

Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal

(International Open Access, Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal)

(Multidisciplinary, Monthly, Multilanguage)

* Vol-2* *Issue-8* *August 2025*

**Catharsis and Fragmentation:
Aristotelian Poetics in the Modernist
Wasteland***Shankar Kumar Jayvardhan**UGC-NET, English*

Abstract

This research article investigates the transformative dialogue between the classical imperatives of Aristotelian poetics and the aesthetic of fragmentation that defines literary Modernism, specifically as manifested in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the broader "Wasteland" milieu. At the centre of this inquiry is the perceived collapse of the Aristotelian mythos—a unified, teleological plot structure—under the weight of modern trauma, and its replacement by a "spatialized" or "mythical" method of composition. The study explores the semantic instability of catharsis, contrasting the classical view of emotional purgation or cognitive clarification with the Modernist experience of "secondary witnessing" and unresolved trauma. By analysing the structural roles of the tragic hero, the three unities, and the formal enactment of trauma, the report argues that Modernism does not merely reject Aristotelian principles but adaptively subverts them to represent a "dissociation of sensibility." Through a comparative analysis of Eliot's allusive techniques and Ezra Pound's ideogrammatic method, the research demonstrates how fragmentation serves as a new, non-linear form of coherence—a "reparative" strategy that seeks a spiritual and cultural resolution within the ruins of the Western canon.

The Ontological Foundation: Aristotelian Mimesis and the Unified Universe

The study of Western literary theory inevitably finds its genesis in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a text that sought to categorize and systematize the human impulse toward *mimesis*, or imitation. For Aristotle, poetry was not a mere shadow of a shadow, as his teacher Plato had argued, but a sophisticated medium through which universal truths were revealed through the representation of human action and emotion. The Aristotelian world-view was predicated on the belief that reality is well-ordered and harmonious, moving inexorably toward an ideal form. Consequently, the function of tragedy—the highest form of poetry was to imitate this "organic unity" and provide a formative effect on its audience by heightening their awareness of the cosmic moral order.

Aristotle's definition of tragedy rests on the arrangement of six key elements: plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle. Among these, the *mythos*, or plot, is of paramount importance, described as the "soul of tragedy". A successful *mythos* must represent an action that is "noble, complete, and of a proper magnitude". This

completeness implies a structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end, where events follow one another not merely *after* each other but *because* of each other, governed by the principles of probability or necessity.

Aristotelian Element	Definition in Poetics	Functional Requirement
Mythos (Plot)	The arrangement of incidents or events in a story.	Must be unified and complete; the "soul" of the tragic work.
Ethos (Character)	The moral qualities and intentions of the agents.	Secondary to plot; should manifest "manly valor" and consistency.
Dianoia (Thought)	The capacity to prove or disprove a point or state a general truth.	Expressed through speech and linked to the intellectual life of the characters.
Lexis (Diction)	The expression of meaning through words and metaphorical language.	Should be appropriate to the character and rhythmic in nature.
Melos (Song)	The musical and lyrical elements of the tragedy.	Distinguishes tragedy from epic; should be integrated into the action.
Opsis (Spectacle)	The visual and scenic effects of the performance.	Least important; should not overshadow the structural impact of the plot.

The ultimate goal (*telos*) of this structured imitation is the achievement of *catharsis*, the “purgation” of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle’s conception of *catharsis* has been the subject of nearly two millennia of debate, with interpretations ranging from medical purgation—the clearing away of “excess humours”—to ethical enlightenment and the balancing of emotions. In the Aristotelian paradigm, *catharsis* is a two-pronged process: it is the “poet’s distillation of events” to clear away anything that undermines coherence, and simultaneously, it is the audience’s realization of the relative importance of factors determining a character’s fate. This process brings the spectator to a balanced, more philosophical view of human suffering, realizing that their personal emotions are insignificant compared to the larger design of the universe.

The Modernist Rupture: Fragmentation and the Dissociation of Sensibility

The dawn of the twentieth century brought a cataclysmic shift that rendered the Aristotelian “well-ordered universe” unrecognizable. The First World War, the Spanish Influenza pandemic, and the rapid urbanization of society created a “macro-trauma” that shattered the traditional narratives of Western civilization. High Modernism emerged as a response to this “spiritual drought,” a movement characterized by the rejection of intelligible plots and the collapse of unified identity. T.S. Eliot, writing in the aftermath of a personal nervous breakdown and a global war, diagnosed a “dissociation of sensibility”—a rupture between thought and feeling that he believed had plagued English literature since the seventeenth century.

In *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot presents a “heap of broken images” as a formal enactment of this cultural and psychological disintegration. The poem’s structure is fundamentally fragmented, shifting abruptly between voices, languages, and cultural references without stable transition. This fragmentation is not merely a stylistic experiment but a mimetic representation of the “shattered reality” of the modern era. Where Aristotle demanded a “unity of action,” Eliot offers a “skittering” consciousness that takes a step in one direction only to pivot before advancing too far, reflecting a self that fundamentally lacks confidence in its own coherence.

The Three Unities vs. Modernist Simultaneity

The classical unities Time, Place, and Action were designed to maximize dramatic intensity by concentrating the audience’s focus. Modernist literature, however, operates on a principle of “temporal and spatial simultaneity,” where geographically distinct spaces are mapped onto a single, polyphonic work.

Unity	Aristotelian/Classical Paradigm	Modernist Subversion in the Wasteland
Action	A single, complete plot without subplots; causal necessity.	Discontinuous vignettes; "jump-cut" techniques; lack of narrative closure.
Time	Limited to a "single revolution of the sun" (24 hours).	Collapsed time; simultaneous presence of ancient Greece, Elizabethan London, and the modern city.
Place	A single, fixed location or tightly connected settings.	"Diverse geographies" (desert, alpine, jungle) juxtaposed through "collage-like" shifts.

This subversion of the unities reflects the Modernist imperative to “never forget” and to mimic the symptoms of trauma through formal difficulty. In *The Waste Land*, the unity of action is replaced by a “symmetrical large-scale structure” rooted in myth rather than linear causality. The unity of time is dismantled by the “eternal recurrence” of fertility rites, where the death of a Phoenician sailor in the present is simultaneous with the drowning of Phlebas in the past.

The Tragic Hero: From Nobility to the “Common Man” as Victim

Aristotle’s tragic hero was a figure of noble birth and outstanding qualities who experienced a “reversal of fortune” (*peripeteia*) due to a “tragic error” (*hamartia*). This nobility was essential for ensuring that the hero’s downfall was of “proper magnitude” to arouse pity and fear in the community. In the Modernist landscape, however, the “noble hero” has been replaced by the “common man” or the “othered body”—individuals marginalized by pandemics, wars, and the reifying degradations of industrial society.

The protagonists of *The Waste Land* are not kings like Oedipus but “wounded bodies” and “fractured minds”: rape victims like Philomela, war veterans struggling in their relationships, and powerless women like Lil. These figures represent a “life-in-death” existence, characterized by moral, spiritual, and intellectual bankruptcy.

Tiresias as the “Trauma Clearinghouse”

Eliot identifies Tiresias as the most important personage in the poem, yet he is a subversion of the Aristotelian hero. While he “sees the substance of the poem,” Tiresias is a “secondary witness” rather than an agent of action.

- Impotent Witnessing: Tiresias has “foresuffered all,” witnessing sexual violence and devastation across centuries. Unlike the Aristotelian hero who moves toward anagnorisis (discovery), Tiresias possesses a “burden of knowledge” that leads to paralysis rather than resolution.
- Dissolution of Identity: Tiresias blurs his identity with those of the victims he observes, embodying the “danger of secondary witnessing” where the listener to trauma becomes a participant and co-owner of the wounding event.
- Gender Fluidity as Fragmentation: Tiresias’s status as “throbbing between two lives”—old man with wrinkled female breasts—mirrors the poem’s larger collapse of “prevailing norms” and the “layered anxieties” concerning gender and otherness in a traumatized society.

In this context, the Aristotelian *hamartia*—a specific fault—is replaced by a general “condition of the subject”. The downfall is not an event but a state of “abjection and oblivion” caused by the “nature of the cosmic moral order” being entirely absent or broken.

The Mythical Method: A Structural Reconstitution of Poetics

Faced with the collapse of the traditional plot, Eliot utilized the “mythical method” as a structural substitute for Aristotelian *mythos*. As he famously remarked in his review of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, this method is a way of “controlling, ordering and giving a shape and

significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which was contemporary history”.

The primary backbone of *The Waste Land* is the myth of the Fisher King and the Holy Grail, as explored in Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. This myth provides a “symbolical structure” based on conceptions of “eternal recurrence” and “fertility rites,” allowing Eliot to link modern society to humanity’s shared past.

Structural Technique	Function in Modernist Poetics	Relationship to Aristotelian Logic
Allusive Pastiche	Collects the "bric-a-brac of an exhausted civilization" to establish a new tradition.	Replaces "beautiful diction" with a "polyphonic" range of cultural registers.
Mirror Image Concept	Juxtaposes figures like Buddha and St. Augustine to show eras are "one and the same".	Replaces linear progression with "spatial orientations" and simultaneous meaning.
Mythic Frame	Uses the Fisher King’s wound to symbolize the "spiritual drought" of the age.	Replaces the hero’s "noble action" with a symbolic "spiritual quest".
Hypertextual Navigation	Forces the reader to act like a "quest hero," assembling fragments to "earn restoration".	Replaces the audience’s "spectatorship" with "potential activation" and co-creation.

The mythical method performs a “spiritual quest across a wasted civilization,” acting as a palliative to suffering by suggesting that destruction results in only temporary chaos before an automatic rebirth. However, this “rebirth” is not the clear, moral resolution of the Aristotelian stage; it is a “tenuous” forward movement rooted in the “deep recesses of past memory”.

Ezra Pound and the Ideogrammatic Method: A Non-Linear Catharsis

Parallel to Eliot’s mythic structure was Ezra Pound’s development of the “ideogrammatic method,” which offered a different way of achieving “cognitive order” from chaos. Pound sought to move poetry away from abstract content toward concrete images, based on Ernest Fenollosa’s reading of the Chinese character.

The ideogrammatic method involves the “super-position” of images—one idea set on top of another—to create a “Vortex” of energy. In Pound’s famous “In a Station of the Metro,” the juxtaposition of “faces in the crowd” and “petals on a wet, black bough” creates a “metro emotion” that is translated from feeling into a “dynamic sensorial experience”.

- **Sudden Liberation:** Pound argued that the presentation of such a “complex” instantaneously gives a “sense of sudden growth” and “freedom from time and space limits”—a Modernist equivalent of the Aristotelian “proper pleasure” derived from a unified mythos.
- **Equation for Emotion:** The “Image” functions as an “equation for both emotion and an intellectual experience,” paralleling Eliot’s theory of the “objective correlative”.
- **Healing Through Memory:** For Pound, the retrieval of “fragments of the past” was a way to work through “horror and misery,” seeking to recover “hopeful instances” and find a “unifying constituent” in the ruins of history.

Both Eliot and Pound utilized these techniques to “reorganize the real world’s messy, irregular and fragmentary experience”. By transforming “thinking into emotions” and combining disparate experiences, they sought to “regulate the fragmentation” that plagued Western humanity.

The Subversion of Catharsis: Trauma and the Resentment of Closure

Perhaps the most significant departure from Aristotelian poetics lies in the Modernist treatment of *catharsis*. In classical drama, the sequence of events led to a “cleansing” of emotions, leaving the audience feeling “uplifted” and having reached a “virtuous and happy mean”. In the Modernist “wasteland,” however, *catharsis* is often “vexed” or “impeded”.

The Blockage of Recovery

Richard Badenhausen proposes that *The Waste Land* is preoccupied with the “various blockages” that occur when victims struggle to recover from trauma. Because the poem “insistently conceals the roots of trauma,” characters remain trapped in a “hopeless future”.

Aristotelian Catharsis	Modernist Unresolved Trauma
Purification: Pity and fear are brought into "proper balance".	Melancholia: A refusal of closure; trauma is "stored" as an "unconscious repository of mourning".
Clarification: Audiences realize the relative importance of factors in their life.	Misprision: A purposeful "misreading" of the "secret" as a means of self-preservation.
Resolution: The "unburdening" of emotions that inhibit understanding.	Repetition: Formal mimicry of "symptoms of trauma" through ambiguity and paradox.
Uplifting: The audience leaves feeling "cleansed".	Disenchantment: Trauma is viewed as a "stark dead end"; recovery is "maddeningly impeded".

This refusal of closure is seen in the dialogue of “A Game of Chess,” where post-war traumatic shock destroys intimate relationships, and in “Death by Water,” which highlights “disrupted mourning” rather than providing consolation. Trauma theory suggests that the victim resents the “societal demand for closure” with the same ferocity that they resent the “intrusively authoritarian father figure”. Literature, therefore, becomes “uncanny” in its ability to “familiarize us with trauma by making it unfamiliar”.

The Function of the Poem as “Cure”

Despite the “poetics of nothingness” and “nihilism” that some critics find in Modernism, others argue that the fragmented poem itself functions as the “cure”. Eliot’s goal in writing poetry was close to Dante’s: to “rescue living people from their melancholy state” and “prevent the cosmos from committing suicide”.

- **Therapeutic Creation:** Eliot described *The Waste Land* as the “therapeutic result” of his own “torment” and “hysteria,” suggesting that the act of writing pulled together his “fragmented consciousness”.
- **Enlightenment through Ambiguity:** The poem’s language is an “ambiguous key to enlightenment,” demanding that the reader critically consider the scenarios of the wasteland to find their own answers to the “spiritual drought”.
- **The Reader’s Catharsis:** By responding “emotionally and selectively” to the text through “transformative processes of re-enactment,” literary adaptation can act as a catharsis for the “reimagining of previously repressed memories”.

The conclusion of the poem, with its “shored fragments,” represents a “redirection of eschatological expectation to the act of writing”. The “end” is not an event to be witnessed but a “condition of the subject,” and the inscription of the poem is the only means of navigating that condition.

Historical and Critical Perspectives on Coherence

The critical reception of *The Waste Land* has been divided between those who see it as a “wilfully obscure” parade of erudition and those who defend its “internal coherence”. F.R. Leavis famously argued that the poem is a “masterpiece” that maintains its “unity within fragmentation” through irony and musical dissonance.

Critic	Perspective on Unity/Catharsis	Main Focus
F.R. Leavis	Defends the poem's coherence despite fragmentation.	Allusion and musical technique.
Cleanth Brooks	Irony and paradox provide a "unified vision".	Structural unity through contradiction.
Edmund Wilson	Critical of "excessive allusions".	The poem as overly complex and "pompous".
Calvin Bedient	All voices are the performances of a "single protagonist".	Internal coherence through character projection.
Richard Badenhause	Focuses on "failed elegy" and "disrupted mourning".	Trauma as a "dead end" for catharsis.

The search for an “inner coherence” often leads back to the “mythical method,” though scholars like Leon Surette amend this theory by questioning whether Frazer and Weston were truly foundational or merely “deliberate mystification”. Regardless, the “symmetrical large-scale structure” of the poem—the way it mirrors death and sex across its five parts—suggests a “determinate structure” that Aristotle would have recognized, even if its “matter” was the “detritus” of a dying world.

Conclusion: The Persistence of the Aristotelian “Soul”

The dialogue between Aristotelian poetics and the Modernist wasteland is not one of simple rejection but of profound and agonizing transformation. Aristotle defined the *mythos* as the “soul” of tragedy because it provided a formal cause that organized life into an organic whole. Modernism, witnessing the “collapse of European civilization,” found that the “soul” had become “fragmented” and “alienated”.

However, the “mythical method” and the “ideogrammatic vortex” were attempts to find a “new world” of structure that could still “speak the truth of the modern world”. While traditional *catharsis*—the “purgation” that leaves one “cleansed and uplifted”—is often blocked by the “concealed nature” of modern trauma, the poem offers a “reparative engagement” with the “othered bodies” of the wasteland. The “shored fragments” are not merely ruins; they are “language demoted to matter” that can be “defensively positioned” between the self and a world of chaos.

In the final analysis, *The Waste Land* suggests that in an age of “dissociation,” the only possible “unity” is one of “multiplicity”. The “beginning, middle, and end” have been replaced by the “eternal recurrence” of the quest, and the audience’s “proper pleasure” is found in the “sudden liberation” from a linear time that has become unbearable. Aristotle’s *Poetics* remains the standard by which these transformations are measured, proving that even in the “stony rubbish” of the wasteland, the search for the “soul” of the poem is the ultimate “spiritual quest”.

Author’s Declaration:

I/We, the author(s)/co-author(s), declare that the entire content, views, analysis, and conclusions of this article are solely my/our own. I/We take full responsibility, individually and collectively, for any errors, omissions, ethical misconduct, copyright violations, plagiarism, defamation, misrepresentation, or any legal consequences arising now or in the future. The publisher, editors, and reviewers shall not be held responsible or liable in any way for any legal, ethical, financial, or reputational claims related to this article. All responsibility rests solely with the author(s)/co-author(s), jointly and severally. I/We further affirm that there is no conflict of interest financial, personal, academic, or professional regarding the subject, findings, or publication of this article.

Works cited

1. Aristotle: Poetics - English,
2. Criticism from Plato to Eliot | Literature and Writing | Research Starters – EBSCO
3. Literary Criticism of Aristotle,
4. Aristotle’s “Poetics” - Hellenic Cultural Center of the Southwest,
5. Six parts of tragedy | PPTX - Slideshare,
6. Mythos and catharsis in Aristotle’s Poetics - ResearchGate,

7. MODERN DRAMATIC TRAGEDY AND ARISTOTLE'S POETICS: A COMPARISON A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the Department of English
8. ARISTOTLE-ELIOT - Academia.edu,
9. Key Concepts of Aristotle's Three Unities to Know for Classical Poetics.

Cite this Article-

'Shankar Kumar Jayvardhan', "Catharsis and Fragmentation: Aristotelian Poetics in the Modernist Wasteland," Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal (RVIMJ), ISSN: 3048-7331 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:08, August 2025.

DOI- 10.70650/rvimj.2025v2i800025

Published Date- 12 August 2025