

The Comedic Ladder  
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How Comedy Affects Us

In comedy, the appeals are made to the head, not the heart. As audience members, the playwright expects us to see the incongruity (an intellectual process) of an action. Comedy, because of this coldly rational approach, lifts us out of the emotional aspects of an idea. Some playwrights (such as Shaw and Wilde) seize on this emphasis on the unemotional aspect of comedy (where our defenses of our pet theories are down) and for them comedy becomes a lever for change. Comedy is successful in changing us, firstly, because it does not threaten us by asking for our emotional support. Similarly, comedy allows for changes in the audience by allowing us to feel superior to the comic character. We can look at the character and say, "I hope I am not like that fool." But we know we do have something in common with the fool's blind repetition of an action. Thus, thirdly, we sense our own rigidity and past reluctance to change and in comedy we see how a character's inability to change makes him laughable.

"A good comedy throws a strong emphasis on a character who is simplified in such a way that we can readily see the distortions that have made him a fool in other men's eyes; we can see them, that is, if we understand what is considered normal behavior in the society reflected in the comedy. Norms are, therefore, very important in comprehending comedy. Thus, the action in comedy consists of a string of incidents that reveal the fool in situation after situation where he always shows the same distortions, the same variations from what is considered normal behavior. Consequently, the fun of a comedy usually consists of the reactions of the other characters to the continuing stupidities of the principal character until he finally sees how distorted he is, or the others decide that it would be heartless to make him face his realities.... (Comedy) is based on the principle that no man knows what he is, that he cannot see his real mirror image, but only what he wants to see." (*Play Directing*, Francis Hodge)

### Characteristics of Comedy

"Normal" life is a balance of good and bad, ups and downs. As long as the variations of good/bad or up/down are within "normal" limits, the life of the individual and his/her world is in equilibrium. When the variations are extreme, we have either tragedy or comedy. If the "extreme" event does not restore the individual's equilibrium, we have tragedy; if it does restore the individual's equilibrium, we have comedy. In literary works of comedy, everything broken is mended before the end of the work; all ends well.

1. Comedy occurs when

- characters and situations are exaggerated,
- incongruous elements are paired, or
- the unexpected takes place.

2. Comedy occurs when

- human beings are presented as unheroic.( Comic figures dealt with seriously can turn pathetic or tragic.)
- their limitations project them into all kinds of ludicrous situations. These limitations may be those imposed by nature (the man trying to propose marriage is seized by hiccups because he is nervous), or by character (the waiter in a "fancy restaurant" slips on an ice cube because he has his nose in the air and his eye on his tip).

### 3. Comedy occurs when

- people become objects rather than human beings - they are funny when they fall out a third floor window because they are, at that moment, things, and things cannot be hurt.

### 4. According to Henri Bergson, Comedy occurs when

- people are able to escape and evade the demands made by life. A clown hit by a big paddle is funny because he is immune to the pain one expects him to feel.

In Restoration Comedy (aka Comedy of Manners, or high comedy), characters read their lines and perform the actions with an air that takes them out of the real world and into a world where speech and gesture follows rigid patterns and emotion is an embarrassment.

Three aspects of the comic - *caricature*, *gesture*, *disguise* - exaggerate the unique (unchanging) features of the individual to the point that they are noticeable, and therefore laughable, because of their grotesque exaggeration. Disguise makes nature appear to be what it is not, and that is laughable.

### 5. Satire is distinguished from comedy by the author's maintenance of tone and incident. Comedy is gentler, satire, bitter.

- Satire is distinguished from comedy partly by the effect that characters produce in the audience.
- Comic characters entertain and amuse; the audience views them with affection.
- Satiric characters startle, may even appall, though they may also amuse and entertain. The audience views them with repugnance and irritation, seldom with affection.

### 6. Tragicomedy (aka Dark Comedy) arises from a humorous view of the tragic or dark side of life.

7. Existential drama sees humans as fending for themselves, alone in an empty universe. They have the freedom to make choices, but almost no stimulus or will to do so; they are moved by forces they cannot resist and do not understand. The protagonist's heroism is his decision to accept his fate. The surprise and wonder in response to the events around him lead the existential hero to bizarre and clownish performances. He becomes a comic figure - often a puppet- whose gestures he cannot control. He is amusing in a way that jolts the audience into a realization that all human beings are clowns and that the world is either an empty stage or an empty circus. The laughter is mixed with sad realization; the drama is dark comedy.

### 8. Comedy is an extension of tragedy; it makes possible the acceptance of tragic reality by making sport of the behavior of humans in the face of the awesome nature of living in a treacherous

and consuming universe. Comedy is the antidote to the agony of living in a world in which people fail and suffer. Comedy's amusing comment on our seriousness, its power to make us forget the hardships of living, its criticisms of those elements in ourselves, our beliefs and ideas, and our institutions that are false and destructive provide the neutralizing forces that make daily existence palatable.

Laughter is universal and serves in subtle ways to make us accept the pains and problems of life; it gives us a sense of importance; it "softens" us for more humane social living. People who laugh, not bitterly but naturally, at themselves and others will refrain from inflicting pain on anyone.

9. Satire exposes faults in society, institutions, or in people so that the audience will recognize them. The writer seeks to impart recognition and awareness that may lead to action to correct the evil. The spectacle of man at his worst should remind the audience of the potential for wickedness and foolishness in themselves and serve to restrain thoughts and actions which might lead to ugliness in themselves and pain in others. The spectacle of society in disarray, of institutions betraying their ideals and goals, should sharpen the perceptions of the audience, help them see their world honestly, and lead them to support changes for improvement.