

## Comedy as a Form

### Introduction:

Comedy is a form of drama that deals with humorous or ridiculous aspects of human behaviour. Most comedies have a playful mood and end happily. The chief object of comedy according to modern notions is to amuse. It is contrasted on one hand with tragedy and on the other with farce, burlesque, and other forms of humorous amusement. There are many types of comedy. The three most common ones emphasize character, ideas or situations. In comedies of character, the humor comes from the major traits of the characters. Comedies of ideas deal chiefly with social issues. Situation comedies rely on comic actions and events. Other important types of comedy include Comedy of Manners and romantic Comedies. Most Comedies of manners are humorous treatments of the social codes of the upper and middle classes. Most romantic comedies concern people who are in love. An exaggerated kind of comedy called farce is sometimes considered a separate type. But farce may be treated as a form of situation comedy

### Origin:

The word 'comedy' is derived from the Greek verb meaning "to revel". And comedy arose out of the revels associated with the rites of Dionysus, the God of vegetation. Thus, the origin of comedy is related with the vegetation rituals. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, states that comedy originated in phallic songs. Like tragedy, comedy also evolved by stages but its progress largely remained unnoticed as comedy was considered to be an inferior form. Aristotle maintains that tragedy imitates men than they are and comedy imitates men worse than they are. The conception of comedy which started with Aristotle in 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE persists even today and believes that comedy is concerned with humans as social beings, rather than as private persons, and that its function is basically corrective. Comedy holds a mirror up to society to reflect the follies and foibles, in the hope that they will be amended. In short, it aims at laughing out the vices and follies of the people and bring the comic character back into conformity with his society. M. H Abrams states that a comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern. We are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters. The term "comedy" is customarily applied only to plays for the stage or to films. However, the comic form also occurs in prose fiction and narrative poetry.

### History and Development of Comedy:

The first important comic playwright was Aristophanes, who lived in Greece from about 445 to 385 B.C.. Most of his comedies deal with public issues. The ancient Roman Playwrights Plautus and Terence wrote situation comedies based on events from everyday life. During the middle Ages, farce was the major type of comedy. In the late 1500's and early 1600's in England, William Shakespeare wrote plays involving almost every type of comedy, while Ben Jonson specialized in satiric comedies of character, with each character dominated by a single trait, such as greed. In the mid-1600's Moliere became the most

famous playwright in France with plays similar to Jonson's. In the late 1600's English playwrights William Wycherley and William Congreve raised the comedy of manners to a high level. Many playwrights of the 1700's wrote sentimental comedies. These dramatists include Sir Richard Steele of England and Pierre Marivaux of France. Later in the 1700's witty comedies were written by Oliver Goldsmith of Ireland, Richard Brinsley Sheridan of England and by Pierre de Beaumarchais of France. In the early 1900's the Irish -born dramatist Gorge Bernard Shaw proved a master of the comedy of ideas, which discusses moral or philosophical issues without interrupting the humour. Noel Coward wrote comedies of manners about England's sophisticated society. During the mid-1900's the Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett and the Romanian born Eugene Ionesco pioneered the theater of the absurd, in which bizarre comic events mingled with serious action. The dark comedies of Harold Pinter in England and Edward Albee in the United States are an off shoot of this school. In the late 1900's Alan Ayckbourn in England and Neil Simon in the United States have specialized in situation comedies about everyday life.

### **Definition:**

Aristotle defined comedy as "an imitation of characters of a lower type-not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive."

### **Constituents and Features of Comedy:**

The treatise on comedy by Aristotle is lost. Some fragments are all that is available. The *Tractatus Coislinianus* preserved in a 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript in the De Coislin Collection in Paris contains some of the views expressed by Aristotle. The *Tractatus* divides the substance of comedy into the same six elements that are discussed in regard to tragedy in the *Poetics*: plot, character, thought, diction, melody (song) and spectacle. The Italian scholar Trissino in his *Poetica* (1530) stated that as tragedy teaches by means of pity and fear, comedy teaches by deriding things that are vile. He directs the attention to the source of laughter. According to Trissino laughter is aroused by objects that are in some way ugly and incongruous (means those things which are hoped to be good but turn out otherwise). Comedy expresses human character in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life and tragedy expresses the sufferings of a particular individual in extraordinary periods of intense emotion.

### **Constituents:**

**Plot:** It is the arrangement of incidents that is not the story itself, but the way the incidents are presented to the audience in order to achieve particular artistic and emotional effects.. It must be a whole consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end. A plot in comedy also follows the pyramidal structure stated by Freytag. It has exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and the denouement or the resolution like a tragedy. The plot must be complete and have unity of action. It is through the plot that the author organizes the raw material of experience and the way he does so must tell us a great deal about his way of understanding and the meaning of his experience. Plot reveals the cause and effect relationship between the events. Plot is thus, the soul of drama.

**Characterization:** Characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as possessing particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it (dialogue) and from what they do (their actions). Characters are fictitious creations who enact the plot. Though Aristotle considers the plot as the soul of drama, it must not be forgotten that it is through the characters that the plot unfolds. Characters are classified into flat or round, major or minor depending upon the prominence they receive in the play and the consistency or change they display during the course of the play. The most prominent character is the protagonist and a character equal in significance but opposite in demeanour is the antagonist. Comedy deals with types and classes and not with personalities and individuals as happens with tragedy.

**Setting:** The overall setting of a drama is the general locale, historical time and social circumstances in which its action occurs. When applied to a theatrical production, setting includes the décor, the scenery, the properties or movable pieces of furniture. The setting also includes the time, location and circumstances in which a play takes place. Sometimes it implies the milieu, to include the context (such as society) beyond the immediate surroundings of the story.

**Diction:** It means the expression of the meaning in words. It is the exchange of words between the characters in a comedy. Commonly known as dialogue, it carries the action forward in the form of verse or prose and holds a mirror up to what the dramatist attempts to express. It unfolds the relations between characters and also assures the creation of the comic atmosphere. In comedy, the dialogues are sparkling, short, quick exchanges in the form of repartee, unlike those in a tragedy which are longer and full of seriousness. They are also an important source of humour. There is lot of wordplay and at times even satire.

**Song:** When used in a comedy, songs serve the purpose of strengthening the light, merry atmosphere and may be accompanied with dance. This is in accordance with the main function of comedy to provide entertainment to the audience.

### **Types of Comedy:**

**1. Romantic Comedy:** was developed by Elizabethan dramatists on the model of contemporary prose romances such as Thomas Lodge's Rosalynde (1590), the source of Shakespeare's As You Like It (1599). Such comedy represents a love affair that involves a beautiful and engaging heroine (sometimes disguised as a man); the course of this love does not run smooth, yet overcomes all difficulties to end in a happy union. Many of the boy-meets girl plots of later writers are instances of romance comedy, as are many motion pictures. In 'Anatomy of Criticism' (1957), Northrop Frye points out that some of Shakespeare's romantic comedies manifest a movement from the normal world of conflict and trouble into "the green world" – the forest of Arden in As You Like It, or the fairy-haunted of A Midsummer Night's Dream – in which the problems and injustices of the ordinary world are dissolved, enemies reconciled, and true lovers united. Frye regards that phenomenon (together with other aspects of these comedies, such as their conclusion in the social ritual of a wedding, a feast, or a dance) as evidence that comic plots derive from primitive myths and rituals that celebrated the victory of spring over winter. In Shakespeare's

romantic comedies, the women are often superior to the men, while in his tragedies he “creates such nightmare female figures as Goneril, Regan, Lady Macbeth and Volumnia”.

**2. Satiric Comedy:** ridicules political policies or philosophical doctrines, or else attacks deviations from the accepted social order by making ridiculous the violators of its standards of morals or manners. The early master of satiric comedy was the Greek Aristophanes (450 B.C. to 385 B.C) whose plays mocked political philosophical, and literary matters of his age. Shakespeare’s contemporary, Ben Jonson, wrote satiric or “corrective comedy”. In his Volpone and The Alchemist for example the greed and ingenuity of one or more intelligent but rascally swindlers, and the equal greed but stupid gullibility of their victims are made grotesquely or repulsively ludicrous rather than lightly amusing.

**3. The Comedy of Manners:** Originated in the New Comedy of the Greek Menander, 342-292 B.C. (as distinguished from the Old Comedy represented by Aristophanes, 450-385 B.C.) and was developed by the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. Their plays dealt with the vicissitudes of young lovers and included what became the characters of much later comedy, such as the clever servant, old and stodgy parents and the wealthy rival. The English comedy of manners was early exemplified by Shakespeare’s “Love’s Labours Lost” and “Much Ado about Nothing” and was given high polish in Restoration Comedy (1660-1700). The Restoration form owes much to the brilliant dramas of the French writer Moliere (1622-73). It deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society, and relies for comic effect in a large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue-often in the form of repartee, a witty conversational give and take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing match – as well as on the violations of social standards and decorum by would be wits, jealous husbands, conniving rivals and foppish dandies. Excellent examples are William Congreve’s The Way of the World and William Wycherley’s The Country Wife. A middle-class reaction against what had come to be considered the immaturity of situation and indecency of dialogue in the Courtly Restoration Comedy resulted in the Sentimental Comedy of the eighteenth century. In the latter part of the century, however, Oliver Goldsmith (she stoops to conquer) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (The Rivals and A School for Scandal) revived the wit and gaiety, while deleting the indecency, of Restoration Comedy. The comedy of manners lapsed in the early nineteenth century, but was revived by many skillful dramatists, from A. W. Pinero and Oscar Wilde (The Importance of Being Earnest 1895) through George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward, to Neil Simon, Alan Ayckbourn, Wendy Wasserstein and other recent and contemporary writers. Many of these comedies have also been adapted for the cinema.

**4. Farce:** is a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter – “belly laughs” in the parlance of the theatre. To do so it commonly employs highly exaggerated or caricatured types of characters, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and often makes free use of sexual mix-ups, broad verbal humour and physical bustle and horseplay. Farce was a component in the comic episodes in medieval miracle plays, such as the Wakefield plays, Noah and the Second Shepherd’s play, and constituted the matter of the Italian Commedia dell’arte in the Renaissance. In the English drama that has best stood the test of time, farce is usually an episode in a more complex form of comedy-examples are the knockabout scenes in Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew and The Merry Wives of Windsor. The plays of the French playwright George Feydeau (1862-1921),

relying in great part on sexual humour and innuendo are true farce throughout as in Brandon Thomas Charley's Aunt, an American play of 1892, which has often been revived, and also some of the current plays of Tom Stoppard. ...It should be noted that the term "farce" or sometimes "farce comedy" is applied also to plays – a supreme example in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) – in which exaggerated character – types find themselves in ludicrous situations in the course of an improbable plot, but which achieve their comic effects not by broad humour and bustling action, but by the sustained brilliance and wit of the dialogue. Farce is also a frequent comic tactic in the theatre of the absurd.

A distinction is often made between high and low comedy. High comedy, as described by George Meredith in the classic essay, The Idea of Comedy (1877) evokes "intellectual laughter" – thoughtful laughter from spectators who remain emotionally detached from the action – at the spectacle of folly, pretentiousness, and incongruity of human behaviour. Meredith finds it in its highest form within the comedy of manners, in the combats of wit (sometimes identified now as the "love duels" between such intelligent, highly verbal, and well-matched lovers as Benedick and Beatrice in Shakespeare's Much Ado about Nothing (1598-99) and Mirabell and Millamant in Congreve's The Way of the World (1700). Low comedy, at the other extreme, has little or no intellectual appeal, but undertakes to arouse laughter by jokes, or 'gags' and by slapstick humour and boisterous or clownish physical activity; it is therefore, one of the common components of farce.

**5) Comedy of Humours:** A type of comedy developed by Ben Jonson, the Elizabethan playwright, based on the ancient physiological theory of the "four humours" that was still current in Jonson's time. The humours were held to be the four primary fluids blood, phlegm, choler (or yellow bile) and melancholy (or black bile) – whose temperament (mixture) was held to determine both a person's physical condition and type of character. An imbalance of one or another humour in a temperament was said to produce four kinds of dispositions whose names have survived the underlying theory sanguine (from the Latin "sanguis", blood) phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic. In Jonson's comedy of humours each of the major characters has a preponderant humour that gives him a characteristic distortion or eccentricity of disposition. Jonson expounds his theory in the "Introduction to this play Every Man in his Humours (1598) and exemplifies the mode in his later comedies. The Jonsonian type of humours character appear in plays by other Elizabethans, and remained influential in the comedy of manners of the Restoration period (1660-1700).

**6) Sentimental Comedy:** This type of comedy came into existence in the eighteenth century. It emphasized a sort of moral philosophy which was a reaction against the stoicism of the seventeenth century wherein reason and unemotional will carried importance. Sentimental comedy is a representation of the middle-class life that replaced the tough amorality and the comic or satiric representation of aristocratic sexual license in Restoration comedy. It is also called play of sensibility. It lays emphasis on the human capability for sympathy and wishing others well and aimed to develop social consciousness and a sense of communal responsibility in an era of expanding commercialism. Oliver Goldsmith in his "Comparison between Sentimental and laughing Comedy" (1773) remarked, "The virtues of private life are exhibited rather than the vices exposed, and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece", characters "though they want humour, have abundance of sentiment and feeling". Consequently the audience "sit at a play as gloomy as at the tabernacle". Plays such as Richard Steele's The Conscious Lovers (1772) and Richard Cumberland's The West Indian (1771) present monumentally benevolent heroes and heroines

of the middle class, whose dialogue abounds with elevated moral sentiments and who, prior to the manipulated happy ending suffer tribulations designed to evolve from audience the maximum of pleasurable tears.

**Conclusion:** The general reader looks for entertainment in a comedy. If laughter is mixed with tears, and if a serious purpose haunts the superficial glitter and smiles, the reader does not grumble. Shakespeare introduced **tragi-comedies** and the **Dark Comedies**. But if the author simply cuts out all entertainment, no amount of serious activity will convince the reader that it is a comedy. One may bring in all the depth one can, but it must be properly hidden behind the facade of joy and entertainment and laughter.