

Module-9

Background Prose Readings

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

What is comedy?

The word 'Comedy' has been derived the French word *comdie*, which in turn is taken from the Greco-Latin word *Comedia*. The word *comedia* is made of two words *komos*, which means *revel* and *aeidein* means to sing.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, comedy means a branch of drama, which deals with everyday life and humourous events. It also means a play of light and amusing type of theatre. Comedy may be defined as a play with a happy ending.

Function of Comedy

Though, there are many functions of comedy, yet the most important and visible function of comedy is to provide entertainment to the readers. The reader is forced to laugh at the follies of various characters in the comedy. Thus, he feels jubilant and forgets the humdrum life. George Meredith, in his *Idea of Comedy*, is of the view that comedy appeals to the intelligence unadulterated and unassuming, and targets our heads. In other words, comedy is an artificial play and its main function is to focus attention on what ails the world. Comedy is critical, but in its scourge of folly and vice. There is no contempt or anger in a comedy. He is also of the view that the laughter of a comedy is impersonal, polite and very near to a smile. Comedy exposes and ridicules stupidity and immorality, but without the wrath of the reformer.

Kinds of Comedy

1. Classical Comedy

Classical comedy is a kind of comedy, wherein the author follows the classical rules of ancient Greek and Roman writers. It is modeled upon the classical comedies like *Platus*, *Terence* and *Aristophanes*. The most important classical rules are:

- The Three Unities of Time, Place and Time

- Separation of comic and tragic elements i.e., comedy is comedy and tragedy is tragedy having no other element from each other. There is no mingling of comic and tragic elements in a classical comedy.
- The aim of classical comedy is satiric in nature. It does not only aim at providing entertainment, rather, it aims at correcting the society.

2. Romantic Comedy

Romantic comedy is a type of comedy, wherein the playwright doesn't follow the classical conventions of comedy. The writer is mostly concerned with his plight of imagination and writes what he thinks. There is mingling of comic and tragic elements unlike classical comedy, wherein only comic elements are included in a comedy. The three unities are thrown into the wind. Its aim is not didactic or morality. Its main function is to provide entertainment to the readers. Comedies of Shakespeare are romantic in nature.

3. Comedy of Humours

Comedy of humours is a special type of comedy, wherein the author dwells upon a certain trait of a character. Humour means a specific trait of a character, e.g., avarice, pride etc. The ancients believed that human body was made of four elements i.e., air, fire, water and earth. The increased quantity of any of these elements is called humour. It was supposed that every element stands for a certain trait of human character e.g., fire stands for ill-tempered nature, water stands for cold temperament, earth signifies down to earth nature, while air implies a lofty or showy temperament of human being. The comedy of humours satirizes the idiocies and idiosyncrasies, the flaws and evils of contemporary society, and his satire is generally abrasive and fierce. For example, Ben Johnson's comedy *Volpone* is written upon avarice.

4. Comedy of Manners

Comedy of manners is a play, which deals with the elite class of the society and their manners. It is satirical in nature like the comedy of humours. Its main purpose is to bring about reforms in the society of his age. Such plays were popular in the Age of Restoration. Sheridan's *The Rivals* and the plays of Congreve and Oliver Goldsmith are examples in this regard.

Qualities	Elements	central Organ	Humour
hot and moist <i>calidus et humidus</i>	air <i>aer</i>	heart <i>cor</i>	blood <i>sanguis</i>
hot and dry <i>calidus et siccus</i>	fire <i>ignis</i>	liver <i>hepar</i>	yellow bile <i>cholera</i>
cold and dry <i>frigidus et siccus</i>	earth <i>terra</i>	spleen <i>splen</i>	black bile <i>melancholia</i>
cold and moist <i>frigidus et humidus</i>	water <i>aqua</i>	brain <i>cerebrum</i>	phlegm <i>phlegma</i>

CLASSICAL COMEDY

Ancient Greek comedy was one of the final three principal dramatic forms in the theatre of classical Greece. Athenian comedy is conventionally divided into three periods: Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy.

1. Old Comedy

Aristophanes was considered the master of the **Old Comedy**, and we have eleven complete plays from him. His work had weak plots, but there were two other layers to his plays. The first was pure and simple humor, focused on scatological and sexual jokes.

The other layer was personal and political. The few plays we have are filled with attacks on political and intellectual people from his time; he did caricatures of **Socrates**, **Cleon**, and **Euripides**. He mocked the **Peloponnesian Wars** that were going on when he wrote, along with the Athenian government that was fighting it. He didn't pull any punches, either, but because he laced his scenes with his simple humor, the comedies came across as fun and light. Imagine Larry, Moe, and Curly doing a political rant on the latest White House drama, and you have a good picture of Aristophanes' plays. We don't know for sure, but his peers were probably doing the same thing, just not as well. Examples of plays during this period include Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and *The Acharnians*.

2. Middle Comedy

Middle Comedy has been placed between the death of Aristophanes and the first plays of **Menander**. The style is considered a transition between the traditional and new comedy, but you can think of Middle Comedy as a simpler form of Old Comedy.

The chorus was a basic part of the play in Old Comedy, but it was unimportant by the time Aristophanes died and used less and less. There weren't any attacks on people, either. Instead, there were stock figures that always behaved in the same way. Think of a cranky cab driver, a proud baker, a perfectly precise banker, and a valley girl being put in play after play with other stereotype characters, and you have an idea about how Middle Comedy looked.

3. New Comedy

Menander was the genius of **New Comedy**, which started about 320 B.C.E. and ended in about 260 B.C.E. There were other playwrights, though, like Philemon and Diphilus, and we know from fragments that they wrote the same kinds of plays.

Just like Middle Comedy, New Comedy didn't bother with politics or specific people nor did they use sexual humor or the chorus too much. Instead, the New Comedy playwrights liked to focus on the humor of everyday living. Their plays were usually set in Athens with everyday people as the main characters. The situation comedies that seem to be on your television every night are a good representation of that.

TRAGEDY

Definition:

- “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in the language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation-catharsis of these and similar emotions.” (*Poetics*, P.10)

Explanation of the definition:

- The definition is compact. Every word of it is pregnant with meaning. Each word of the above definition can be elaborated into a separate essay. All art is representation (imitation) of life, but none can represent life in its totality. Therefore, an artist has to be selective in representation. He must aim at representing or imitating an aspect of life or a fragment of life. Action comprises all human activities including deeds, thoughts and feelings. Therefore, we find soliloquies, choruses etc. in tragedy.
- The writer of ‘tragedy’ seeks to imitate the serious side of life just as a writer of ‘comedy’ seeks to imitate only the shallow and superficial side. The tragic section presented on the stage in a drama should be complete or self contained with a proper beginning, proper middle and proper end. A beginning is that before which the audience or the reader does not need to be told anything to understand the story. If something more is required to understand the story than the beginning gives, it is unsatisfactory. From it follows the middle. In their turn the events from the middle lead to the end. Thus the story becomes a compact & self sufficient one. It must not leave

the impression that even after the end the action is still to be continued, or that before the action starts certain things remain to be known.

- Tragedy must have close-knit unity with nothing that is superfluous or unnecessary. Every episode, every character and a dialogue in the play must carry step by step the action that is set into motion to its logical dénouement. It must give the impression of wholeness at the end.
- The play must have, then, a definite magnitude, a proper size or a reasonable length such as the mind may comprehend fully. That is to say that it must have only necessary duration, it should neither be too long to tire our patience nor be too short to make effective representation impossible.
- The language employed here should be duly embellished and beautified with various artistic ornaments (rhythm, harmony, song) and figures of speech. The language of our daily affairs is not useful here because tragedy has to present a heightened picture of life's serious side, and that is possible only if elevated language of poetry is used. According to need, the writer makes use of songs, poetry, poetic dialogue; simple conversation etc is various parts of the play.
- Its manner of imitation should be action, not narration as in epic, for it is meant to be a dramatic representation on the stage and not a mere story-telling.
- Then, for the function/aim of tragedy is to shake up in the soul the impulses of pity and fear, to achieve what he calls Catharsis. The emotions of pity and fear find a full and free outlet in tragedy. Their excess is purged and we are lifted out of ourselves and emerge nobler than before.

Important parts of a Tragedy

After discussing the definition of tragedy, Aristotle explores various important parts of tragedy. He asserts that any tragedy can be divided into six constituent parts.

They are: Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Song and Spectacle.

The Plot is the most important part of a tragedy. The plot means 'the arrangement of the incidents'. Normally the plot is divided into five acts, and each Act is further divided into several scenes. The dramatist's main skill lies in dividing the plot into Acts and Scenes in such a way that they may produce the maximum scenic effect in a natural development.

Characters are men and women who act. The hero and the heroine are two important figures among the characters.

Thought means what the characters think or feel during their career in the development of the plot. The thought is expressed through their speeches and dialogues.

Diction is the medium of language or expression through which the characters reveal their thoughts and feelings. The diction should be 'embellished with each kind of artistic element'. The song is one of these embellishments.

The decoration of the stage is the major part of the spectacle. The Spectacle is theatrical effect presented on the stage. But spectacle also includes scenes of physical torture, loud lamentations, dances, colourful garments of the main characters, and the beggarly or jocular appearance of the subordinate characters or of the fool on the stage. These are the six constituent parts of tragedy.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GREEK AND ENGLISH TRAGEDY:

We notice the following differences between the tragedies by the Greek playwrights, and those written by English playwrights:

Device	Greek Tragedies	English Tragedies
Theme/Plot	Focused on a single theme and plot	Have several story lines developing at the same time into plots and sub-plots
Character Origins	“great” characters were mortals who were equal to gods in their significance	Heroes come from all walks of life
Subject Matter	Serious, treated in a dignified manner	Mixed tragic with comic (Modern playwrights argue that such depiction is nearer to life as our life is a mixture of good and bad fortunes.)
Purpose/Objective	Religious teaching	Instructive of a religious or ethical issue, though their primary objective is to entertain.