

COMEDY

Introduction

Comedy is one of the oldest and most enduring literary genres. Although people often think that comedy simply means "something funny," literary comedy is much broader than humour or laughter. A comedy may contain wit, satire, irony, misunderstandings, and amusing situations, but its most important feature is that it moves from conflict to reconciliation. Unlike *tragedy*, which usually ends in suffering or death, comedy generally concludes with happiness, harmony, marriage, forgiveness, or social renewal.

Etymology

The word comedy comes from the Greek word *komoidia*, which originally referred to a festive song or performance associated with village celebrations in honour of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility. These festivals gradually developed into dramatic performances, giving birth to Greek comedy.

Definition

A comedy is a literary work that presents amusing characters or situations and generally ends in happiness, reconciliation, or social harmony. The emphasis is not merely on laughter but on the successful resolution of conflicts.

Essential Features of Comedy

Most comedies share several important features.

A. Happy Ending: The defining feature of comedy is its ending. The conclusion usually involves marriage, reunion, forgiveness, restoration, celebration, or social harmony. Unlike tragedy, the central characters normally survive.

B. Conflict: Comedy begins with obstacles like mistaken identity, misunderstanding, parental opposition, jealousy, deception, and social barriers. These conflicts create dramatic interest.

C. Resolution: Unlike tragedy, comedy resolves rather than intensifies conflict: misunderstandings are cleared, enemies reconcile, families unite, and love succeeds.

D. Ordinary Characters: Comic heroes are usually ordinary human beings rather than legendary heroes. Their weaknesses often make them attractive and believable.

E. Humour: Comedy employs wit, irony, wordplay, exaggeration, misunderstanding, satire, and coincidence to entertain readers or audiences.

The Structure of Comedy

Although individual comedies differ greatly, many follow a common pattern.

Beginning

Order exists.

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Conflict

Society becomes disturbed.

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Complications

Confusion increases.

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Recognition

Truth becomes known.

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Resolution

Order is restored.

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Celebration

Marriage or reconciliation concludes the work.

This movement from disorder to order distinguishes comedy from tragedy.

Historical Development

A. Greek Comedy: Greek comedy developed after tragedy. The greatest comic dramatist was Aristophanes. His plays combined political satire, fantasy, social criticism, and humour.

B. Roman Comedy: Roman playwrights such as Plautus and Terence adapted Greek comedy. Their plays influenced Renaissance drama.

C. Shakespearean Comedy: Shakespeare transformed comedy into one of the greatest dramatic forms. His comedies typically include lovers separated by obstacles, disguise, mistaken identity, witty dialogue, and marriages. Examples include *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

D. Modern Comedy: Modern comedy often combines humour with social criticism. Writers such as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and contemporary dramatists

use comedy to expose hypocrisy, prejudice, class distinctions, and political corruption.

Major Types of Comedy

There are several important types of comedy.

A. Romantic Comedy: This kind of comedy represents a love affair involving a beautiful, engaging heroine (sometimes disguised as a man); the course of this love doesn't run smoothly, but eventually overcomes all difficulties and ends in happy union. Many later "boy-meets-girl" plots are instances of romantic comedy, including romance novels and films.

Example: Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

B. Comedy of Manners: The comedy of manners uses wit and intellectual dialogue to satirize the social behaviors, artificialities, and strict codes of a specific contemporary society.

Example: Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*

C. Comedy of Humours: The comedy of humours focuses on a character or range of characters, each of whom exhibits overriding traits or 'humours' that dominate their personality, desires and conduct. This creates comic behaviour. The English playwrights Ben Jonson and George Chapman popularised the genre in the closing years of the sixteenth century.

Example: Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*

D. Sentimental Comedy: Sentimental comedy is an 18th-century dramatic genre which sprang up as a reaction to the immoral tone of English Restoration plays. In sentimental comedies, middle-class protagonists triumphantly overcome a series of moral trials. These plays aimed to produce tears rather than laughter and reflected contemporary philosophical conceptions of humans as inherently good but capable of being led astray by bad example.

Instead of ridicule, it emphasizes virtue, sympathy, and moral improvement.

E. Farce: Farce is a form of comedy that relies on amusing and highly implausible plots, stereotyped or exaggerated characters, physical humor and misunderstandings to entertain an audience.

Comic Devices

Comedy creates humour through many techniques.

- I. Mistaken Identity: Characters confuse one person for another.
- II. Disguise: A character adopts another identity.
- III. Coincidence: Unexpected events produce comic results.
- IV. Verbal Wit: Clever dialogue creates amusement.
- V. Irony: Readers recognize meanings that characters fail to perceive.
- VI. Exaggeration: Minor situations become absurdly important.

Comedy and Society

Comedy usually concerns society rather than isolated individuals. Its goal is often not to destroy society, but to correct it. Laughter becomes a means of exposing vanity, pride, greed, hypocrisy, and foolishness.

Comedy versus Tragedy

Comedy

Happy ending
Reconciliation
Marriage
Social harmony
Laughter
Hope

Tragedy

Catastrophic ending
Destruction
Death
Social breakdown
Pity and fear
Suffering

Comedy and Satire

Comedy and satire frequently overlap. However, they are not identical. Comedy primarily entertains. Satire, on the other hand, primarily criticizes. Many works successfully combine both.

The Function of Comedy

Comedy performs several important functions.

- I. Entertainment: Produces pleasure.
- II. Social Criticism: Exposes human weaknesses.
- III. Moral Instruction: Encourages moderation and self-awareness.

Common Student Mistakes

Mistake 1: Thinking comedy simply means "funny." Comedy is defined mainly by its structure and ending, not by the number of jokes.

Mistake 2: Confusing comedy with farce. Farce depends upon absurdity. Comedy may contain serious ideas.

Mistake 3: Ignoring satire. Many comedies criticize society while entertaining audiences.

Mistake 4: Believing comedy lacks seriousness. Many comic works explore themes of justice, morality, love, politics, and human behaviour.