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Background Reading

Comedy and Tragedy in Classical Drama

The world of literature of fiction has been enriched with so many literary *genres* viz- poetry, epic, novel, lyric etc. drama is another popular *genre* in the canvas of literature. It has been derived from the Greek word *δρᾶμα* meaning 'action' It is a mode of fiction represented through performance. Some critics are of the opinion that it takes its origin from *Natya Shastra* by Bharat Muni in Sanskrit literature. However, may be the matter of debate drama represents the generic division between comedy and tragedy. To deal with these two *genres*, again, we have to sink into the deep delved realm of classical literature. So, in this discussion our main focus is to deal with comedy and tragedy in classical drama.

For Aristotle, comedy represents human beings as "worse than they are," but he notes that comic characters are not necessarily evil, just ridiculous and laughable. He contrasts comedy with tragedy, which represents humans as "better than they are." Many scholars speculate that Aristotle treated comedy in a lost section of the *Poetics* or in another lost treatise.

On the other hand Aristotle defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action, that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the part of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incident arousing pity and fear. Wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." (Translated by Ingram Bywater: OUP).

Classical tragedy – elements include a tragic hero who is of higher than ordinary moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, to which he is led by "an error in judgement" or his tragic flaw. Most often the mistaken act ultimately leads to the hero's death. We feel pity for the tragic hero because he is not an evil man, so his misfortune is greater than he deserves. There is also a sense that the hero could have been more if not for his tragic flaw. Comic elements may be present in a classical tragedy.



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Classical comedy (also known as tragicomedy) – comedies of this variety represent a serious action which threatened a tragic disaster to the protagonist, who resembles in most ways a tragic hero, yet by an abrupt reversal of circumstance, the story ends happily. Refer to the above definition for the elements in a classical comedy, noting the change in the ending.

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Some Distinctions Between Classical Tragedy and Comedy

Purpose and Effect	
Comedy	Tragedy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasizes human suffering 2. Ends with rigid finality 3. Moves with solemnity and foreboding 4. Emotional Response (pity and fear) 5. Identification with the hero 6. Laments man's fate 7. Criticizes hubris self-delusion, and complacency 8. Offers some hope (man can learn), but stresses limitations of the human condition 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasizes the renewal of human nature 2. Moves from rigidity to freedom 3. Plays with prevailing high spirits 4. Intellectual response (ridicule and absurdity) 5. Scorn/approval of protagonist/others 6. Celebrates life 7. Criticizes folly, self-delusion, and complacency 8. Suggests cynicism (man a fool), but offers hope of renewal.
Tragic Hero versus Comic Protagonist	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hero recognizes great mistake, but too late to change it 2. Hero demonstrates a personal flaw or error in perception 3. Hero frequently hubristic 4. Hero isolated from community in individuality 5. Hero exercises free will 6. Hero suffers terrible downfall 7. Hero fails through error 8. Hero aspires to more than he can achieve 9. Hero is larger than life, considerably above the audience in status or responsibility 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Hero" awakens to better nature after folly exposed. 2. "Hero" undergoes improbable improvement. 3. "Hero" frequently intolerant or prudish 4. "Hero" finds selfhood by joining flow of society and community, rejecting individuality 5. "Hero" is a comic mechanism 6. "Hero" loses and recovers his equilibrium 7. "Hero" triumphs by luck, wit, acceptance 8. "Hero" pretends to be more than he is 9. "Hero" is just like everyone else, or might even be an anti-hero or buffoon.



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Tragic Struggle versus Comic Struggle	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serious and painful struggle 2. Life and societal norms at odds 3. Struggle against unchangeable 4. Struggle dominated by Fate or necessity 5. Discovery of true nature leads to hero's isolation 6. Struggle against predictable and inevitable 7. Struggle between man and destiny, or between man and social forces beyond man's control 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less serious and painful struggle 2. Norms valid and necessary 3. Struggle against movable 4. Struggle dominated by Fortune (chance) 5. Discovery of true nature leads to hero's conformity with group norms. 6. Struggle against coincidence (unpredictable) 7. Struggle between individual and group or between groups (e.g., men and women)
Tragic Methods versus Comic Methods	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tragedy depends on validity of universal norms 2. Cohering episodes clarify action 3. Causality dominates pattern of (a) deed, which leads to (b) suffering, which leads to (c) recognition or understanding 4. Plot moves from freedom of choice to inflexible consequence 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Comedy exploits conflicting values 2. Plot more intricate, less plausible 3. Coincidence dominates a pattern less grappling with the unpredictable and the absurd. Plot forwarded by chance discoveries and accidental encounters. 4. Plot moves from rigidity at the beginning to greater freedom for characters at end