Directions: *Read, highlight, and annotate things worth discussing…*

<http://www.siue.edu/~ejoy/eng208NotesOnComedyAndTragedy.htm>

**Dramatic Structure: Comedy and Tragedy**

Shakespeare's plays are all about one great general theme: disorder. This may sound like a profound statement, but, as we shall see in a moment, it applies equally well to almost all drama. Still, the point is worth stressing, for reasons we shall attend to in a moment, because the major entry into every play we read is going to be an attempt to answer some key questions associated with that notion of disorder: What is the order in this society? How is that order violated? How do the characters respond to the loss of traditional order? How is order restored? Is the new order at the end of the play something healthy or is it shot through with ironic resonance?

All dramatic stories always involve conflict. Typically, the dramatic narrative will open with some sense of a normal society: we see people of all kinds going about their business, and in witnessing this initial state of affairs we quickly ascertain the various ranks of people, the bonds which hold them together, and something about their value system. In other words, we begin with a society which is held together by shared rules. Many of Shakespeare's plays begin with a large group scene (the king and his court, for example) in which everyone has a place and knows his or her place. The scene is offered to us as a symbol of social unity which is about to be broken and will not be restored until the closing scenes (e.g., *King Lear*, *Macbeth, Richard II*).

Then, something unusual and often unexpected happens to upset that normality. The event may be something natural, like a ship wreck (as in *Twelfth Night* or *The Tempest*), supernatural (as in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*), a decision made by a particular character (as in *King Lear* or *As You Like It*) or a sudden quarrel (e.g., *As You Like It, Henry IV, Part 1*). Often this event which kick starts the action is given very quickly with no attempt to provide a detailed explanation for it or even, in some cases, instantly plausible motivation (e.g., Cordelia's refusal to answer Lear, Oliver's decision to seek Orlando's death). At all events, this upset (which typically occurs very early in the action) disturbs the normal situation, creates confusion and conflict. Such conflict may be the source of much humour (for example, in the various mistaken identities which occur when a set of twins or, as in *Comedy of Errors*, two sets of twins, unexpectedly get loose in the community), or it may be the source of much political, personal, and psychological torment. Attempts to understand what is going on or to deal with it simply compound the conflict, accelerating it and intensifying it. Finally, the conflict is resolved.

The terms comedy and tragedy commonly refer to the ways in which dramatic conflicts are resolved. In comedy, the confusion ends when everyone recognizes what has been going on, learns from it, forgives, forgets, and re-establishes his or her identity in the smoothly functioning social group (which may return to the original normality or may be setting up a better situation than the one the group started with). Comedies typically end with a group celebration, especially one associated with a betrothal or wedding, often accompanied by music and dancing The emphasis is on the reintegration of everyone into the group, a recommitment to their shared life together. If there has been a clearly disruptive presence in the action, a source of anti-social discord, then that person typically has reformed his ways, has been punished, or is banished from the celebration. Thus, the comic celebration is looking forward to a more meaningful communal life (hence the common ending for comedies: "And *they* lived happily ever after").

The ending of a tragedy is quite different. Here the conflict is resolved only with the death of the main character, who usually discovers just before his death that his attempts to control the conflict and make his way through it have simply compounded his difficulties and that, therefore, to a large extent the dire situation he is in is largely of his own making. The death of the hero is not normally the very last thing in a tragedy, however, for there is commonly (especially in classical Greek tragedy) some group lament over the body of the fallen hero, a reflection upon the significance of the life which has now ended. Some of Shakespeare's best known speeches are these laments. The final action of a tragedy is then the carrying out of the corpse. The social group has formed again, but only as a result of the sacrifice of the main character(s), and the emphasis in the group is in a much lower key, as they ponder the significance of the life of the dead hero (in that sense, the ending of a tragedy is looking back over what has happened; the ending of comedy is looking forward to a joyful future).

This apparently simple structural difference between comedy and tragedy means that, with some quick rewriting, a tragic structure can be modified into a comic one. If we forget about violating the entire vision in the work (more about this later), we can see how easily a painful tragic ending can be converted into a reassuring comic conclusion.. If Juliet wakes up in time, she and Romeo can live happily ever after. If Cordelia survives, then Lear's heart will not break; she can marry Edgar, and all three of them can live prosperously and happily for years to come. And so on. Such changes to the endings of Shakespeare's tragedies were commonplace in eighteenth-century productions, at a time when the tragic vision of experience was considered far less acceptable and popular by the general public.

**Comedy and Tragedy as Visions of Experience**

But the terms tragedy and comedy refer to more than simply the structure of a narrative (especially the ending). The terms also commonly refer to visions of experience (which those structures present). And this matter is considerably more complex than simply the matter of the final plot twist.

Of the two, the comic vision is easier to explain, since, as we shall see, it corresponds to the way most of us think (or like to think) about life. Stated most simply, the comic vision celebrates the individual's participation in a community as the most important part of life. When the normal community is upset, the main characters in a comedy will normally have the initial urge to seek to restore that normality, to get back what they have lost. Initially, they will be unsuccessful, and they will have to adapt to unfamiliar changes (funny or otherwise). But in a comedy the main characters will have the ability to adjust, to learn, to come up with the resources necessary to meet the challenges they face. They may also have a great deal of luck. But one way and another, they persevere and the conflict is resolved happily with the reintegration of the characters into a shared community. Often an important point in the comedy is the way in which the main characters have to learn some important things about life (especially about themselves) before being able to resolve the conflict (this is particular true of the men in Shakespeare's comedies).

This form of story, it will be clear, is an endorsement of the value in the communal life we share together and of the importance of adjusting our individual demands on life to suit community demands. In a sense, the comic confusion will often force the individual to encounter things he or she has taken for granted, and dealing with these may well test many different resources (above all faith, flexibility, perseverance, and trust in other people). But through a final acknowledgment (earned or learned) of the importance of human interrelationships, a social harmony will be restored (commonly symbolized by a new betrothal, a reconciliation between parents, a family reunion, and so on), and a group celebration (feast, dance, procession) will endorse that new harmony.

Tragedy, by contrast, explores something much more complex: the individual's sense of his own desire to confront the world on his own terms, to get the world to answer to his conceptions of himself, if necessary at the expense of customary social bonds and even of his own life. The tragic hero characteristically sets out to deal with a conflict by himself or at least entirely on his own terms, and as things start to get more complicated, generally the tragic figure will simply redouble his efforts, increasingly persuaded that he can deal with what is happening only on his own. In that sense, tragic heroes are passionately egocentric and unwilling to compromise their powerful sense of their own identity in the face of unwelcome facts. They will not let themselves answer to any communal system of value; they answer only to themselves. Lear would sooner face the storm on the heath than compromise his sense of being horribly wronged by his daughters; Macbeth wills himself to more killings as the only means to resolve the psychological torment he feels; Othello sets himself up as the sole judge and executioner of Desdemona.