Tragedy versus Comedy: On Why Comedy is the Equal of Tragedy

Matthew Kieran (University of Leeds)

Abstract

Tragedy is superior to comedy. This is the received view in much philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism and amongst many ordinary literary appreciators. The paper outlines three standard types of reasons (and the main variants therein) given to underwrite the conceptual nature of the superiority claim, focusing on narrative structure, audience response and moral or human significance respectively. It sketches some possible inter-relations amongst the types of reasons given and raises various methodological worries about how the argument for tragedy's superiority typically proceeds. The paper then outlines an original normative account of a type of literary or dramatic comedy – 'high comedy' – which proves to be tragedy's equal. High comedies, it will be argued, have complex narrative structures shaping audience responses of fear and hope underwriting the moral significance of the comic mode. The received view is unjustified and appreciating why this is so casts light on the nature and value of (a certain kind of) comedy.

Introduction

Tragedy is in some significant sense superior to comedy.[1] This is the received view in philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism and amongst many ordinary literary appreciators. Tragedy is taken as the highest or most difficult literary form whilst comedy

[1] As with much of the philosophical literature on tragedy we will be concerned with narrative works in general e.g., plays, novels or films.

is judged to be inferior.[2] Criticism often characterises comedies as an escape from reality, light hearted amusement or easy ridicule. By contrast tragedies are serious stuff. They traffic in profound emotions and confront us with uncomfortable reality. On this view literary tragedy confronts us with profound truths about morality and the human world, comedy provides an enjoyable flight from it. The standard view no doubt helps to explain why much philosophical ink has been spilt over tragedy whilst comparatively little has been devoted to comedy.[3]

Milton articulates the received view when he asserts that tragedy 'hath ever been held the gravest, moralist, and most profitable of all other poems' (1947 (1671): 101) and, according to Albert, 'tragedy, says Hazlitt, is superior to comedy because it reveals human character more truly and because it arouses more sympathy in other people' (1956: 1051). Stolnitz's philosophical examination of tragedy and comedy concludes that, just as Aristotle argues epic poetry is inferior to tragedy, so, too, we should hold that 'comedy is "lower" than tragedy not only because of the lesser intensity, complexity and

---

[2] Canonical literary criticism that endorses or is often *taken* to support the received view includes Sydney [1947 (1580-1): 26-27], Milton [1947 (1671)], Addison [1975 (1711)]. Hazlitt [1869 (1817); 1913 (1818-19)] and Arnold 1925 (1888). For citations of a far wider range of literary critics who take such a view – especially from the Romantic period - see Albrecht (1956). Philosophical work that either endorses or is often taken to support the received view includes Aristotle [1920 (367-322 B. C.)], Schopenhauer [1969 (1819, 1844), Russell [1918], Stolnitz [1955] and Feagin [1983].

[3] Whilst contemporary companions to aesthetics in analytic philosophy have multiple articles on tragedy they contain little on comedy. See, for example, Kivy [2003], Lamarque and Olsen [2003], Levinson [2003], John and Lopes [2004], Gaut and Lopes [2005]. There are honourable exceptions. Contemporary work by Ted Cohen [1999] and Noel Carroll [2003; 2013] comes to mind though this tends to be concerned with humour as opposed to literary comedy. However, whilst primarily concerned with physical comedy Carroll's analysis of narration in Keaton's *The General* is wonderfully illuminating [Carroll 2007]. Somewhat earlier exceptions such as Janko [1984] and Golden [1984] tend to construct an account of comedy mirroring Aristotle's account of tragedy. It is worth bearing in mind worries about essentialist characterisations of both tragedy and comedy but these will not be addressed here. See Hume [1972].

subtlety of our response . . . but also because it lacks the compactness and vividness of structure which, as tragedy unfolds in time, creates a tightly-knit, climactic and integrated experience in the spectator' (Stolnitz 1955: 60). Feagin notes that 'the observation is often made that tragedies are much more important or significant artworks than comedies . . .There are great comedies, but the significance of the greatest is not thought to reach the significance of even less great tragedies. Why?' and goes on to argue this is so *because* 'the basis for our judgements of the *aesthetic* significance of tragedy (as opposed to the lesser significance of comedy) can plausibly be its calling forth feelings which are also at the basis of morality. Judgements about tragedy's greatness derive from a recognition of the importance or morality to human life' (Feagin 1983: 98-99).

It is worth clarifying exactly what the nature of the superiority claim is supposed to be. There are a host of associated empirical or contingent claims that should not be conflated with the superiority claim as such. To claim that tragedy is superior to comedy is not to claim that all tragedies are better than all comedies; it seems manifestly implausible to hold that really bad tragedies are better than really good comedies. It is not the claim that an average tragedy is better than the average comedy. It is not even necessarily to claim that the greatest tragedies are better or more significant than the greatest comedies though some (such as Feagin) who hold the received view may take this to fall out of the basis for holding the received view. As a matter of fact there may well happen to be more good tragedies than comedies i.e. perhaps more tragedies rightly figure in the endless lists of greatest works or literary canons than comedies. Conversely, perhaps there are a greater number of good comedy films than tragedies. Such claims are not without interest but they do not speak directly to what is at issue. The received view,

as we saw from the quotations above, depends upon constitutive claims to the effect that there is something inherent in what is required for a work to be a good tragedy which, when contrasted with the requirements of good literary comedy, thereby renders tragedy a superior literary, dramatic or narrative genre.

After outlining the standard reasons given for the received view, it will be argued, via a positive analysis of a kind of comedy, that the received view is unjustified. Indeed comedy, or at least a kind of comedy, is, contrary to the received view, tragedy's equal. Showing how and why this is so will cast light on the nature and value of literary comedy (an unjustly neglected topic within philosophical aesthetics).

The Received View

There are at least 3 distinct types of reasons taken to underwrite the received view.

(1) Superiority of Structure: Tragedy involves a complex dramatic structure which comedy does not.[4]

The complexity of the tragic figure, it is often suggested, gives rise to the complex dramatic structure of tragedy whereas the simplicity of the comic figure results in the simple dramatic structure of comedy. Tragedy involves a dynamic transformation and moral regeneration of a protagonist's thought and action via a dramatic reversal of fortune and the recognition of moral error through suffering. By contrast, it tends to be assumed that comedy involves neither such a complicated interplay between the

[4] Subscribers to this type of claim range from analytic philosophers such as Stolnitz [1955: 45-60] to literary critics such as Wimsatt and Brooks [1957: 49].

protagonist's thought and character nor the kind of moral crisis that would precipitate it. Hence, unlike the tragic figure, the comic figure is neither morally regenerated nor undergoes a process of moral learning.

(2) Superiority of Responses: Tragedy, unlike comedy, solicits complex responses from us based upon sympathy.[5]

Comedy, it is presumed, involves a particular kind of direct response. The pleasures of comedy derive from ridicule at the salient failings possessed by whomever or whatever is the joke's object. The responses involved are thus simple in structure and based on antipathy or at the very least indifference. Tragedy, by contrast, calls on the responses of pity and fear. The direct responses to tragedy are held to be superior since feeling pity and fear for the characters depends on sympathy, the foundation (at least psychologically if not conceptually) of morality. Given that the direct response of ridicule is based on antipathy or indifference then comedy is to say the least not quite so morally admirable (if not downright suspect). Furthermore, it is claimed, tragedy enables a complexity of meta-response that is unsupported by comedy. There are two distinct variants here. One tradition has it that our commiseration with the suffering of the virtuous, concomitant with indignation at the prospering of the vicious, gives rise to a meta-delight in contemplating the moral rectitude of our feelings in so responding [Hurd 1776; Feagin 1983]. A rather different tradition has it that through fearing for and pitying the distress

[5] Explicit advocacy of this type of claim can be found in literary criticism, see, for example, Hazlitt [1869 (1817): 13; 1913 (1818-19): 5-9, 31-2, 37, 35, 154-5] and Lamb [1932 (1823): 165-72] and in philosophy, see, for example, Stolnitz [1955] and Feagin [1983].

of others, tragedy enables the meta-response of pleasure to be taken in the contemplation of our own security [Lucretius 1908 (55 B.C.): 41; Upton 1748: 53-4]. Thus tragedy is superior to comedy in so far as the responses solicited depend on the core of moral feeling and support complex meta-responses.

(3) Superior significance: Tragedy is of greater significance than comedy.[6]

This claim is often taken to fall out of, at least in part, (1) the superiority of tragedy's structure and/or (2) the alleged superiority of the responses tragedy calls on when compared with comedy. The ways in which these claims are taken to be true are commonly assumed to underwrite further elaborations of the general claim to superiority. Such further characterisations of tragedy's superiority are typically claims to the effect that, unlike tragedy, comedy is unconcerned with matters fundamental to human happiness or morality [Feagin 1983] or statements of the putative fact that we can learn something deep from tragedy whereas the cognitive gains to be gleaned from comedy are trivial at best [Stolnitz 1955].

Although the three types of claims outlined above are distinct they can be and often are intimately related. Versions of (1) the superiority of dramatic structure claim

[6] The thought that the distinctive pleasures afforded by tragedy are superior in virtue of calling on that which is at the foundation of moral life, namely sympathy, can be found in or has been derived from works too numerous to mention (see footnote 6). This is commonly taken to underwrite the presumption that tragedy is the highest or most excellent of literary forms. Classic examples of this train of thought include Hazlitt [1913 (1818-19)], Burke [1987 (1757): 44-48], Smith [1976 (1759): 42-49] and Feagin [1983: 99]. An emphasis on sympathy can be conjoined with or kept separate from the thought that tragedy is superior in virtue of what it enables us to comprehend or learn [Nussbaum 1986].

can be taken to underwrite versions of (2) that assert the superiority of tragedy's responses and (3) the greater significance of tragedy. An alternative position might be silent about cross genre comparisons with respect to dramatic structure and yet hold that a version of (2) the superiority of responses claim explains why (3) the assertion of tragedy's greater significance allegedly holds good. These sorts of inter-locking relations amongst the types of claims outlined and the reasons given to underwrite them are fairly typical. Nonetheless, the three types of claims outlined can be held independently of one another. It could be the case, for example, that someone might only hold to some suitably characterised version of (3) the claim that tragedy possesses the greatest significance.[7]

The three types of claims capture what underlies the received view. The question is, either singly or in some combination, do they justify it? Are the claims any good?

Initial Worries

Given the assumption that cross genre comparisons make sense, there are some initial worries that should give us pause for thought. A couple are methodological. The arguments in tragedy's favour often seem to proceed by assuming essentialism about both genres and then biasing the relevant comparison class in tragedy's favour. Stolnitz [1955], for example, concentrates on Lear as the paradigmatic tragic figure and takes Charlie Chaplin movies as paradigmatic of the comic figure. The resultant analysis is taken to show that tragedy enables a complex interplay of thought and action from moral error through to moral transformation and learning that comedy putatively cannot sustain.

[7] Russell [1918: 53-55], for example, suggests that tragedy is extolled as the greatest art form just in virtue of its putatively clear sighted, courageous recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness of human life.

Although the generalisations about comedy and tragedy thereby arrived at may seem plausible in such a context, the framing effect is distorting. This becomes clear as soon as we realise that neither the tragic nor the comic figure and their concomitant dramatic structures must be as characterised.[8]

There are many successful tragedies that do not involve the moral transformation or regeneration of character. *Oedipus Rex*, a masterpiece of Greek tragedy, is a tragedy partly in virtue of a cognitive error. Oedipus does not know who he is. The dramatic reversal comes about when Oedipus learns the disastrous truth about himself too late, and thus realises that he killed his father and married his mother. He chooses to blind himself as a punitive symbolic act but this does not signify Oedipus' moral regeneration or transformation of character in light of his moral error. Oedipus's self-blinding manifests the same moral character and courage that he has shown all along. This is far from being an atypical case. The tragic errors central to *Antigone*, *Ajax*, *The Trojan Women*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *A Doll's House* or *Saint Joan*, to name but a few, are all at odds with the idea that tragedy requires the moral transformation of a central protagonist. Furthermore, there are many successful comedies that have complex dramatic structures and often involve moral error and transformation of central characters in various ways: *Lysistrata*; *The Taming of the Shrew*; *Much Ado*

[8] The distortive framing effect is also manifest in Stolnitz's assumption that tragedies are essentially compact and unitary in structure whereas comedies are by nature episodic. This assumption, conjoined with Aristotelian reasons for holding that compact and unitary tragedies are superior to episodic ones, grounds Stolnitz's claim that the dramatic and aesthetic effect of (episodic) comedy is dissipated by comparison to (compact and unitary) tragedy [Stolnitz 1955: 58-60]. Yet many tragedies are episodic and many comedies are compact and unitary. If compact and unitary works are the best in the relevant class then the comparison should be between tragedies and comedies that are compact and unitary. Alternatively an argument is needed to show that i) comedy is inherently episodic and ii) that episodic literature is inherently inferior.

About Nothing; *The Liar*; *The Misanthrope*; *School for Wives*; *She Stoops to Conquer*; *School for Scandal*; *Pygmalion* and *Annie Hall* (to name but a few).

A distinct but related worry about methodology concerns the intension and extension of the genre terms under discussion. 'Comedy' is often taken to refer to works that are pre-dominantly amusing with some sort of happy ending. These are then contrasted with a much more sophisticated conception of tragedy. Far from picking out works which conform to a similarly minimal conception of tragedy (i.e. pre-dominantly serious with some sort of sad ending), 'tragedy' is taken to pick out a much narrower range of works that are characterised in tightly circumscribed terms with respect to appropriate subject matter, complex dramatic structure and effects. It is to compare a folk use of 'comedy' with a highly technical literary conception of tragedy. This hardly looks to be comparing like with like.

It might be said in response that the methodology derives from common linguistic understanding and use of the terms. However, this seems false and proceeding in this way serves only to render the alleged superiority of tragedy a trivial matter. Tragedy is straightforwardly superior to comedy if 'tragedy' is defined in terms of a work's adherence to a particular complex artistic aim, structure and effect whilst 'comedy' is defined merely as works that seek to amuse. For the claim to be philosophically substantive, given 'tragedy' is reserved to pick out a certain kind of serious work with a particular structure and concomitant effects, what must be at issue is whether or not an appropriately contrasting and delimited type of comedy exists that can achieve a complex dramatic structure, effect and value of equivalent significance. The methodologically sound way to proceed is to seek a characterisation of an appropriately contrasting and

sophisticated kind of comedy and see what, if anything, falls out from such an analysis. If those who defend the superiority claim argue in terms of what the best kind of tragedy realises, then the claim must stand or fall in light of what we should say about what the best kind of comedy can achieve.

Lastly, support for the received view depends upon a rather uncharitable characterisation of what comedy essentially involves; one that stretches back to the beginnings of philosophical tradition. There is a tradition that holds that comedy and humour more generally draw on base feelings of superiority at the expense of others alongside a concomitant lack of sympathy. Plato holds not only that comedy speaks to our baser appetites as all art does [Plato 1985 (375 B. C.): 10, l. 606c-d, 437], but that it does so through invoking malicious delight in contemplating the suffering of others [Plato 1975 (355-347 B.C.): l. 48a-50b, 47-50]. Aristotle's few scattered remarks on comedy have also been construed pejoratively. Comedy, Aristotle suggests, is an imitation of lower characters involving some defect or ugliness [Aristotle 1996 (367-322 B. C.): 5, 3.4, 9]. Comedy's pleasures are identified as being similar to those arising from second-rate tragedies, where the good end happily and the bad are punished thus resulting in comforting rather than challenging audiences [Aristotle 1996 (367-322 B. C.): 13, 7.2, 22]. Aristotle's remarks are often taken to support the idea that comedy involves an unsympathetic easy laughter directed at 'low' ridiculed figures we thereby feel superior to and such a view persists down the ages. Indeed, Hobbes infamously characterised laughter as consisting in the "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in our selves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" [Hobbes 1684 (1650): 55]. Such a tradition lends itself to the received view's

presumption that the easy ridicule central to comedy does not require a complex dramatic structure, need call on only the most direct of responses and cultivates neither learning nor the feelings that are at the basis of morality. Indeed, according to this line of thought, comedy is all too closely related to schadenfreude and its attendant morally problematic emotions such as malice and envy [Baudelaire 1986 (1855)].

However, construing Aristotle as a forerunner of the received view should be deeply puzzling. The *Poetics* is, after all, a riposte to Plato's denunciation of art as involving an epistemic illusion serving only to indulge irrational emotions. It seems perverse to attribute to Aristotle the thought that only the best kind of tragedy meets Plato's challenge. Aristotle explicitly claims that tragedy *and* comedy are the highest art forms [Aristotle 1996 (367-322 B. C.): 4, 3.2, 8] and that even the putatively lower form, episodic epic, answers Plato's charge (albeit not in the strongest or most effective way) [Aristotle 1996 (367-322 B. C.): 26, 12.2, 47-8]. It seems more in keeping with the methodology and rationale of the *Poetics* to infer that Aristotle held that comedy too trumped Plato's concerns about art. Tragedies with happy endings may be second rate according to Aristotle but, presumably, this is because they import endings appropriate for realising the ends of comedy. At the very least, it in no way follows from Aristotle's remarks that the characteristics he takes to be appropriate to comedy proper are themselves second rate. It is just that these characteristics make for second rate tragedies (as opposed to dramas *per se*). More generally, why should it be granted that the comedic representation of defects or inferiority essentially involves a lack of sympathy and renders the form itself inferior? To take but one example, Chaucer's shrewish narrator in his *Wife of Bath* is a lusty and overbearing schemer. She not only portrays herself as such

in the prologue but also exaggerates the extent to which this is so for comedic effect. Yet the humour and complex comic irony achieved by Chaucer in the *Wife of Bath*'s prologue depends upon sympathy for her rather than indifference or antipathy. The wife of Bath's vitality and generosity of spirit are bound up with a dogged determinedness not to be taken advantage of. In moral terms this is particularly impressive given that women in the fourteenth century were understood to have few rights and taken to be the chattels of men. Hence the moral character of the wife's humorous self-portrayal of her last marriage and its conflicts, between a woman and the clerical authorities that would condemn her, is touching.

These worries should be enough to cast some doubt on the received view and prompt us to approach reasons adduced in support of it with due care. Rather than going on to criticise in detail each type of claim taken to support the received view, a more positive way to proceed is to develop a substantive characterisation of a kind of comedy which promises to fulfil – for comedy - the criteria supposedly underwriting tragedy's claim to superiority. In what follows not only will such a characterisation be given but it will also be shown that there are such comedies. Thus it will be argued that, contrary to the received view, comedy, or at least a kind of comedy, is the equal of (a kind of) tragedy.

Comedy's Complex Dramatic Structure

Let us stipulate that, echoing Aristotle, in literary comedy the primary aim in giving form to the raw material constituting a work's subject matter is the overall ludicrous treatment

of action that is susceptible to such treatment.[9] The overall qualification is required since comedies can have tragic scenes, the function of which, ideally at least, is to provide an appropriate contrast in order to heighten the general comic effect striven for. Ludicrous treatment involves representing something lightly, playfully or absurdly. The means employed, for obvious reasons, are often mirthful or laughter inducing but these should not be confused with the nature of ludicrousness itself. After all works can be wryly amusing or sardonic without being hilarious. Furthermore what is being treated ludicrously in the literary representation should, at least *as treated*, be susceptible to such treatment. There are situations that naturally seem to speak to or call for ludicrous treatment, from everyday mishaps to amusing misunderstandings, and it is important to recognise that it does not follow that such subject matter or states of affairs are thereby trivial. The disparities between aspiration and reality that are the stock in trade of comedies range over, for example, the pursuit of love, social aspiration or matters of life and death, to name but a few areas fundamental to our lives. Ludicrous treatment is often put in the service of seriousness of purpose. Furthermore although certain types of events may naturally speak to a comic rather than a tragic treatment, there is much subject matter that in principle can admit just as much of ludicrous as serious treatment depending on the bent, talent and purposes of the author. Tales of someone's being arrested, rescued from suicide, depression or failures in love, for instance, can be treated comically or tragically. Hence the nature of the raw material for the narrative itself is insufficient to determine the treatment (though it may tend to speak to or prompt certain

[9] It is not hereby claimed that this is exactly what Aristotle did mean or would have meant. See footnote 14 for the relevant contrasts and differences between the present account and those argued for by commentators engaged in trying to uncover or reconstruct Aristotle's account of comedy.

possibilities). It is the primary aim that governs the form of the work and thus the ways in which the content is represented to us as ludicrous.

One ideal comedic structure is that of a complex plot involving a reversal of fortune, recognition and error.[10] The reversal of fortune in the best of such comedies should be sudden, unforeseen and in need of explanation. Comedies typically involve the misfortunes and mishaps of the central protagonist in which disaster increasingly looms. At the very moment when impending catastrophe is about to be realised or indeed appears to have struck, there is a sudden and unexpected reversal of fortune such that the central character's fundamental goals come to be realised. Its sudden and unforeseen nature affords maximum impact and calls for explanation. If it seems like the wholly arbitrary stroke of good fortune then it is mere happenstance. There should be a connection between the state of good fortune arrived at and the trajectory of the central characters. This requirement leads onto the second feature of this type of comic plot, namely that of recognition. What renders the reversal intelligible is the trajectory of the character from the ignorance implicated in their errors and misfortunes to knowledge.

In Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* we can see how this structure works. Jim Dixon has stumbled into a provincial backwater of academia in austere post-war Britain. He loathes his subject, medieval history, but can think of nothing better to do. Hence he hangs around hoping that the piece of scholasticism he's cobbled together, entitled "The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485",

[10] By way of emphasis, this is a normative account of the criteria that at least one type of comedy should aim to fulfil. The reasons grounding the criteria will become clear but, in essence, the thought is that such criteria enable a comedy to achieve a certain complexity of structure and response. It does not automatically follow that this is *the* ideal comic structure since there may be more than one ideal.

will find acceptance by some obscure journal. It is, Jim thinks to himself, “a perfect title in that it crystallised the article’s niggling mindlessness, its funeral parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon nonproblems” [Amis 1984 (1953): 14]. His dreary boarding house life, eking out limited funds on too few cigarettes and not enough drink, provides the backdrop to a procession of blunders and mishaps. At a party given by his head of department, Welch, who he both despises and has to endear himself to, Jim is subjected to the odious tedium of group singing and pseudo discourse on folk culture and high art. He proceeds to get drunk, set his bed alight and, in an attempt to cover up his crime, cut out sections from the bed sheets. Shot through all these events is his relationship with Margaret, an aggressively vulnerable fellow lecturer. Margaret’s frequent allusions to recovery from a recent suicide attempt, prompted, Jim is led to believe, by a former lover’s abandonment of her, serve only to trap him into acquiescence. His attempts to negotiate her romantic projections are continually doomed, compelled as he is out of politeness and consideration of her apparent circumstance into entertaining her forced intimacies. The cruel hopelessness of Jim’s situation is compounded still further when he encounters the vivacious Christine, seemingly attached to Welch’s son, Bertrand, a pretentious, vulgar pseudo-artist writer from London. The coup de grâce apparently arrives when, at his public lecture on ‘Merrie England’, Jim goes into psychological meltdown. He starts the lecture worse for wear from drink and finds that he is involuntarily imitating Welch. He swiftly changes his manner only to realise that he is now imitating the Principal. This culminates in the realisation that all is lost as Jim holds forth in an exaggerated version of his original regional accent, laying

bare his contempt for the tired scholasticism and sentimental idealism of his peers. The lecture ends in chaos with Jim fainting just as the Principal and Welch try to drag him off.

The final chapters however see a swift reversal of fortune. The prospect of happiness dawns suddenly and wholly unexpectedly after apparent disaster. Jim is told that he is no longer to be kept on at the university. The very act that finally constituted Jim's being true to himself has led to the sack. As if to confirm the hypocrisy of the world Jim is being expelled from, he then learns that his 'Shipbuilding Techniques' article has just been published under the name of the editor that the piece was sent to. Yet on returning home Jim finds he has just been offered a job in London, the very same one that Bertrand was after. Jim then meets with Margaret's former 'lover' and discovers that Margaret neither had any such previous relationship nor had she genuinely tried to commit suicide. She is revealed to be a manipulative, emotional, bully. Jim now sees that he should break with Margaret, though he can't see how. Deliverance arrives in the form of the newly single Christine and they agree to embark on the train to London together.

Maximum impact is achieved precisely because the reversal of fortune is unforeseen and unanticipated. The drama is enhanced because the reversal, from utter misery to the prospect of happiness, involves such an extreme contrast. Rather crucially, however, the reversal isn't an arbitrary stroke of fortune since it is rendered intelligible through the dramatic structure of the plot. The reversal is itself tied up with Jim's movement from ignorance to knowledge. Rather than aping the outward show of all he despises, Jim authentically gives vent to his true feelings in the lecture. The apparently disastrous result precipitates the reversal of fortune, by freeing Jim to take up the unexpected job in London. Almost immediately afterwards, Margaret's deceitfulness is

revealed, making clear to him the nature of the relationship he has been sucked into. This frees him to be with Christine. The novel ends with Jim and Christine bumping into the Welchs in the street. Jim reacts by howling with laughter at the sight of them, overcome, as he is, with relief. He is free to be true to himself and happy in the knowledge of what it is that he has just escaped.

It is worth saying a little more about the kind of error that should be involved here. The misfortunes and mishaps prior to the reversal of fortune should be centrally bound up with some kind of error on the part of the central protagonist. The kind of errors involved could range from deeds done in ignorance to more fundamental errors of mind or character. This enables the central character to be implicated in such a way that the explanation of their misfortunes isn't arbitrary. Hence although the events represented are pitiful they can be represented as comic rather than cruel. It is also important that the reversal of fortune isn't wholly undeserved. The central character must be decent in some respects, ranging from being the performer of good deeds to being well motivated in some respects. Indeed the ways in which this is so may well be tied up with the nature of their errors. Jim's sympathy for Margaret, for example, is what sucks him into a relationship that is false on many levels. If the central character is decent in at least some respects then the reversal of fortune comes as a welcome relief rather than something that is deeply unjust. The unfortunate events as ludicrously represented are thus pitiful, the misfortunes involved are not fully deserved and the treatment of them is ultimately hopeful to the extent that relief from suffering and the prospect of happiness is realised.

Assuming this is an ideal dramatic plot structure we can now elaborate an ideal character object of such a comedy. The central character should be represented as being

somewhat worse than ourselves[11]: s/he must be represented as being lower than standard normative expectations in some salient respect that is foregrounded as central to the dramatic development of the plot. This enables a ludicrous rather than serious treatment of the character's misfortunes. However, despite falling short of decency in the salient respect the protagonist cannot be utterly wicked. The character must be redeemable or decent in certain respects in order for the reversal of fortune to be a welcome one. The ideal dramatic resolution brought about through the reversal of fortune is one of happiness or at least the prospect of happiness.

We are now in a position to refine the general characterisation of the type of comedy given above. It is the overall ludicrous treatment of the ways in which things can go well for us despite human fallibility. The fictional status of events as represented in the narrative enables the treatment of characters and events to be shaped according to this primary aim. This is best realised via a complex dramatic structure involving error, recognition and reversal of fortune. Its ideal object or central protagonist is one who is worse then us in some salient respect yet not wholly evil.

Audience Apprehension and Responses

The complex comedic dramatic structure outlined above underwrites audience apprehension and response. Our natural delight in the ludicrous treatment of such a plot structure enables us to contemplate the events as we would not or might not otherwise be

[11] The common assumption that the central protagonist(s) in comedy must be represented as being worse than ourselves can be traced as far back as Aristotle [Aristotle 1996 (367-322 B. C.): 5, 3.4]: 'Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type – not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive'.

able to in real life. Both the swiftness of condemnation that often follows the recognition of moral failings and the fear arising from the recognition of disaster in actuality can be put in abeyance as the reader apprehends the events as ludicrously treated narrative fictions. Given the failings or errors of the central characters, the audience can happily entertain what happens to them as ludicrous. The central protagonist in Jane Austen's *Emma*, for example, is a self-deceived snob given to meddling in the affairs of others according to her own romantic flights of fancy.[12] If we were to meet such a character in real life we probably wouldn't take to her very well nor wish to spend time in her company. The reader, aware of the work as fiction, is free to see the foibles and follies of such characters as implicated in unfortunate incidents as ludicrous without the psychological pressures the real world brings with it.[13]

The comedic treatment of the central character must be sympathetic. Only if this is the case will we be able to see the events represented as both pitiful and hopeful. If we didn't sympathise with Amis' Jim or Austen's Emma then we wouldn't care about their aspirations, pity the prospects of their being unfulfilled or hope that despite everything they might be fully realised. If Jim or Emma were just nasty pieces of work then we would think that their travails were deserved and the upturns in fortune a matter of undeserved luck. We'd neither hope for such an outcome nor feel sorry for her along the way. It is crucial that despite their faults Jim and Emma are well motivated. What leads to confusion and near disaster in both *Lucky Jim* and *Emma* are the ways in which the central character's motivation is tied up with self-deception or self-conceit thereby

[12] See the extended treatment of *Emma* and more general considerations in Potts (1949), 29-35, to which what follows is in part indebted.
[13] See Kieran (2010) for an extended elaboration of how and why engaging with narrative art can free us from responding as we would in real life.

issuing in wrong action. Nonetheless in the face of imminent disaster both attain true self-knowledge in the respective novels, just when things seem too late. Hence at a late point in the novels both central protagonists become truly decent and thus deserving of the prospect of happiness. Once this is established, the novels play out the aversion of disaster through the appropriate dawning of a new, prospectively much happier life.

We learn through such comedies how certain general traits of character can connect up and why their doing so in such a way threatens to undermine the possibility of happiness. The general theme in both novels, as confirmed by their respective denouements, is that true sympathy and affection must be based on genuine knowledge of oneself and others. Thus both novels in their different ways show us that, despite our errors and with some good fortune, we can attain the prospect of happiness and how we can do so.

We need a characterization of the distinct cognitive-affective attitudes the different dramatic treatments and structures give rise to. The account argued for here holds that good literary comedy consists in the ludicrous yet sympathetic treatment of one worse than us (which is what often gives rise to laughter) who befalls various misfortunes, which gives rise to both pity and hope, and yet who, in the very face of disaster, succeeds against the odds. Devoid of pity and hope we would neither enjoy nor delight in the protagonist's ultimate success since we would be unconcerned about or appalled at the resultant good fortune.[14] Comic catharsis involves pity and hope.[15]

---

[14] It is worth noting that the account outlined remains neutral over whether catharsis most fundamentally refers to the work's dramatic structure or audience responses.

[15] Commentators reconstructing Aristotle on comedy variously identify comic catharsis as envy and anger [Cooper 1922: 65-69], indignation and insolence [Fleming 547-8], indignation [Golden 1984: 288] or more generally concerned with the pleasures of beauty

The ludicrous treatment in *Lucky Jim* and *Emma* enables the protagnosists' thoughts and actions to be entertained sympathetically (as we might or otherwise would not in real life). We are drawn into and can enjoy seeing the ways in which their errors lead to confusion and threaten disaster whilst recognising that the resultant mishaps are pitiful and the unexpected reversals of fortune are hopeful. Hence, as a comedy, both novela get us to entertain and cognitively-affectively understand general threats to and constituents of happiness. Furthermore, because of the way in which ludicrousness enables sympathetic treatment, we are able to see how Jim and Emma embody distinctive faults or make errors that we ourselves are or can be prone to. The light treatment of errors allows us to see something of ourselves in these rather different characters. Thus our pity and hope for in both novels may in part bound up with a meta response of pity and hope for ourselves. Our relief and joy at such happy endings is not just directed toward the central characters but also arises out of the recognition that despite our own errors and failings we too may nonetheless attain happiness.

Comedy's Value and Significance

What then is the value of the comic as opposed to the tragic mode? Tragedy's take on human fallibility affords two things. First, in confronting us with the ways in which things can go wrong for those even better than ourselves we gain knowledge about how we too can go wrong. We realise through our engagement with tragedy how error can precipitate disaster and sever us from the prospect of happiness. Secondly, tragedy

---

and derision or ridicule [Janko 1984]. If a kind of comic catharsis is constituted by negative emotions such as envy, anger, indignation, insolence or derision, this may be closer to capturing satire as distinct from the kind of comedy characterised above.

proffers a particular motivation for taking its lessons seriously. It warns us against complacency and hubris. Given that disaster through error can befall those better than us, we should realise how much more easily it could befall any one of us. If we value the prospect of happiness, we should fear and be on our guard against error. Comedy's take on human fallibility is rather different. First, in showing us the ways in which things can come good for those worse than ourselves we gain knowledge about how despite error we too can come right. We see through our engagement with comedy how error can be overcome and the prospect of happiness attained. Secondly, comedy proffers a rather different motivation for takings its lessons to heart. It encourages striving and hopefulness. Given that success can come to those worse than us, we should realise that the prospect of happiness may be attainable by all of us. Assuming we value the prospect of happiness, we can meaningfully aspire to and strive for it (as opposed to just giving up).

At a more abstract level the way in which we gain propositional knowledge and motivation from engaging with comedy underwrites a more fundamental cognitive-affective pay off. What tragedy and comedy share *qua* narrative fiction is the representation of thought and action. The inter-relations between thought and action are at least typically rendered intelligible and transparent through the narrative. This is in contrast to our epistemic state in real life. The inter-relations between someone's thought, character and action in the actual world are often much more opaque to us. We know, for example, that Emma is well motivated and Othello is not essentially a jealous man in a way in which we could not were the events real. We are, epistemically speaking, in a much harder place when it comes to real life than we are with respect to narrative. What

narratives as such can do is cultivate our capacities to discriminate states, thoughts, actions and their possible interconnections in the artificially clearer cases of fiction. The cultivation of these abilities with respect to transparent possibilities can thereby enhance our capacity to do so with respect to the much more opaque cases in actuality. Thus far tragedy and comedy are on a par. The apparent servility of Shakespeare's Iago and Austen's Steele sisters at particular times is revelatory of self-serving characters. We don't just learn that servility can be self-serving but, in doing so, exercise and cultivate the more general ability to see how the tone and nature of particular outward actions can be revelatory of certain character traits. Where comedy and tragedy differ is in cultivating the capacity at a higher order level to take up distinct cognitive-affective attitudes towards certain kinds of inter-relations between thought and action. Tragedy develops our capacity to see certain kinds of errors in life as fundamentally serious, ranging from the breaching of social or psychological boundaries to infidelities of the heart. It is important to be able to see, where appropriate, a family falling out, a breach of friendship or flirtation as errors both in and of themselves and in terms of their potentially serious consequences. To treat such things lightly, as tragedy warns us against doing, can sometimes be a big mistake. Tragedy shows us not only what to guard against but the light of potential disaster under which such things should often be apprehended. Comedy, by contrast, develops our capacity to see errors in life light heartedly. It is just as important to be able to see, where appropriate, family rows, the falling out of friends or flirtations as ludicrous. The ability to do so is what underwrites the acceptance and making light of mistakes that is often required for us to realise the best in others and ourselves. To treat every error or breach seriously can itself be a big mistake. Comedy

not only encourages us to realise that errors should not always be taken to heart but how to see them in light of the attainable prospect of happiness. The comic mode (just as much as the tragic one) refines our capacity to take up an attitude that is required in a life that aspires toward true happiness.

Comedy as Tragedy's Equal

The account of comedy presented is far from exhaustive; many comedies do not conform to the requirements outlined. The argument presented need not be committed to the claim that all the best comedies must take this shape. The exclusion of much slapstick, satire or farce from high comedy, for example, does not necessarily imply a devaluation of them. However, 'high comedy' picks out a recognisable type of comedy of which there are many successful instances. Austen's oeuvre and Amis's *Lucky Jim* are far from rare in conforming to this type of comedy. Comedies by Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Jonson, Moliere, Corneille, Congreve, Sheridan, Goldsmith, Fielding, Trollope, Wilde, Shaw, and Woody Allen, to name but a few, have this kind of structure. Such comedies possess the complex dramatic structure outlined above that enables us to cognitively-affectively comprehend, clarify and deepen our understanding of ways in which human beings can attain the prospect of happiness despite themselves. It does so in part through the ludicrous treatment of and sympathetic engagement with the central protagonist in a manner that draws on and gives rise to meta responses with respect to ourselves. The

moral significance and value of the comic mode is as fundamental to human life and happiness as the tragic mode. Hopeful comedy is the equal of despairing tragedy.[16]

References

Addison, J. 1975 (1711). The Language of Tragedy, in *Joseph Addison: Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. John Loftis, Northbrook: AHM Publishing Corporation: 30-33.

Albrecht, W. P. (1956). Hazlitt's Preference for Tragedy, *PMLA*, 71: 1042-1051.

Amis, K. 1984 (1953). Lucky Jim, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Aristotle. 1996 (367-322 B. C.). *Poetics*, tr. M. Heath, London: Penguin.

Arnold, M. 1925 (1888). The Study of Poetry in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, London: Macmillan and Co.: 1-55.

Austen, J. 1966 (1815). *The Novels of Jane Austen, Vol IV: Emma,* ed. R. W. Chapman, London: Oxford University Press.

Baudelaire, C. 1986 (1855). On the Essence of Laughter, and, in General, on the Comic in the Plastic Arts in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, tr. J. Mayne, New York: Da Capo Press.

Carroll, N. 2003. Humor in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carroll, N. 2007. *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humor and Bodily Coping*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Carroll, N. 2013. Humor and Morality, *Ethical Perspectives*.

---

[16] I would like to thank two anonymous referees for *Ethical Perspectives* for their comments that helped to improve the paper.

Cohen, T. 1999. *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cooper, L. 1922. *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.

Feagin, S. 1983. The Pleasures of Tragedy, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20: 95 – 104.

Fleming, R. 1939. Of Contrast Between Tragedy and Comedy, *Journal of Philosophy*, 36: 543-553.

Gaut, B. and D. M. Lopes. eds. 2005. *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge.

Golden, L. 1984. Aristotle on Comedy, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42: 283-290.

Hazlitt, W. 1869 (1817). On Modern Comedy in *The Round Table*, London: Sampson, Low, Son and Marston.

Hazlitt, W. 1913 (1818-19). *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, London: Dent.

Herrick, M. T. 1946. *The Fusion of Horatian and Aristotelian Literary Criticism* 1531-55, Urbana: Illinois.

Hobbes, T. 1968. *Leviathan*, London: Penguin.

Hobbes, T. 1684 (1650). Humane Nature in *Hobbs's Tripos in Three Discourses: Humane Nature, De Corpore Politico and Of Liberty and Necessity*, 3rd ed., London: Gilliflower, Rogers and Fox.

Hume, R. D. 1972. Some Problems in the Theory of Comedy, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31: 87-100.

Hurd, R. ed. 1776. *Q. Horatii Flaccci Epistolae ad Pisones et Augustum* with commentary, notes and critical dissertations, 3 vols., 5th ed., London.

Janko, R. 1984. *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II*, London: Duckworth.

Janko, R. 1992. From Catharsis to the Aristotelian Mean in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. A. O. Rorty, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

John, J. and D. M. Lopes. eds. 2004. *Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford: Blackwells.

Kieran, M. 2010. 'Art, Emotions and Immorality', in Peter Goldie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of the Emotions,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kivy, P. ed. 2003. *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lamarque, P. and S. Olsen. eds. 2003. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, Oxford: Blackwells.

Lamb, C. 1932 (1823). On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century in *The Essays of Elia*, London: Everyman.

Levinson, J. ed. 2003. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lucretius. 1908 (55 B.C.). *On the Nature of Things*, tr. Munro, London: George Bell and Sons.

Milton, J. 1947 (1671). Preface to *Samson Agonistes*: Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is called Tragedy, in *English Critical Essays: Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. E. D. Jones, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 101-103.

Plato 1985 (375 B. C.). *The Republic*, tr. D. Lee, 2nd ed., Penguin: Harmondsworth.

Plato 1975 (355-347 B.C.). *Philebus*, tr. J. C. B. Gosling, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Potts, L. J. 1949. *Comedy*, New York: Hutcheson.

Russell, B. 1918. A Free Man's Worship in *Mysticism and Logic and other Essays*, London: Longmans, Green and Co..

Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press: 247-280.

Schopenhauer, A. 1969 (1819, 1844). *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., tr. E. J. F. Payne, New York: Dover Publications.

Smith, A.1976 (1759). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Stolnitz, J. 1955. Notes on Comedy and Tragedy, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16: 45-60.

Sydney, P. 1947 (1580-1). An Apology for Poetry, in *English Critical Essays: Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. E. D. Jones, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Upton, J. 1748. *Critical Observations on Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., London: G. Hawkins.

Wimsatt, W. K. and C. Brooks. 1957. *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.