

TOWARD A CONSTRUCT VIEW OF TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

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Each personality theory will give rise to its own theory of tragedy and comedy. For those theories which – like Freudian psychoanalysis – may be seen as conflict theories of the psychosocial type (Maddi, 1980, 20ff.), both what is called *tragic* in real life and the art form *tragedy* will be seen as the result of the individual's conflict with society. In the art form, the more noble and the more righteously rebellious the protagonist is, the greater the conflict will be, and therefore the more dramatic the tragedy will be, and the more empathetically the audience will perceive the protagonist. Psychoanalytic theorists will often be convinced that 'the oedipal conflict' is the springboard of tragedy and will cite *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* as prototypes. Critical theorists who hold other personality theories are likely to see those famous plays quite differently, and may, as we have seen (*Constructive Criticism*, vol 1, no. 1, March 1991¹), deny that the idea of 'the oedipal conflict' has any relevance whatever to either play.

For fulfillment theorists of the perfection type like Alfred Adler (Maddi, 1980, 113ff.), tragedy will seem to arise from a situation in which a noble protagonist fails to perfect him/herself in some way, or fails to achieve the high degree of 'social interest' required of him/her, or is so thwarted by an evil society that he/she is denied the right or ability to strive for perfection. *Antigone*, *The Doll's House*, or *Hedda Gabler* might seem to these theorists to qualify as the most fascinating tragedies. Tragedy and comedy would be seen by Adlerians as having a didactic goal – not narrowly defined as in the teaching of neatly packaged morals or lessons, but in terms of bringing the individual toward perfection, cel-

ebating the oneness of the individual with society rather than his/her alienation from it, or showing how deadly that alienation can be to individuals and society alike.

Fulfillment theorists of the actualization type (Maddi, 1980, 88ff.), may, as Abraham Maslow did, simply disavow tragedy in particular and literature in general, because they believe that no characters or plots can be found in fiction which offer humans self-actualizing models for their lives (Maslow, 1970, 150).

Construct theory can offer innovative views of many issues in literary and art criticism, but perhaps none translate quite so neatly to construct terms as do tragedy and comedy, for while other theories deal with tragedy and comedy as two distinct, seemingly unrelated genres, construct theory will see tragedy and comedy as opposite poles of a single construct.

TRAGEDY

The assumptions which underlie the opposite poles of the construct *tragedy vs. comedy* will differ. Tragedy is built upon the assumption that reality is ultimately unknowable. The tragic protagonist, like the rest of us, faces inscrutable reality and must struggle to construe, predict, and control the events of his/her dramatic life. A construct definition of tragedy, then, begins with the idea that tragedy is an art form – drama, story, or other representation of fictitious or real events – which is serious and significant, and in which the dramatic flaw of the protagonist is the inability to construe reality accurately so that the failure brings sorrow, despair, and violence into his/her life and the lives of others affected by that failure.

The tragic flaw or *hamartia* in the construct view would be the universal failing of all humans – our inability to attain omniscience. The

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primary tension in tragedy, from the construct point of view, arises when the inherent human desire to predict and control events confronts the intrinsic human inability to ever know reality totally, so that the individual is doomed to misconstrue, and, thus, is fated to fail in some way to predict and control. The inevitability we speak of in tragedy, then, comes when the protagonist's desire to predict and control collides with inscrutable reality. Human beings, as we know from our own experience, are not to blame for their failures of omniscience, and we will therefore sympathize with tragic protagonists because we share their struggles. The successes of the best construer – one who succeeds in predicting and controlling events extremely well – would not by definition be delineated in tragedy; the great construer might turn up, however, as hero or heroine of melodrama, as the detective in the mystery novel, in comedy in its essential sense of a drama concerning a triumph over adversity which culminates in a happy ending; and finally we are accustomed to meet the hero or heroine who predicts and controls exceptionally well in the elevated form of epic.

But beyond the universal *hamartia* – the absence of omniscience – the tragic protagonist may be burdened by *hubris*. We have come to another set of critical terms that falls naturally into a Kellyan bipolar construct – i.e., *hubris* vs. *sophrosyne*.

Hubris has often been mistranslated simply as *pride*, but it has more to do with an arrogant disregard of the rights of others (Kaufman, 1969, 1-86). In Kellyan terms *hubris* often turns out to be *hostility* as Kelly defined it, i.e., "... the continued effort to extort validation evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already proved itself a failure" (Kelly, 1955, 1:510). Thus we see Macbeth's *hubris* burgeoning to keep pace with his impulsivity as he kills first, with some doubt and trepidation, Duncan and his attendants, and then – trying to extort the success he had predicted from the reality of the failure he has realized – goes on to order without compunction the murders of Banquo (and of Fleance who escapes), and finally of the helpless Lady Macduff and her children.

Sophrosyne on the other hand is *prudence*, which a construct theorist might define as the

ability or tendency to act in a manner which maximizes the possibility of construing reality with a high degree of accuracy, predicting, and controlling. In construct terms, then, *sophrosyne* has a close relationship to *circumspection*. In the ideal situation, according to construct theory, *circumspection* will occur in company with preemption and control as in the C-P-C cycle in which the individual starts with *circumspection* – i.e., viewing the elements of a situation conditionally, propositionally, and relatively objectively – moves to *preemption* – i.e., a choice of issue – and concludes with *control* – i.e., a decision to act upon his choice in a certain way. To be caught at, or constantly thrown back to, the level of *circumspection*, however, is to be caught in a dithering inaction such as Shakespeare causes Hamlet to exhibit at certain points in his mission to wreak vengeance on Claudius. *Sophrosyne* or *prudence*, then, seems to be not equivalent simply to *circumspection* but with the whole of what construct theorists call the C-P-C cycle of *circumspection*, *preemption*, and *control*, or rather with the successful conclusion of that cycle.

To begin the action of a drama, novel, story, or poem *in medias res* – in the middle of things – as Aristotle recommended, is to begin the tragedy with a blow to the protagonist's construct system. Often the blow is in the form of a prediction as in *Macbeth*; sometimes it is in the form of a 'post'diction, as in *Hamlet*, which causes the protagonist to construe or reconstrue events which have already happened. In any case, the action of the plot is always the attempt of the protagonist to reconstrue reality and reorder his/her construct system. Through dramatic irony the playwright or novelist allows audience/readers to construe and predict with a greater accuracy than that which the protagonist exhibits, and to realize the significance of events and predict their outcomes before the protagonist does. We of the audience, then, in the construct view, enjoy tragedy not because we experience a purging of pity and fear but because we are elated at our success in representing reality better than the protagonist is able to do, and because we have elaborated our own construct system.

COMEDY

Comedy, residing as it does at the opposite pole of the construct from tragedy, is built on the assumption that not only is reality ultimately knowable; it is *immediately knowable*, and not to know it makes the comic character ridiculous and the fitting butt of laughter. We need not set aside our superordinate construct which supposes that reality is unknowable, for comedy does not deal with cosmic, universal, profound reality but with a temporary, superficial, social reality.

Although theories of comedy have disagreed widely about the nature of comedy, five comic elements have generally been recognized: unexpectedness or incongruity, aggression, a sense of superiority, inconsequentiality of events, and a pitting of the young or new against the old. Construct theorists are clearly on home ground with the issue of unexpectedness, since construct theory deals with anticipation and prediction. We can then begin to develop constructs through which to view events in order to classify them as comic or tragic. The first of these we can call *predictable vs. unpredictable*. When we examine comedies, we can see that laughter does indeed occur when something unexpected happens. But does laughter *always* occur when something unexpected happens? We need to move outside the frame of formal literary or dramatic comedy in order to examine this question, and we are entitled to do so, surely, if comedy like tragedy, is an imitation of life. We can say immediately of course that not all unexpected events evoke laughter. We do not laugh at the sudden death of a relative or friend, nor at an unexpected natural disaster, nor at a surprise military attack, and so we must say that the construct *predictable vs. unpredictable* is not the essential definer of comedy.

What do we laugh at in real life, then, that might be construed as *predictable vs. unpredictable*? We laugh at a small child who utters a gem of wisdom, because we would not have predicted it from his years and experience, and yet we have the saying, “Out of the mouths of babes –”; we laugh at the antics of a dog or cat, puppy or kitten, who plays in what seems to us an almost ‘human’ manner, because we would not have predicted such play. We laugh at a dig-

nified man whose hat blows away down the street. We might laugh at a well-dressed and well-groomed woman who spills a plate of salad down her dress at the restaurant. We might even laugh at a potentially hurtful event, as when someone falls off a chair or down stairs. Even when we know that the person may be hurt, we are often hard put to stifle our laughter. Although we laugh *at* people in these unexpected situations, we often are at pains to assure them that we are laughing *with* them.

Clearly, in the above examples it is not purely surprise which makes us laugh but an element of incongruity along with the unpredictability. But sometimes we laugh when an incident seems to fulfill a stereotype all too neatly, as is the case of the child who utters the gem of wisdom and of whom we say, “Out of the mouths of babes.” Perhaps it is both surprising and incongruous to find our stereotypes validated so patly. “Isn’t that just like a _____” (the reader may fill in the blank), we will say, laughing. This technique of eliciting laughter was used, for instance, very skillfully by Norman Lear and the writers of *All in the Family* a few years ago. They set up a stereotype of a bigoted, uneducated, conservative, and rigid middle-aged blue collar man (who nonetheless, in spite of himself, was not an ogre), and every time he outrageously validated that stereotype we laughed. Archie Bunker was simultaneously predictable and unpredictable (surely no one would actually say what we had just heard Archie say, but Archie, in saying it, satisfied his stereotype). Archie’s actions were also simultaneously *appropriate* and *incongruous* in that there was often a sly bit of truth in his unenlightened self-interest, while his behavior and his language were outrageous.

In real life we find the construct *appropriate vs. incongruous* not only somewhat intertwined with the construct *predictable vs. unpredictable* but also confounded with the next issue on our list of comic elements, *aggression*. Remembering the Kellyan definition which construes *aggression* “... independently of hostility” (Kelly 1955, 2:874) and sees aggression as goal oriented action, a construct theorist might state the other pole of the construct as *passivity*. Theorists of comedy, however, seem to see aggression as containing an element of hostility, and indeed as

we have looked at what makes us laugh in real life we have moved toward a darker view of the comic. We have come to the point of seeing something funny in people's falling off chairs and downstairs. What even more disturbing events might we laugh at?

We might now have to admit that we would laugh at a rival who gets up to speak to a learned audience at a conference, and forgetting his prepared speech because of stagefright, fumbles hopelessly in his pockets and briefcase for notes. There are even businesses that thrive because they specialize in selling the service of sending dead flowers to one's former friend or lover or will even, for a slightly higher fee, wait outside his/her home or office and throw a pie in his/her face while the one who has hired the deed to be done stands by and laughs fiendishly. But when hostile aggression goes too far, it is no longer comic, and that is where the last mentioned element on our list comes in, i.e., *inconsequentiality*.

Quite obviously *inconsequentiality* is in the eye of the beholder. The situation of the rival who cannot remember his speech is of no consequence to us, but surely is to him. We can titter with impunity. We can even laugh along with whoever arranged to have the pie thrown in the face of the unsatisfactory ex-lover or pompous public official. The event is of no consequence to us. We have then arrived at the question which has troubled theoreticians of comedy for a long time: what is funny to whom? The question is somewhat akin to the question: why do good, kindly, honorable people enjoy watching tragedy? Construct theorists can offer answers quite different from those propounded in the past. As we have seen, the construct theorist believes we like to watch tragedy because it lets us believe that we predict and control better than the protagonist does and therefore increases our confidence in our ability to predict and control events in our own real lives. The construct theorist will further say, in regard to comedy and the comic, that we laugh at unexpected events, incongruities, and small aggressions *if* they do not threaten our core role.

To return to the appreciation of the formal artistic construct *tragedy vs. comedy*, we can hypothesize that both poles of that construct have

something to do with the appreciating individual's core role – that essential construction which each of us holds of who and what we are. Tragedy strengthens our confidence in that role. Comedy simultaneously strengthens the core role for most of us, while simultaneously acting as a social corrective at the level of the periphery of the personality, precisely because it can lead us to look at our foibles without threatening our basic construction of ourselves. The attractive, young, or sympathetic characters of comedy often lead us to identify with them and whatever is being promoted as innovative, while old, unattractive, or unsympathetic characters cue us to scorn them and the conservative values which they represent. The art form may of course be used to belittle the new and glorify the classic, but the latter practice is not so common nor so easy to manage. In either case the changes comedy asks us to make in ourselves are usually at any given time small and superficial, although the cumulative effect may be great; and when, rarely, we do find in comedy a major corrective to our core role, we can comfort ourselves that no one criticized or admonished us directly but that we discovered through a witnessed comic representation some mere solecism in our behavior which we have rectified before anyone else noticed it.

A QUESTION FOR RESEARCH

The construct theorist might predict on the basis of his construing of tragedy and comedy, that tragedy will wear better than comedy, since cosmic reality does not change, nor does humankind – in spite of our technical progress – become omniscient, so that we are still deeply moved by *Oedipus Rex*, *Medea*, and *Antigone*, while the superficial social realities represented in comedy change so rapidly that *All in the Family*, in spite of recent re-runs, already seems dated to us; we have to try very hard to remember what is funny about *You Can't Take it With You*, and it takes pages of disquisition to inform us what was once funny in Aristophanes' *The Birds* or *The Wasps*.

Still I suspect that if we were to survey the general public, asking, "If you had to sit down right now and watch a film or a play, would you

prefer to see a comedy or a tragedy?" most would answer, "comedy." If we were to ask, "Would you rather watch a classic Greek comedy or Dustin Hoffman in *Death of a Salesman*", I think the answers might be quite different. Perhaps finding out which alternatives people would choose out of many such pairings, and why, would be of interest to both the psychological and arts communities. And many other hypotheses might be derived from a construct theory of *tragedy vs. comedy* and put to the test.

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