

WRITING ESSENTIALS IN STYLE & COMPOSITION

Week 12: Comedy

Aristotle on comedy in his Poetics:

“As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.”

Let's look at each part of this definition and discuss:

- An imitation of men worse than the average
- Worse as regards the “ridiculous”
- The ridiculous: mistake or deformity not productive of harm or pain to others
- Something ugly and distorted without causing pain

What do you think of Aristotle's definition of comedy?

Comedy was seen by the Greeks as the other main type of imaginative literature. Like the word “tragedy,” the word “comedy” had a richer meaning among the Greeks than it does now. Comedy is more than just light, playful and humorous entertainment; it is beautiful in its own way, it gives a special kind of pleasure, and it deepens our understanding about ourselves as spiritual beings. It allows us to laugh at ourselves and others like us; we see our faults, our limits, our pretensions, and the absurdity and incongruity of our situation on this earth. It balances the tragic by giving us relief; perhaps there is a kind of catharsis in comedy which parallels that of tragedy. Comedy helps us to stay humble, recognize (and therefore correct) our own faults, and to see the value in simple people.

As you read the following excerpt from Don Quixote and the abridged version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, consider these questions:

- Why is comedy valuable?
- What might be an important characteristic in the writer for him to compose comedy?
- What makes GOOD comedy?
- What makes a comedy BAD?
- In what way are comedy and tragedy similar? Different?

Reading 1: Don Quixote by Cervantes - Part I, Chapter 8

(source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm#ch8>)

At this point they came in sight of thirty or forty windmills that there are on plain, and as soon as Don Quixote saw them he said to his squire, "Fortune is arranging matters for us better than we could have shaped our desires ourselves, for look there, friend Sancho Panza, where thirty or more monstrous giants present themselves, all of whom I mean to engage in battle and slay, and with whose spoils we shall begin to make our fortunes; for this is righteous warfare, and it is God's good service to sweep so evil a breed from off the face of the earth."

"What giants?" said Sancho Panza.

"Those thou seest there," answered his master, "with the long arms, and some have them nearly two leagues long."

"Look, your worship," said Sancho; "what we see there are not giants but windmills, and what seem to be their arms are the sails that turned by the wind make the millstone go."

"It is easy to see," replied Don Quixote, "that thou art not used to this business of adventures; those are giants; and if thou art afraid, away with thee out of this and betake thyself to prayer while I engage them in fierce and unequal combat."

So saying, he gave the spur to his steed Rocinante, heedless of the cries his squire Sancho sent after him, warning him that most certainly they were windmills and not giants he was going to attack. He, however, was so positive they were giants that he neither heard the cries of Sancho, nor perceived, near as he was, what they were, but made at them shouting, "Fly not, cowards and vile beings, for a single knight attacks you."

A slight breeze at this moment sprang up, and the great sails began to move, seeing which Don Quixote exclaimed, "Though ye flourish more arms than the giant Briareus, ye have to reckon with me."

So saying, and commending himself with all his heart to his lady Dulcinea, imploring her to support him in such a peril, with lance in rest and covered by his buckler, he charged at Rocinante's fullest gallop and fell upon the first mill that stood in front of him; but as he drove his lance-point into the sail the wind whirled it round with such force that it shattered the lance to pieces, sweeping with it horse and rider, who went rolling over on the plain, in a sorry condition. Sancho hastened to his assistance as fast as his ass could go, and when he came up found him unable to move, with such a shock had Rocinante fallen with him.

"God bless me!" said Sancho, "did I not tell your worship to mind what you were about, for they were only windmills? And no one could have made any mistake about it but one who had something of the same kind in his head."

"Hush, friend Sancho," replied Don Quixote, "the fortunes of war more than any other are liable to frequent fluctuations; and moreover I think, and it is the truth, that that same sage Frisson who carried off my study and books, has turned these giants into mills in order to rob me of the glory of vanquishing them, such is the enmity he bears me; but in the end his wicked arts will avail but little against my good sword."

Reading 2: A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare (Abridged)

(source:

<https://www.commarkschools.org/Downloads/abridged%20version%20of%20the%20play.pdf>)

Click [here](#) for the reading or select the Reading 2 link on the Writing Essential Course Content webpage.

Assignment:

- Choose between the following:
 - #1. Write a comedy according to the definition of Aristotle's comedy.
 - #2. Write an essay analyzing a famous comedy. (Or an essay on the topic of comedy and approved by tutor.)
- Write 1,000 - 1,500 words.
- If you choose #1, keep these questions in mind:
 - Is your comedy gross or grotesque? Does it cause pain to one in order to cause laughter in another? Is it derisive or mean?
 - How does your comedy deepen our understanding of ourselves as spiritual beings?
 - How does it help us to see our faults, limits, pretensions - and LAUGH at them?
 - Does it give us relief and a sort of catharsis?
 - Does your comedy fit with Aristotle's definition of comedy?
 - Does your story follow the standard plot pattern as seen in the outline below?
 - Strong recommendation: choose a famous literary, biblical or historical figure who could be viewed as comic and write a story about them. Or re-tell their story in a modern setting. You may also choose a personal experience of your own.
- If you choose #2: You may write an essay on a famous Shakespearean comedy. Analyze it to show how, and if it fits with Aristotle's definition of comedy. Or, compare a tragedy to a comedy and show similarities and differences. Follow the standard format for essays. You may choose your own topic with approval from tutor.

Invention:

Option #1

Exposition: Introduce the scene and the characters. How does your story begin?

Rising Action: What is the conflict in the story? Could be: man vs. man, man vs. the world/society or man vs. himself. How does the action and tension begin to unfold?

Climax: What is the plot reversal? Change of fortune?

Falling Action: What is the action that leads toward the ending catharsis? What action arouses laughter in the audience?

End: What is the catharsis? What event causes the release of emotion and tension?

Is anything about your comedy mean or ugly? Is it ridiculous without causing pain?

Is there a mix-up, a twist or some element of surprise?

Invention:

Option #2

Thesis: What is your main point?

Introduction

Supporting Reason #1:

Supporting Reason #2:

Supporting Reason #3:

Supporting Reason #4: (optional)

Conclusion: _____
