

# ADVANCED PLACEMENT WORLD LITERATURE

## NORTHROP FRYE'S THEORY OF ARCHETYPES

### SPRING: COMEDY

#### Introduction

Comedy focuses on the social group, often setting up an arbitrary law or humorous society and setting out to reform it. This change, however, is rarely a moral judgment of the wicked, but usually a social judgment of the absurd instead. The hero's society, which prevails in the end, is really a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past, an age that usually disappeared before the beginning of the play.

#### Plot

The basic plot follows the movement from one type of society to another:

- Existent Society: existing society precludes hero from something he wants
- Confrontation: hero confronts representatives of society
- Reformation or Replacement of Society: the hero's society replaces the previous society

More specifically a typical comedy begins with a young man who wants a young woman, but there is opposition, usually from the young woman's father. In the end a plot twist allows the hero to succeed.

The story often begins with an absurd or irrational law that must be broken. The law is sometimes a result of a rash promise or statement of obsessed tyrant. In fact a powerful, but irrational character who can force much of society into his or her obsession is usually present. The change in societies is usually inoffensive as the members of the original society are generally reconciled with or converted into members of the new society. An irreconcilable character may suffer a scapegoat ritual or suffer expulsion.

The society at the beginning of the comedy and at the end tend to follow a predictable pattern:

<i>Existent Society</i>		<i>Reformed Society</i>
Obstructing or blocking characters	→	Hero and heroines
Age, parents	→	Youth, children
Monetary wealth	→	Monetary poverty
Habit, ritual, bondage, arbitrary law, old characters	→	Youth with pragmatic freedom
Illusion (fixed or definable)	→	Reality (not illusion, changeable)

The illusion in the existent society may be caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage.

#### Characters

##### Eiron

- Hero and heroine: self-deprecators, often neutral and uninformed
- Tricky slave: hatches schemes to bring hero's victory; examples include the scheming valet, amateur detective, female confidante, and vice who simply loves mischief but is benevolent; this character often produces the happy ending, is commonly spiritual in nature, and regularly receives reward from resolution; sometimes he is an older man, or father, who leaves (to see what his son will do) and reappears at the end, and sometimes advises or orders the vice

## **Alazon**

- Impostors: typical blocking character, might be a heavy father; character usually rages and threatens, or is marked by obsessions and gullibility; the character is absurd rather than dangerous or pathetic because of obsession; females are rare in this role

*Blocking characters are representatives of, and sometimes responsible for, existent society; therefore, they must be confronted and ultimately assimilated into the new society. Comedies are full of unlikely conversions, miraculous transformations, and providential assistance to allow for the necessary ending.*

## **Bomolochoi**

- Buffoons: serve to increase the mood of the festivity rather than advance plot; typical examples include fools, clowns, pages, singers, parasites, cooks, hosts, and the chorus in Aristophanes' plays

## **Agroikos**

- Rustic: a gull or straight man who is a solemn or inarticulate character who allows the humor to bounce off him; generally a light-hearted, simple man who speaks for a pastoral ideal such as a country squire in an urban setting; they do not refuse festivity but mark the extent of its range; in satiric or ironic comedy, role of rustic may be played by a straight talker, who represents audience's sympathetic ideals in an absurd society, similar to a chorus in a tragedy, but if the tone becomes bitter they may be a malcontent or railer
- Churl: a miserly, snobbish, priggish character who refuses festivity and tries to stop the fun; commonly played by old men

The *eiron* and *alazon* form the basis of comic action; the *bomolochoi* and *agroikos* polarize the comic mood.

## **Traits**

The focus of comedy is often on defeated characters rather than heroes but is presented in a pleasing way because in the end, comedy integrates the family and adjusts it to the society as a whole. The necessity of the happy ending means that comedy often requires the victory of an arbitrary plot over consistency of character. Because the happiness of the ending is a foregone conclusion, it must arise through a clever manipulation to be effective.

## **Phases of Comedy**

1. Existent society remains: The absurd society triumphs or remains undefeated or sometimes, in more ironic cases, dissolves without anything to take its place
2. Criticism of society without change: The hero escapes a humorous society without transforming it
3. Existent society is replaced by happy society: The hero's society replaces that of the humorous society
4. Happy society resists change: The society at the beginning of the story remains at the end, but a metamorphosis occurs by a central character or the members of the society moving into a green world where a comic resolution and a rebirth are achieved before the return to the normal world
5. Reflective and idyllic view: Movement occurs from a lower world of confusion to an upper world of order, where a distance between human experience exists
6. Society ceases to exist beyond contemplation: the collapse and disintegration of comic society occurs, and the story exists in an isolated place or on a different plane