

Tragedy and Comedy p. 1523

Tragedy and **Comedy** are two of the oldest dramatic forms, and many contemporary playwrights and critics continue to apply these terms. Many people believe that tragedy and comedy still provide convenient ways to organize and present experience because they reflect basic ways of viewing human history. You can sometimes get into a pretty lively argument about whether a particular play should be called a tragedy; all kinds of critics, students, theatergoers, and readers argued with Arthur Miller and with one another about whether *Death of a Salesman* was truly tragic, for example. But while individuals often disagree about how to label particular texts and about exactly what each label implies, most people admit the necessity of labels and believe that general agreement about definition is possible, despite quibbling over details.

In a **tragedy**, values are universal and beyond the control of humankind. Right and wrong stem from some other extra human authority.

In a **comedy**, values are social determined by the general opinion of society. Comedy tends to endorse the values of society, sometimes at the expense of individual needs or values.

Tragedy and **comedy** differ in their treatment of character. **Tragedy** tends to focus on a person of high rank who confronts the universe and his or her fate as an individual. The tragic figure is ultimately doomed because, although good and noble, he or she has a flaw of character or a limitation of knowledge - some mark of humanity - that offsets all his or her greatness.

By contrast, being concerned largely with society, **comedies** often define their characters in terms of social roles. They have individual traits but what distinguishes them is not so important as what they have in common according to prevailing social standards. Many comic characters become stereotypes.

Tragedy and **comedy** can be differentiated by their endings. In most **tragedies**, the hero is enlightened, coming to understand the meaning of his or her deeds and to accept the consequences. Many tragic heroes die, but understanding, rather than death itself, ends the tragedy. In **comedy**, on the other hand, the resolution occurs when one or more characters take on a proper social role. Most frequently this means the marriage of an eligible woman and an equally eligible man.