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“Tragedy as an Episode in the Divine Comedy”:

A Defense of the Comedic Form

As a result of man’s fallen nature, suffering is not only inevitable but unavoidable, and this suffering culminates in man’s ultimate tragedy: death. Tragedy, as an art form, explores this brokenness, arousing from the audience reactions of both pity for the suffering characters and fear of the world’s inevitable severity. In contrast, comedies relish the joys of life by exploring humor, absurdity, and the happy ending of a loving community, leading the audience to feel both sympathy and ridicule. Though comedies tend to resolve themselves in a way that seems unlikely or unrealistic, comedy actually provides the necessary counterbalance to the suffering and darkness found in tragedies, pointing towards the light of hope, joy, and ultimately, redemption. Thus, as seen in Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing*, the comedic ending fulfills the tragic ending by pulling man out of despair and hopelessness, leading him towards hope and joy, and reminding him of his final end: salvation.

Before understanding how comedy is a completion of the tragic form, a basic understanding of tragedy is necessary. According to Northrop Frye’s concept of tragedy, this form involves a tragic hero who is both sufficient to have stood, but free to fall, and who often undergoes a series of recognition, reversal, and suffering over the course of the story (211). His nobility and fatal flaw are closely intertwined and the hamartia often leads to the character’s

downfall. Another important characteristic of tragedy is “an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be” (208). The emergence of this law leads to an outpouring of pity and fear: “a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongness (it is too bad he falls) (214). These emotions allow us to purge ourselves as we pity the character for living in the type of world that plays upon their hamartia while fearing that we ourselves might experience what they have lived through.

Shakespeare’s *Othello* depicts a tragic hero’s nobility that led to his downfall through a fatal flaw, or hamartia, that results from an inexorable law of nature. Othello, the tragic hero, is presented as a noble character worth admiring, and his powerful love for his wife Desdemona is particularly admirable as it endures despite external doubts. However, this noble, passionate love ultimately leads to Othello’s downfall as he slowly allows his fears and insecurities to twist and distort his love; his attitude towards her changes, and now he considers her with the utmost hatred. Here, *Othello* points to the emergence of a natural law. Though Othello originally believes in Desdemona’s love and is committed to their marriage, over the course of the novel, he accepts the lies that are fed to him— largely by Iago— addressing the particular areas of his insecurities. We pity Othello because he is in a world that plays upon his insecurities and fears, seeming to “force” him to respond in the other extreme, as his passionate love turns to passionate hate. We experience fear when we question our own ability to withstand the pressures telling us we will never be sufficient. The tragedy ends with Othello’s recognition of his error as he realizes that he has murdered his innocent wife; this leads him to then kill himself, out of his overwhelming grief and guilt. Thus, the tragedy ends with the important reminder of our death, the world’s darkness, and man’s fallen sinful nature.

In the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, the play subverts our normal expectations regarding the comic structure and flirts with the tragic form, as the story takes an unexpected turn. Rather than following the usual comic structure of a marriage resulting from the overcoming of obstacles, Claudio, much like Othello, falls prey to exterior deception and believes the liars who tell him that his lover Hero has been cheating on him with another man. Claudio does not want to believe the lies against his lover, but still he declares, “If I see anything tonight why I should not / marry her, tomorrow in the congregations, where I / should wed, there will I shame her” (3. 3. 117-19). When he is convinced by the deception against Hero, he rejects her on the altar, leading one friend to exclaim, “This looks not like a nuptial” (4. 1. 71), and Hero’s father to ask, “Hath no man’s dagger here a point for me?” (4. 1. 114). In these scenes, as well as later conflicts between festivity and sadness, the comic expectations are frustrated. Hero faints, and then pretends to have died. When Claudio finally hears of his error, he says it feels as though “he has drunk poison” as he begins to bear the responsibility of causing Hero’s “death” (5. 1. 171). At this point, the play adopts a tragic structure that is similar to that of Othello’s; the difference between these two plays comes when *Much Ado About Nothing* explores an ending beyond the sadness and despair of the “murderer.”

While tragedy is important in expressing one’s inevitable experience of suffering, sadness, and the limitations of man’s fallen nature, remaining in this state may lead him to turn inwards; pity for another turns into melancholy for oneself, and fear of the world’s unavoidable consequences leads to despair and hopelessness. Thus, it is essential that tragedy not be the final word, as death and suffering are not the ultimate end of man’s existence; comedy is necessary to lead towards the virtues of hope and joy, pointing towards life after death in the ultimate, loving

community. In a comedy, ridicule and sympathy can lead us to joy at a present good (laughter), as well as hope for a better future, while also pointing towards salvation, as seen in Hero's "resurrection" at the end of the play.

In order to understand how comedy fulfills tragedy, one must understand the basic comedic structure. According to Frye, "what normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will" (163). This resolution typically results in at least one marriage and the emergence of a new, more loving community (167). This happy ending should be considered not only for how it affects the characters in the play, but how it points to our own desire and longing for a good, loving, inclusive community. It serves as an example for what a good community might look like, as well as pointing to a happiness that transcends both time, and the situation at hand. Through a religious and particularly Judeo-Christian lens, the comedic ending may be seen as an allegory for the resurrection of man after death when he will be joined into the ultimate loving community. We find such an ending in Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing*. In this story, two pairs of lovers, Claudio and Hero and Beatrice and Benedick, wrestle with varying obstacles, which, by the end of the play, the characters have overcome, resulting in a double wedding, and a better community. Though *Much Ado About Nothing* adopts a more tragic tone during sections of the play, it ultimately returns to the comic form, and Hero's "resurrection" leads to happy marriages and a new community.

However, because it always ends with a "happily ever after," comedy might seem too

superficial, misleading, or even ungrounded and unfair as a source of inspiration; if we allow people to believe that life stops at this moment of love and happiness, the expectations created for our own “perfect ending” can actually be a rather cruel delusion. If comedic endings seem too realistic, one might begin to interpret their own life in light of this wishful ending, assuming that they will secure their own prince charming and happy ending. In the tragedy *Othello*, the story of Desdemona and Othello does display the love and committed marriage that marks the happy ending of *Much Ado About Nothing*; however, the remainder of *Othello* highlights how man’s brokenness will impact and alter life after marriage, including the suffering and sadness that inevitably accompanies man’s fallen nature. This tragic ending points towards real truths about suffering and sin; yet, if a person has no remedy to his pity and fear, he will be stuck in a mindset that leads towards depression and despair.

Thus, in defense of comedy it is important to combat the tendency of considering a work only for the realism it portrays and instead, consider comedy and its hopeful ending as a way to rise up from despair and refocus on hope, joy, and life after death. A work can, and should, provide more than simply an accurate portrayal of life as it is; it should also offer experiences of truth, beauty, and, particularly in the case of comedy, an archetypal reminder of man’s ultimate end: salvation. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare avoids the pitfalls of creating a work that is too realistic by including a more mythic ritual of death and resurrection not expected to be found in our own lives. In this way, the ending that may be seen as an allegory for resurrection and salvation, thus reminding the reader that death is not his final end and life for the believer is ultimately a comedy. In the words of Frye, “Christianity... sees tragedy as an episode in the divine comedy, the larger scheme of redemption and resurrection. The sense of tragedy as a

prelude to comedy seems almost inseparable from anything explicitly Christian” (215). He accepts the belief that tragedy is only “an episode” in our lives, which are ultimately a “divine comedy” with the promise of a new, loving community and the resurrection from the dead.

Thus, the clear necessity of the tragic form may be seen through examining Shakespeare’s plays, though the distinct ways it falls short of man’s complete story also become clear. While addressing his suffering and cleansing the reader of pity and fear, tragedy leaves man with emptiness, despair, and hopelessness. Comedy, then, may be seen as the fulfillment of this incomplete form, as it offers man a remedy to his sadness through hope, joy, and faith that there is a life after death.

Works Cited

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