

## Tragicomedy

Inversion of  
Aristotle's definition  
Poetics leading to humour  
Catastrophe + Comedy

Tragicomedy has a respectable history as a genre even though critics have had a difficult time defining it. As evident from the name, tragicomedy combines elements of both tragedy and comedy, very often averting the seemingly almost inevitable tragic outcome at the last minute with a comic resolution. (Beckett's gesturing to this genealogy in *Waiting for Godot* is not simply ironic. He is pointing to the inseparability of the comic and the tragic in a world where the moral order that guarantees them has dissolved, and the language that conveys them has broken down.)

*Waiting for Godot* is described as a tragicomedy in the subtitle. It exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which led themselves to both comedy and pathos. Somewhere in the background are innumerable pairs of comedians, ever hopeful, ever failing, ever encouraging each other even in the blackest despair and scoring off each other. There is the comedy of the married couple, deeply conscious of each other's weaknesses but bound inseparably by love and necessity. There is again the master and man situation that has a literary tradition centuries old, from the Roman times through Cervantes and Le Sage to Tolstoy and Goncharov. On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1953, reviewing the first production in Théâtre de Babyolne by Roger Blin at the previous night, Jean Anouilh described it as "a great music-hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* as played by the Fratellini clowns." (According to Anthony Cronin, *Waiting for Godot* has "a peculiar buoyancy of humour which lifts it far above despond." It has the same class of humour we enjoy in the silent films of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton; and in the verbal nonsense of W. C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, and the Marx brothers.)

The clownish mood is set as early in the play as when Vladimir enters "with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart", and the spectators invariably identify him with Chaplin or Keaton. Humour continues at Estragon's struggle to take his boot off, while tragedy is introduced simultaneously at the futility of human endeavours: "Nothing to be done." The biblical discourse also evokes apparent laughter, while destabilizing faith, or 'bad faith', from a kind of Existentialist perspective. The conversation regarding the classification of the tree, the underlying sexual innuendoes of hanging and Vladimir's bafflement over carrots and turnips also provide the audience with slapstick comedies with metaphysics underneath. Laughter breaks out again with the tramps passing Lucky's hat back and forth, to add to the mayhem the problem with their own hats. This hat business was a routine comedy of the Marx brothers; perhaps Beckett was influenced by them. (X)

According to John Fletcher, "the totters, the pratfalls, the tumbles, Estragon's trouser-dropping, Vladimir's duck-waddle, Lucky's palsy and Pozzo's cracking of his ring-master's whip are lifted straight from the repertoire of the big top. The amount of gesture in a play reputedly actionless is in fact extraordinary." Once during the Pozzo-Lucky episode, the tramps behave as if they are in a theatre. Vladimir even asks Estragon to keep his seat while going off to the urinal at "The end of the corridor, on the left." This is surely hilarious, but also problematizes the concept one's role, as Vladimir and Estragon become actors on one hand and spectators on the other. This seems to highlight the Existential notion that we become what we choose to be, without any divine or otherwise intervention. The two tramps have themselves made the choice of waiting; now they must pursue it to find at least something reasonable in an otherwise meaningless universe.

This leads to the most significant tragicomic element: despair. The recurrence of the refrain "Nothing to be done", the silly attempts to pass idle times, the uncertainty about the very Godot they await - everything is apparently hilarious, but sinister inwardly. When the laughter stops we recall the play to be amused once again, but this time shiver in hopeless terror with darker truths of human existence suddenly unfolding themselves. The last scene conveys the breakdown of language through slapstick comedy:

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.

Estragon: You want me to pull off my trousers?"

Beckett's tragicomedy is deeply rooted in this fusion of the laugh and the tear. The act of waiting for a Godot, who may or may not come, is emblematic of the tragicomedy of human existence itself. The claim that the author makes in the subtitle is therefore true, and it enabled him to present *Waiting for Godot* as everyone's play all over the world.

f. Hat exchange by Laurel & Hardy - ... The Music Box

"Stone face" - Tragicomic?  
Inspiration for tragicomedy?