

## Characteristics of Tragedy & Comedy -- A Debatable List

The following list by John Morreall represents a conglomeration of varying theory on the nature of tragedy and comedy. Personally, I find (depending on the play) some of the characteristics more convincing and others less so. Try testing a play we're reading in class against these ideas. Do they successfully explain what's going on in the work?

<b>The Cognitive Psychology of the Tragic and Comic Visions</b>	
<b>TRAGEDY</b>	<b>COMEDY</b>
<b>Simplicity:</b> Tragic heroes tend to approach problems and situations in a fairly straight-forward manner. Life can be understood in simple binaries -- good/bad; just/unjust; beautiful/ugly.	<b>Complex:</b> Comic heroes tend to be more flexible. Life tends to be messier, full of diversity and unexpected twists and turns. It is more difficult to classify experience.
<b>Low Tolerance for Disorder:</b> Tragic plots tend to stress order and process -- the end follows from the beginning.	<b>High Tolerance for Disorder:</b> Comic plots tend to be more random; they seem to be improvised, leaving a number of loose ends.
<b>Preference for the Familiar:</b> Tragic heroes and plots have "a low tolerance for cognitive dissonance." The violation of the norm is what brings about a tragic fall.	<b>Seeking out the Unfamiliar:</b> Comic heroes and plots tend to see the unexpected and surprising as an opportunity rather than a norm-violation.
<b>Low Tolerance for Ambiguity:</b> In tragedy, things should have one meaning and have clear-cut application to problems.	<b>High Tolerance for Ambiguity:</b> In comedy, ambiguity is what makes humor possible. Equally, not everything has to make sense in comedy.
<b>Convergent Thinking:</b> Tragedy stresses what is past and what is real. It tends to be more information-gathering based, wanting to find and resolve nagging problems.	<b>Divergent Thinking:</b> Comedy is more imaginative, stressing playfulness. It tends to look for a variety of answers and doesn't need to solve everything.
<b>Uncritical Thinking:</b> Tragedy tends not to call into question the accepted order of things. To do so is to suffer the consequences.	<b>Critical Thinking:</b> Comedy tends to call attention to the incongruities in the order of things, be it political, social, or religious.
<b>Emotional Engagement:</b> Tragic heroes tend to respond with strong, overpowering emotions--pride, lust, grief, rage. This often results in extremist attitudes and reactions. In the same way, the audience is expected to respond with cathartic involvement.	<b>Emotional Disengagement:</b> Comic heroes are often ironic and disengaged from the situation; they tend to respond with wit, imagination, or cynicism. They tend to abstract themselves from their misfortunes. The audience is expected to react in much the same way to what the characters undergo.
<b>Stubbornness:</b> Tragic heroes tend to stick with a course of action and follow it to their doom. They are firm and committed.	<b>Adaptable:</b> Comic heroes are more willing to change. Or if they are not, we as the audience find this funny rather than tragic.
<b>Idealistic:</b> The tragic vision longs for a clear-cut world driven by principle. It tends to value ethical abstractions, such as Truth, Justice, and Beauty	<b>Pragmatic:</b> The comic vision is more aware of concrete realities. Comic heroes seek how to make it from day-to-day.
<b>Finality:</b> Tragic actions lead to inevitable consequences.	<b>Reversal:</b> At least for the clever, comic actions allow one to escape the consequences, to have a second chance.

<p><b>Spirit:</b> The tragic vision tends to value the human spirit. It can often be dualistic, prizing the spirit/soul above the body. Tragic heroes often long for some higher, greater level of life than common human existence.</p>	<p><b>Body:</b> The comic vision is very concerned with the human body--its sexual desires, bodily functions, craving for food. Suffering is often slap-stick. Comic heroes seem comfortable in such a world.</p>
<p><b>Seriousness:</b> The tragic vision takes its characters and plots seriously. They are treated as important and make demands upon us.</p>	<p><b>Playfulness:</b> Even if it has its serious side, the comic vision tends to treat large portions of life as not quite so serious.</p>
<p><b>The Social Differences between the Tragic and Comic Visions</b></p>	
<p><b>Heroism:</b> Characters tend to be "superhuman, semi-divine, larger-than-life" beings.</p>	<p><b>Anti-heroism:</b> Characters tend to be normal, down-to-earth individuals. Comedies tend to parody authority.</p>
<p><b>Militarism:</b> Tragedies often arise in warrior cultures. And its values are those of the good soldier--duty, honor, commitment.</p>	<p><b>Pacifism:</b> Comedies tend to call into question warrior values: Better to lose your dignity and save your life.</p>
<p><b>Vengeance:</b> Offending a tragic hero often results in a cycle of vengeance.</p>	<p><b>Forgiveness:</b> In comedies, forgiveness, even friendship among former enemies, happens.</p>
<p><b>Hierarchy:</b> Tragedies tend to stress the upper-class, the noble few, royalty, and leaders.</p>	<p><b>Equality:</b> Comedies tend to include all classes of people. The lower classes are often the butt of the jokes, but they also tend to triumph in unexpected ways.</p>
<p><b>Less Sexual Equality:</b> Tragedies are often male-dominated.</p>	<p><b>More Sexual Equality:</b> Comedies, while often sexist too, are sometimes less so. Women play a larger, more active role.</p>
<p><b>Respect for Tradition:</b> Tragic heroes often uphold the accepted order or champion one tradition against another.</p>	<p><b>Questions Authority:</b> Comic heroes more often question tradition and those in authority.</p>
<p><b>Rule-based Ethics:</b> The tragic vision tends to stress the consequences of disobeying the accepted order of things.</p>	<p><b>Situation-based Ethics:</b> Comic heroes tend to make up the rules as they go along or at least be wary of generalizations.</p>
<p><b>Social Isolation:</b> Tragedies tend to stress the individual and the consequences of the individual's actions.</p>	<p><b>Social Integration:</b> Comedies tend to focus on the larger community and spend more time paying attention to the interaction between groups.</p>

[Morreall, John. Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion. Albany: State U of New York P, 1999.]  
<http://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/comedytr.htm>