Comedy and Tragedy: A History of Theatre as a Reflection

of Social Identity

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In *The Poetics*, Aristotle outlines the origins and history of Greek theatrical performance

to set up his analysis of Tragedy as the successor to the Epic poem. This section not only

addresses the origins of Tragedy but of Comedy as well, which is significant because Aristotle

establishes a distinct division between the two genres and their creators:

> Poetry now diverged in two directions, according to the individual character of the
> writers. The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more
> trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as the
> former did hymns to the gods and the praises of famous men. (6)

By presenting the division of poetry into two genres as a divergence of the writers' character,

Aristotle presents the content of each genre as a reflection of its writer's sensibilities. Aristotle

does not trivialize Comedies or the work of comic writers, which is seen when he praises

Homer's comedic works (6), but the distinction he makes between the writers' identities places

them at odds with each other as if each writer possessed different qualities that made them better

equipped to write either Comedies or Tragedies. As such, Aristotle, although most likely

unintentional, frames Comedy and Tragedy as two genres that share little to no similarities other

than being forms of theatrical performance.

I acknowledge the two genres possess many differences in terms of plot structure, staging

and the audience's emotional response, but these differences do not make them inherently

oppositional. In fact, my paper will hopefully show by analyzing how Tragedy and Comedy

functioned during eras when the theatre was a central artform in society—Greece, Rome,

Renaissance England, and the post-WWII Theatre of the Absurd—that not only do these two

genres share many similarities as art forms, but they also share the same communal function by

reinforcing the ideologies of the time period. Rather than focusing on the specific staging

differences that represent changes to Comedy and Tragedy's structure—stage direction,

choruses, music—my paper will analyze two important elements of theatre: the shifting

representations of human nature on stage and the societal function of those representations.

The perspective of the two genres as contrasts to one another is not exactly problematic,

but it often leads to a belief among scholars that one genre is superior to the other. Many have

applied this belief to either genre, but arguments of Tragedy's superiority seem more common.

Some have argued there is a complexity to Tragedy that requires an internal speculation and self-

awareness that Comedy lacks (Scruton 207-8) while others present Comedy as a less serious

genre that was designed more for entertainment (Kieran 1-2). These arguments are varied in their

analysis of the two genres, but they appear to originate from the ideas in Aristotle's *Poetics*. This

fact is significant because many critics, scholars, writers and philosophers of every generation

since Aristotle's definition of Tragedy have represented Comedy as Tragedy's direct antithesis.

Each give their own reasons for how Tragedy differs from Comedy and how that

difference represents the former's superiority, but most of their criticisms can be boiled down to

one point of contention: the genres' theatrical representations of humanity. Aristotle establishes

this difference in *the Poetics* when he states "Comedy aims at representing men as worse" while

Tragedy frames men "as better than in actual life" (5). Aristotle establishes this distinction

because Comedy and Tragedy represent two different perspectives of human nature. Comic

writers portrayed human nature as inherently ridiculous while tragic writers represented it as

empathetic. The writers' desired affect for these perspectives would be to either have the

audience laugh at the state of humanity or sympathize with its suffering. Unfortunately, the reliance on these distinctions also positioned Comedies as a lower form of entertainment since it seemed to lack the dramatic weight the tragic form possessed as it shows sympathetic, noble characters fall to misfortune and death.

In fairness, more critics are now arguing that Tragedy is an antiquated genre. In Richard Eberhart's analysis of the two genres in a modern context, he argues that Comedy has superseded Tragedy as a more contemporary and more useful way of representing human nature. He summarizes this argument by stating:

> Tragedy used to be based on the flaw in individual man. Now we do not have faith in this. It becomes minor compared with the general flaw of mankind, who having dropped the atom bomb and holding over our heads devastating and terrible weapons has reduced our sensibility to intellection so that all we can do now is to laugh. Perhaps we may aspire to a Gargantuan and cosmic laughter. Our true emotions are worn out. Our intellectual laughter arises shrill and febrile. Hence why not think of Hamlet as a comedian, the whole affair as a wonderful absurdity? (Eberhart 9)

For Eberhart, Tragedy cannot properly illicit its desired effect from a jaded, modern audience. He advocates that a modern context requires a comedic structure to help the audience comprehend and acknowledge the enormity of humanity's flaws from a cynical outlook rather than Tragedy's more empathetic view of individual suffering. In other words, Comedy is not necessarily superior to Tragedy structurally, but rather through the emotional needs of post-WWII society. I do not agree with his conclusion that Comedy can replace Tragedy for reasons I will address later, but, more importantly, his ideas are still based on the same problematic idea that Comedy and Tragedy serve different societal functions because they represent humanity differently.

The issue that arises in defining a genre's greatness by its depictions of reality is it leads to misconceptions about the cultural purpose of theatre. By contrasting these genres and

pronouncing one superior, many scholars miss how similar they are and the importance of those similarities which extend beyond the structure of the play into their function as a reflection of their contemporary societies. I agree that Aristotle's distinctions between the two genres are functionally useful for organizing plays into categories; however, our unwillingness to alter or improve upon his original representation of the two genres' relationship leads to misconceptions about how these genres have changed over the years. Scholars and writers have added new rules and expanded on or criticized Aristotle's definitions since he wrote the *Poetics*, but they usually maintain the idea that Comedy and Tragedy are two separate entities with little to no interaction even after genres like tragicomedies became popularized for combining elements of both.

I.   Greek and Roman Theatre (532BC – 476AD)

Since Tragedy and Comedy originated in Greece, exploring how both genres fulfilled an important societal function will build a useful foundation for understanding how they are used in future eras. One should pay particular consideration to how the two genres share this function despite perceptions of Old and New Comedy as inferior to the Greek/Roman Tragedies due to the differences in subject matter. However, this section will show that the scholars who favor Greek/Roman Tragedy over Comedy are basing much of their views on more subjective points regarding the "seriousness" of Tragedy. If one instead judges the two genres based on their role within Greek and Roman culture, they might find the seemingly simple structure of Greek/Roman Comedy was as important as its sibling genre in reinforcing the ideologies of each society.

Although the plays of Roman culture structured their drama differently than Greece, Rome incorporated much of Greek culture into their own, leading to their theatrical representations possessing a similar societal purpose by using many of the characteristics of theatre that Aristotle

outlines in *Poetics*. Greek theatre existed long before Aristotle, and his influence over Roman theatre only extends as far as what they incorporated from Greek culture, but the Tragedies and Comedies of both nations display a similar attitude toward what theatre does and how it should engage its audience. For both societies, theatre is an imitation of human life. As Aristotle explains in *Poetics*, "the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated" (6). Aristotle establishes that all theatre is a dramatized representation of reality for the purposes of conveying a lesson or meaning. However, this rule applies not only to Greek and Roman theatre but rather all theatre in every culture because imitation is inherent to performance. The fact that all theatre reflects humanity in some way is important because it shows that regardless of a play's structure or genre, theatre serves the same societal purpose: to instill their ideas and perspectives about humanity into an audience which often reinforce a societal identity.

The human nature that Greek and Roman societies concerned themselves with most was questions about the connection between happiness and morality. Greek philosophers in particular obsessed over how one could live a fulfilled life. The discussion of this topic focused on how one should structure and perceive their life in a way that brings contentment, but Greek depictions of a fulfilled life usually related to an inherent moral coding. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that all men naturally seek to fulfill their existence through moral action but need to educate themselves on how to carry through with those good intentions: "Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what is right?" (3-4). Aristotle's representation of a fulfilled life pushes the individual to temper their behavior with education,

but he also positions the individual's actions as inherently driving towards some moral good. This inherent morality in the individual's actions was a common concept in Greek philosophy.

Plato's *The Republic* precedes Aristotle's *Ethics*, yet it possesses a similar view on the connection between individual action and moral good. Its Socratic conversation begins as a renumeration about happiness and its connection to personal wealth before Socrates makes connections to the morality of the individual which the characters refer to as 'justice'. Their conversation leads to Plato's connection between personal gain and common good through Socrates's conclusion:

> Then now, Thrasymachus, there is no longer any doubt that neither arts nor governments provide for their own interests; but, as we were before saying, they rule and provide for the interests of their subjects who are the weaker and not the stronger–to their good they attend and not to the good of the superior … For, in the execution of his work, and in giving his orders to another, the true artist does not regard his own interest, but always that of his subjects; and therefore in order that rulers may be willing to rule, they must be paid in one of three modes of payment, money, or honour, or a penalty for refusing. (198)

Plato presents the individual's personal success as connected to a common good. The worker or "artist" performs his skill for compensation but those for whom he works benefit from his talents; therefore, the individual's actions and the good that comes from them reflects a morality inherent to their behavior regardless of their motivations. This focus on an individual's actions reflects an important element of Greek society: their association between outward behavior and interior virtue. In Greek society, one must comport themselves in a manner that showed they were in control of their emotions, well-educated in their fields of study, and desirable of the common good of their fellow citizens because it reflected a fulfilled being who understood their role in society.

Rome developed a similar perspective of an individual's actions and their dedication to their nation due to Greek philosophy's influence on Roman culture. Greek stoicism, which Rome

adopted for a time, pushed for the pursuit of perfect rationality and control over one's emotions and body to promote the acquiring of knowledge for the good of the state. The stoic Epictetus establishes this when he argues that a man is a "part of the state" and not to be independent of it "as a foot is no longer a foot if it is detached from the body;" therefore, an individual's actions are always working towards the good of the state regardless of their intentions (106). In other words, an individual's actions, no matter how they might be for the person's self-interest, supports the common good of society by nature of him being a part of that society. Stoicism also promotes the appearance of moral integrity to reflect a rational interior. Stoics must appear cool-headed and rational in society while adopting the manners and attitudes of their fellow citizens (Epictetus 7-8).

The popularity of this philosophy that pushes one to see oneself as a part of a larger body and behave in accordance to the attitudes of their community in Rome reflects the society's belief in a public morality. Both Romans and Greeks shared a belief that morally good actions and behavior were inherent to human understanding, learning and growth while immoral behavior could corrupt the individual's soul, which is why almost all Greek and Roman philosophies possessed the belief that one must learn how to behave ethically to avoid falling into ruin (Holmes 573). As such, both societies established a moral structure to their worldview. Engaging in perversion or degeneracy of any kind carried with it the threat of corrupting one's self, so Greek and Roman societies viewed aberrational behavior outside of the accepted manners like those outlined by Epictetus as potential threats to the decency of all.

As a subject of Greek and Roman culture, the theatre served the important societal function of reinforcing these philosophies; Tragedy and Comedy accomplished this through character interactions. The outcome of these interactions (the story's conclusion) led to the conveyance of

a lesson about human nature through the lens of the societies' moral philosophies. Although Tragedy and Comedy shared the societal function of reinforcing a public morality in their audience through performance, the nature of those performances differed from each other. The structural and tonal differences of the plays served as dramatic functions to help convey the moral message, but Greek and Roman societies possessed a lesser opinion of Comedy due to its sometimes sexual or perverse content. As such, Comedy played the role as both a representative of a social morality and a possible corrupting influence that some feared could pollute the minds of the citizens with portrayals of sexual promiscuity and immoral behavior.

This judgement, in particular by Greek society, is noteworthy because echoes of their criticism can be found in future generations' criticism of the Comedy. Originally, Greeks did not incorporate Comedy into their culture until 33 years after they established Tragedy as an artform (Brockett 18). Aristotle's *Poetics* explains the reason for this time displacement was because Greek society dismissed Comedy as an unserious artform (7). Greeks viewed Comedy as an inferior artform. As compared to Tragedy's serious tone, many viewed the "lighter" mood and raucous behavior that comic characters engaged in as a sign that it was an artform meant for baser entertainment. This is understandable since even in Old Comedy which focused on political satire there still existed sexually degenerate acts like in Aristophanes' *The Clouds* when the protagonist Strepsiades begins masturbating under a blanket during a thought exercise.

Modern scholars' opinions of these depictions of sexual degeneracy share many of the qualities of the criticism Greek society leveled against the genre. Many individuals saw and continue to see Greek comedy as thoughtless enjoyment for Greece's lower class. In fact, only recently have scholars began looking at New Comedy during the Hellenistic Era as a part of the societal function of reinforcing the Greek moral system along with Tragedy instead of as

mindless entertainment (Brockett 37). This is not to say scholars dismissed Comedy entirely. Most respect the Greek comic works of Aristophanes and Menander or the Roman Comedies of Plautus and Terence which helped revolutionize theatrical performance, but some struggle to see beyond the perverse, juvenile actions of the characters on stage to find a deeper meaning in the genre's buffoonery. Aristotle's brief mention that Comedy requires further explanation following Tragedy in *Poetics* (7) implies a complexity to the genre's antics which often goes either unnoticed or unmentioned in many scholars' analysis of it; however, before we begin to analyze how Comedy's complexity tied in with its societal function, an analysis of how Tragedy fulfilled this function will provide for a useful comparison.

Tragedy reinforces the Greek/Roman moral structure in its depictions of sympathetic figures falling from nobility due to a failing to uphold the values of that structure. This failing may or not be the protagonist's fault but it always leads to the downfall or death of multiple characters. This is seen in plays like *Oedipus Rex* where the titular character's acts of murdering his father and bedding his mother lead to ruin; whereas in *Antigone*, the titular character is a victim of Creon's faulty judgement, leading to the deaths of Creon's son and wife. These tragic elements also exist in Roman Tragedies like Seneca's *Octavia* when Nero executes the protagonist, which the play implies is an immoral action through the knowledge that it will bring destruction to his kingdom. All these plays fulfill their societal function by showing their audiences consequences of transgressing the social morality of their societies. As such, Tragedies helped reinforce the worldview that an inherent moral system existed in Greek/Roman societies by representing the fall of individuals who defy that moral system.

This role of Tragedy reinforces the societal moral code through Aristotle's concept of catharsis. Aristotle's catharsis is a "purgation" of the audience's pity and fear through an

outpouring of those emotions for the suffering of the characters on stage (8). This strong

combination of emotions allows for the audience to empathize with the characters' suffering, but

it also engrains those feelings with a moral cause and effect. The audience recognizes the

characters' immoral actions as the cause for their intense suffering which they then apply to

reality. Aristotle presents a version of this in *Poetics* when he talks about the value of action in

Tragedy: "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists

in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's

qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse" (9). As an imitation of life,

Tragedy presents the actions of people as the determiner of happiness. As such, the audience

empathizes with the suffering of characters like Oedipus, but they also know that he was the

cause of that suffering through his actions. This reinforces the idea of a social morality.

Greek/Roman philosophies promoted a perspective that a person's actions determines their moral

goodness; therefore, the audience of Tragedy feel pity for the characters' fall but also fear the

idea of taking actions that oppose the social morality, which helped to reinforce a belief in a

worldview where immoral actions always have consequences.

    The best way to understand how Comedy fulfills the same reinforcement of social morality is

to understand how the genre's use of characters who engage in sexual or degenerate acts helps

fulfill the same function. To use an example from earlier, Aristophanes *The Clouds* creates a

satirized view of the Socratic method through Socrates's attempts to teach a foolish Strepsiades

how to think. The scene in which Strepsiades begins masturbating during Socrates's thought

exercise is meant to emphasize the absurdity of the Socratic method:

       SOCRATES
          Have you grasped anything?
       STREPSIADES

No, by god, I haven't.
SOCRATES
Nothing at all?
STREPSIADES
I haven't grasped a thing—
except my right hand is wrapped around my cock. (Aristophanes 733-37)

This scene's humor is perverse but not mindless. The act of masturbation raises the absurdity of the scene to its upmost limits by presenting Socrates's teachings through Strepsiades' ridiculous reactions to them. Aristophanes already portrays Socrates as comical by making him arrogant and impatient, but the sexually perverse humor helps bring Socrates's teachings into the world of absurdity, allowing the audience to see the more ridiculous nature of the Socratic method which is what entices them to laugh. Like Tragedy, Comedy focuses on the actions of the characters to reinforce a social morality; however, the methods of doing so elicit laughter instead of pity or fear.

Whereas Tragedy emphasizes the realism of the characters' suffering by making them sympathetic, Comedy pushes not only its characters but also its subject matter into the realm of absurdity to better show the audience a new perspective on a normally serious topic. Taking inspiration from Hegel's definition of Comedy, Mark W. Roche outlines the nature of the absurd in Comedy to show that "[t]he comic work takes the hero's position seriously, accepts it, and follows it to the point where it reveals its own absurdity and so destroys itself" (415). In other words, Comedy reveals the absurdity of a concept or idea by following along as characters act it out. Like Tragedy, the characters' actions possess a moral coding, but there is a difference in how this coding functions. Tragedy uses sympathetic characters who suffer from immoral actions which causes the audience to fear the consequences of defying the moral structure of society, but Comedy uses immoral characters who act out of selfish goals to such a ridiculous degree that the audience laughs at the absurdity of behaving in such contrast to the moral

structure of their society. This is a common characteristic of Comedy, so although Roche is referring to a more modern take on the genre, it can still be applied to the Greek/Roman version of it.

Proof of this can be seen in Aristophanes *The Clouds* where it reveals the absurdity of the Socratic method by showing our protagonist engage with them in increasingly ridiculous ways. The audience laughs at the interactions between the characters but also at the new, comical perspective of the Socratic method. As observers of the play's absurd imitation of this method of reasoning, they can understand the ridiculous nature of Socrates's methods of teaching, emphasizing Euripides's critical perspective of it. With the audience's laughter also comes the understanding that the characters' behavior is so immoral that it becomes ridiculous. As such, Comedy fulfills its function by leading the audience to laugh at the absurdity of the characters' immoral behavior, which leads the audience to associate actions and behaviors opposed to the social morality with the ridiculousness of the Comedy's foolish characters.

This perspective of Comedy's societal function is not only reflective of Aristophanes work, but also of Greek Comedy in general. One could argue that New Comedy does not function this way since it focuses less on satire and more on caricatures of everyday people, but that too serves the important purpose of exploring the relationship between individuals and their relationship to their society. Menander's *Dyskolos* reflects this relationship well by centering the play's comic scenes around the grouch Knemon's interactions with the other characters. Knemon is a character who antagonizes his community. He beats people who walk on his property and berates others in public to keep them from bothering him, yet his interactions with others become increasingly comedic as more and more people interrupt his self-imposed isolation. These interruptions reflect the absurdity of isolating one's self from their society. Knemon's inability to

remain independent of his neighbors conveys the play's message that subjects of a community should work together rather than selfishly close themselves off.

This message is further emphasized by Knemon's realization of his own wrongdoing. By Act III, character after character knocks on Knemon's door asking for favors as the absurdity of his isolationism builds to the moment when he injures himself and must rely on that same society who he refused to help. His realization of his immoral behavior comes in the form of a monologue where he reflects on his deeds:

> Perhaps I was mistaken, but I thought
> That I alone of everyone
> Could be sufficient to myself,
> Needing no one else.
> But now I see how fierce and unexpected
> The end of life can be. (Menander 895-900)

Like all New Comedy, this moment of Knemon's acceptance of his society represents a shift "from an old, effete society to a new one" (Beck 111), which both reflects the natural societal shift between generations of people and the reaffirmation of Greek/Roman societal beliefs. Knemon's dependence on the community likens itself to the Greek view of citizens as parts of the state, but more importantly it reinforces the idea of a public morality in the audience. As Knemon, the representation of a resistance figure against societal norms, comes to accept the society in which he lives, so too does the audience feel justified in their belief that a public morality exists where everyone's position within the society helps that society succeed.

One could still argue that just because the two genres fulfilled the same function that does not mean that they fulfilled that function equally nor does it prove that the two genres relied on each other to fulfill that function. Ironically, the only way to understand how Tragedy and Comedy relied on each other to serve this function is to look at the differences between the

genres. As I established earlier, many critics base the differences between the two genres on how they choose to represent human nature. This difference is best outlined by Hazel E. Barnes when she establishes how Tragedy represents humans as "more significant, more signifying" by taking seriously our attempts to be better than our current state will allow while Comedy "glorifies the average" by presenting humans as inherently absurd creatures that aspire to be more than what they are despite it being impossible (Barnes 125-6). In classical antiquity, Tragedy represents human nature as noble in our failings while Comedy reveals their latent absurdity. This difference is important because although both genres support their society's moral structure individually, they also rely on one another to offer new perspectives of human nature through the lens of this moral structure. As such, the two genres establish a kind of balance between the perspectives of what society should aspire to be and its reality.

This balance is best seen in Greek society's use of the Satyr play. These plays combined the perverse humor of Comedy with the mythological epics of Tragedy; however, they served a societal function more like Comedy. Some critics have described Satyr plays like *The Cyclops* as Tragicomedies since they combine elements of both Tragedy and Comedy into one play (Barnes 128), but these plays seem far closer to satirical Comedies of Greek mythology. One can see this when Dana Ferrin Sutton explains how Euripides's *Cyclops* neutralizes the tragic themes of the Greek mythology the play is based in through humor which is mostly supplied by Silenus and his satyrs (61). This neutralization occurs in all Satyr plays since they all base their stories in Greek myths and Silenus, along with his satyrs, are always there to provide comical commentary on the play's action. As such, much of Comedy's characteristics apply to Satyr plays with their focus on using increasingly absurd interactions between characters to make the audience laugh at the ridiculously immoral behavior of the characters; however, this characteristic is more interesting

in Satyr plays since they must present inherently tragic scenes from a comical perspective. In the *Cyclops* alone, scenes of cannibalism, murder and eye gouging from the Greek myth are still present, but now the play presents it from the perspective of Silenus and his chorus of Satyrs, who get drunk and make fart noises, rather than Ulysses, so the story becomes humorous in nature instead of horrifying.

The importance of this change from a tragic perspective to a comical one without changing the content of the story can be seen in how these Satyr plays functioned in Greek society. During Dionysian festivals where actors performed Tragedies for an audience, Satyr plays ended the festival because it provided comic relief for the seriousness of the plays that preceded it (Brockett 18). This is significant because the Satyr plays often satirized the tropes of the Tragedies that preceded it. Sutton explains this by arguing that Satyr plays like Euripides's *Cyclops* "present a close counterpart to the serious actions of the foregoing play, so that in both instances there is the curious effect of witnessing this serious action reflected, as it were, in a humorously distorting mirror" (62). Satyr plays interact with the Tragedies that precede them like how Comedies represent human nature: they reveal the absurdity that exists within it. Satyr plays take the tragic elements that previously made an audience empathize with the noble characters on stage and show the audience a new perspective that makes the characters' actions absurd.

The effect of this perspective shift on the audience reveals how a society needs both Comedy and Tragedy when they fulfill a function within said society. In Greek and Roman societies, theatrical performance of human nature allowed for the reinforcement of a social morality, but both genres were needed because they provided the public with a useful contrast of how they should perceive themselves within that moral structure. Many critics view Tragedy as

superior because of the more overtly emotional moments that seem to provide deeper analysis of humanity; however, Comedy is as accurate as Tragedy at understanding human nature except the perspective of humanity changes. Tragedy presented the condition of humanity as something to empathize with and feel pity for, but Comedy presented humanity as inherently ridiculous when one considers it from an outside perspective. They represented the two extremes of interpreting reality. However, Greek/Roman Comedy still promoted acceptance of one's role as a part of that absurd existence like Knemon acknowledging his reliance on his community. As such, the presence of both genres provided Greek and Roman societies with different contexts in which they could position themselves within the social morality they established. Although the direct interactions between the genres was limited then (Satyr plays being the only real application of both), they still shared the burden of not only reinforcing societal norms but also of providing perspectives of human nature that diversified how their audience understood their societal role.

II.   The English Renaissance Theatre (1562AD-1642AD)

A consistent theme across the Renaissance era was the societal shift into humanism as the primary means of learning. Renaissance humanism was a scholarly and literary movement that dominated all areas of study and philosophical thinking in Europe from the 14th to 16th centuries which focused on imitating many concepts from Ancient Greek and Roman culture (Kristeller 586). Much of the philosophy, religion, music, art, literature and of course theatrical productions of this era borrowed numerous techniques and perspectives from classical thought. They even promoted a similar view of education and its ties to morality as Paul Oskar Kristeller shows in his analysis of the movement: "the humanists did not pursue a moral ideal attainable without education and scholarship, but an ideal of education and scholarship that attempts and claims to lead towards a more human and civilized, if not to a more moral life" (589). Although clashing a

bit with Aristotle's view of humans as inherently good, humanists believed that becoming more educated in the culture of classical antiquity would lead to "a more human" or rather a more fulfilled, moral existence. The humanists' reintroduction of these classic ideas initiated the Renaissance; however, this does not mean that humanists did not make alterations to the concepts they borrowed.

Founders of Renaissance humanism like Petrarch incorporated their education in Greek and Roman culture into their Christian identity despite the 'pagan' beliefs of the former. Petrarch accomplishes this through a great personal struggle which he represents in *Secretum* (Secret) as a dialogue between himself and St. Augustine. Much of this conversation consists of St. Augustine criticizing Petrarch for his personal affections over his devotion to God's teachings, which some have argued reflects Petrarch's rejection of his humanist identity at the end of his life (Kahn 155). This perspective of Petrarch's writing is problematic since he makes a point to bring up classical Greek and Roman philosophies like Stoicism in the dialogue which St. Augustine agrees is the superior form of reasoning (13). These momentary breaks in the discussion where Greek/Roman philosophies and ideologies function alongside Petrarch's rumination on the nature of his devotion to God conveys the difficult but functional relationship between Petrarch's identity as a Christian and as an appreciator of classical antiquity. This relationship reflects much of the earlier Renaissance humanists' stances but more importantly it reveals that Renaissance humanists did not inherently despise religion despite their desire to focus on more secular topics.

This representation of the religious Renaissance humanist is important for understanding how Renaissance humanism engaged with the non-secular when it was a movement most concerned with improving the education and personal fulfillment of individuals. As Eugene Thomas Long explains in his analysis of Renaissance humanism:

Humanism often expressed antipathy towards the authority of religious institutions, the ascetic life, religious intolerance and theologies which deemphasized man's autonomous role in the world. It was not, however, antagonistic to religion as such. Indeed, some of the Renaissance humanists (e.g., Petrarch, Pico della Mirandola and Erasmus) sought to reconcile Christian faith with their belief in the dignity of men and women. (120)

In other words, Renaissance humanism was not inherently opposed to religion but rather the institutions that limited the autonomy of the individual. In this resistance to organizations of the state like religious institutions, the humanists' teachings differentiate themselves from Greek/Roman culture. The Greeks and Romans might question the nature of humanity but their social morality does not allow for a criticism of religious beliefs or institutions; this is shown by how many Tragedies present a defiance of divine right as an immoral action that results in severe consequences (*Antigone*, *The Bacchae*, *Prometheus Bound*, and so on). However, it is in the humanists' criticisms of religious institutions that we see one of the English theatre's functions during the Renaissance.

Leading up to the Elizabethan era, England experienced radical shifts in its religious figure heads, destabilizing those institutions' political hold over the public. The nation rapidly switched between Protestantism and Catholicism as the authoritative state religion. As Peter Marshal shows in his analysis of this short time period, many scholars originally believed that King Henry VII's replacement of Catholicism with the Church of England began a great Protestant reformation that was briefly interrupted by Mary Tudor's return to Catholicism before Queen Elizabeth reestablished Protestant control without causing the public to react critically towards those religious institutions (565). This was not the case. Rather, some groups frustrated with Catholicism's degeneration since the Middle Ages took up the new Protestant teachings while others remained secretly loyal to the previous institution (George 84). English society during the Renaissance split into different factions of people with different religious beliefs,

decentralizing the control of any one religious institution over the mass population. This decentralization also created a societal tension between the groups since a single religious teaching no longer united them.

English Renaissance theatre fulfilled a societal function by helping the divided public come to accept their new situation, which it facilitated through the return of Comedy and Tragedy as Renaissance humanism popularized the old forms in English culture. English Comedy and Tragedy took many of their characteristics and plot structures from their Greek/Roman counterparts; however, Renaissance writers like Shakespeare, Marlowe and Johnson incorporated new approaches to drama and even revised some of the rules of Greek/Roman theatre so the genres would function within their new societal context. As such, we can assume that these new inclusions to the genre not only helped modernize classical theatre but also reflected the societal views of human nature, which, at the time, were deeply concerned with matters of national identity and religious faith. A proper analysis of these changes to the original genres will best show how Comedy and Tragedy shared a societal function during the English Renaissance.

Due to the humanists' influences, many English Tragedies still utilized Greek/Roman traits in their productions with a few exceptions. As with Greek/Roman Tragedy, the Tragedy of the English Renaissance usually based its materials in mythology or historical narratives, but they usually based their plots in Christianity or English history. English writers adapted many Greek/Roman plays of which Seneca was quite popular throughout the entire Renaissance period (Smith 202) and even created their own version of Roman stories like Shakespeare's *Titus Andromeda* or *Julius Caesar*, but most English Renaissance plays pulled inspiration from English culture and history. This change was significant for two reasons: the familiar

stories/historical settings would allow a wider English audience to relate to the play's action, and it allowed writers to directly address issues in English society.

Both points usually meant plays that either consciously or unconsciously addressed the shifting perceptions of English society. *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus*'s corrupt Christian characters are two overt examples of the contemplation of the Christian identity but it can be argued that *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*'s depictions of destabilized countries that fall into chaos due to internal conflict might reflect the instability of identifying one's self with older societal structures like Catholicism. By making the Tragedies closer to contemporary times, the plays could better fulfill the societal function of representing and exploring the divisions in English society and the audience's relationship to it. This exploration of the new English identity also explains why English Renaissance Tragedies often focused on individuals whose actions significantly impact the hierarchies of their societies.

The English Renaissance Tragedy's shift away from using "noble" protagonists further represents the societal concern about the relationship between the individual and their society. To clarify, English Tragedies still used characters of high birth or esteem and even characters that would fit in well amongst Greek Tragedies like Shakespeare's Brutus, but as the English Renaissance progressed, more and more protagonists of Tragic plays became less moral and/or sympathetic. In fact, Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* defy Aristotle's claim that a tragic plot should not center around "the downfall of the utter villain" (14) by focusing their plays' actions almost entirely on unsympathetic protagonists who die without redemption.

This shift in protagonist is reflective of the needs of English society. The noble protagonists of Greek and Roman Tragedy presented human nature within the lens of a moral

structure that most of their societies accepted; therefore, it fulfilled the audience's need to be entertained while also giving them a performance which reinforced that worldview through imitation. Most of England's moral identity was encapsulated by Christian beliefs which caused an internal conflict by splitting this moral identity between Catholicism and Protestant teachings. This conflict meant that the classical, noble protagonist could not fulfill the same societal function, so writers needed to create a protagonist that could better explore England's new reality. They needed characters who could navigate an amoral universe. More morally grey and sometimes, as in the case of Barabas and Coriolanus, more immoral characterization allowed writers to address the humanist perspective of the England's social consciousness.

For similar reasons, English Renaissance Comedies also began breaking away from the generic limitations of their classical predecessors. English Comedies still built their plots around the character interactions with their perverse jokes and displays of sexual deviancy (Jensen 302), but Renaissance writers felt free to change almost every other element of the genre. A good example of the Renaissance writer's freedom from generic convention is seen in Renaissance Prodigal-son Comedies. In "Terence Improved: The Paradigm of the Prodigal Son in English Renaissance Comedy," Ervin Beck establishes this form of Comedy as "fundamentally opposed" to New Comedy because while New Comedy promoted the revitalization of society through the passing of generations, the Prodigal Son Comedy portrayed revitalization through the acceptance of the previous generations values (110-13). Beck provides this contrast because it helps define the Prodigal Son Comedy as a genre; however, I think the contrast offers some insight into why the older generic conventions were mostly abandoned for not only this form of Comedy but many of the Renaissance Comedies in general since, as Katharine Eisaman Maus assesses,

"Renaissance scriptwriters did not necessarily maintain strict demarcations between genres" (123).

As with the tragic writers, English Renaissance comics needed to make changes to Greek and Roman Comedy's structure to make it accurately represent its new societal context. These plays reflect that new context in their subject matter. Beck's summary of the Prodigal Son Comedy's purpose is telling of how this social context affected a play's structure: "[Prodigal Son Comedy] is redemptive comedy, which means that it is concerned with resolution of internal contradictions and progress toward right integration of personality. In religious terms, it portrays the salvation of the individual's soul and the social reconciliation and renewal that naturally result from the emergence of the hero's true self" (115-6). Although Berk presents this purpose as one of Christian morality, it is also deeply concerned with constructing identity. The "redemptive" quality of this play comes from the protagonist's struggles to reconcile with both internal and external forces that attempt to shape him until his "true self" emerges when he rejoins the society he abandoned. This Comedy type redeems through the protagonist's identification with the 'correct' (Christian) social context. As such, one can see the societal function of this Comedy as a way to reaffirm classic Christian values in the audience by using the protagonist's personal struggles as a reflection of Renaissance English society's struggles to establish a new national identity.

Most comedic plots in England during this time period possessed themes of society and identity. An example of these themes is present in English Renaissance Comedy's use of disguised characters. This plot device is present in almost all of Shakespeare's Comedies through his crossdressing characters, in Ben Johnson's trickster characters who adopt false identities and in many individual plays like the *Dutch Courtesan*, *Coxcomb*, *Palace of Pleasure* and *Monsieur*

Thomas where disguise is integral to the story. Renaissance writers borrowed the device from Roman Comedy but used it as a tool to create a confusing atmosphere on stage where identities are forsaken, and characters cease to recognize each other. The plot device inevitably creates multiple sub-plots between the confused characters where "[n]o single story, no single individual has a monopoly on the stage, nor, implicitly, a monopoly on the truth" (Maus 126). Like the Prodigal Son Comedies, the play must resolve the different sub-plots by removing the characters' disguises, revealing their true identities once more.

This reveal has different implications depending on the play (Shakespeare's Comedies resolve in marriage while Johnson's often end by 'unmasking' the tricksters' falsehoods), but they always conclude with the revitalization of a united social identity. Maus states as much by describing the resolution of a Renaissance Comedy as "a renewal of an entire community" (126) where people are united either by the promise of another generation through marriage or the removal of disruptive elements/characters. As such, while English Renaissance Tragedy fulfills its societal function by exploring social identity through the protagonist's relationship to their society, English Renaissance Comedy resolves the playful chaos created by the disparate sub-plots and disguised characters by creating a united community that shares the same principles and traditions. A simpler way to think about the two genres' societal function is to see English Renaissance Tragedy as a representation of the individual's identity within society while its sibling genre is a depiction of the social connections and institutions that make up a social identity. By investigating both the nature of the individual's identity and the social structures that represent a society's identity as a whole, English Comedy and Tragedy create different but equally important depictions of human nature through which the English audience could question the nature of their national identity and the social structures that identity was based on.

The best way to show how these genres fulfilled this function during this time would be to go through and analyze two plays that encapsulate how Comedy and Tragedy provided perspectives that not only served the same function but also interacted in meaningful ways. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare's comedic response *The Merchant of Venice* address similar themes and ideas but through different perspectives tied to identity. Arthur Humphreys acknowledges the unusual relationship between the plays with their different approaches to a similar narrative when he argues that the "two radically different sorts of dramatic mind" provoke the audience to consider how the plays relate to one another (279). As such, *the Jew* and *the Merchant* offer a unique opportunity to understand the societal functions of English Renaissance Comedy and Tragedy by contrasting the perspectives of the two theatrical productions; furthermore, the relationship between the two plays is reflective of the interactions that occurred between the genres during this time period.

Barabas drives *The Jew of Malta*'s plot through his spiteful war against the Christian characters; therefore, the play presents a perspective of Christian society through the lens of a character who is fundamentally opposed to it. 16th and 17th century England mythologized Jewish people as antagonistic outsiders. Since England exiled the Jewish population in 1290, English society lacked direct contact with Jewish culture or its people; therefore, Jewish characters like Barabas came to be caricatures that represent threats to Christian society (Shapiro 13-14). Barabas is a direct threat to Christian society seeking vengeance against them through violence and manipulation. He also represents the direct antagonist to Christian doctrine by being a selfish, materialistic character that values personal wealth above charity. Marlowe emphasizes this by having the character famously refer to his wealth as "infinite riches in a little room"

which is a reference to Christ's birth that Barabas twists to present materialistic wealth as the

foremost authority in the world (1.1.37).

Marlowe uses a character that is the antithesis of Christian teachings as the perspective

through which the audience engages with Christian society to explore the hypocrisy that

permeates it. Like Barabas, the Christian characters in the play value material wealth, and they

are willing to act immorally to get it, but they also attempt to justify their behavior with Christian

doctrine. Ferneze is the best example of this hypocrisy. He is a character who often uses

Christian doctrine to justify actions that benefit him like when he preaches to Barabas about

sinfulness of greed to explain why he takes all of Barabas's wealth for himself:

> Out wretched Barabas,
> Sham'st thou not thus to justify thyself,
> As if we knew not thy profession?
> If thou rely upon thy righteousness,
> Be patient and thy riches will increase.
> Excess of wealth is cause of covetousness:
> And covetousness, oh 'tis a monstrous sin. (1.2.119-25)

The play's purpose in presenting Christian society through this perspective was not to criticize

Christianity but rather to explore what it means to be Christian in a world devoid of a moral

structure. This perspective actually reinforces Christian doctrine by showing a horrifying

representation of a society devoid of Christian morals which serves its societal function by

exploring what it means to be Christian. By exploring the idea of Christian identity, the play calls

on the commonality of Christian beliefs in English society to unite the audience in horror against

the depiction of Christians on stage. Unlike Greek/Roman Tragedy, the cathartic moment does

not come from the protagonist's fall because he is too unsympathetic in Marlowe's play;

therefore, the feelings of horror come from the immoral Christian society where a 'false

Christian' like Ferneze prospers in the end.

Shakespeare's comic take on Marlowe's play in *The Merchant of Venice* shifts the perspective from one individual's interactions with society to the society's inner workings and relationships. As a Tragedy, *The Jew of Malta* has a few sub-plots that are all secondary to Barabas's war on Christian society; however, *The Merchant* divides its story into multiple plots that are mostly disconnected until the climactic court scene, but more importantly is the fact that many of involve marriage. There is the 'main' plot surrounding Shylock's deal with Antonio, Portia's marriage test, Bassanio's trip to marry Portia, Jessica's conversion and marriage to Lorenzo, and Graziano's marriage to Nerissa. These marriages represent the interconnections that build the societal structure of the play. The events in the main plot threaten these connections but in the end the marriages are reaffirmed and, in the nature of English Renaissance Comedy, unify the characters of the play into one (Christian) community.

The conflict between Antonio and Shylock represents the main plot by having Shylock take up Barabas's role as the direct threat to the play's Christian community. When compared to Barabas, Shylock is a rather sympathetic character. His motivations for wanting vengeance against Antonio and Christian society by extension is for the prejudice he has experienced at their hands: "He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew" (*The Merchant of Venice* 3.1.45-8). However, Shakespeare did not intend for the audience to sympathize with Shylock over the Christian characters. As Arthur Humphrey's argues, Shakespeare's Comedies create more complex characters with their own flaws so the Christians are sympathetic despite their treatment of Shylock as Shakespeare "concentrates malignancy into one overwhelming figure while yet deeply humanizing that figure" in the form of Shylock (287). As such, Shylock still represents

the Jewish threat to Christian society that the characters must neutralize. This is further supported by the fact that after he is forcefully converted to Christianity as punishment, he disappears from the play entirely, having served his purpose in the play by threatening the security of Christian society before being defeated by it.

Although the methods differ, English Renaissance Comedy and Tragedy fulfill the function of reinforcing the concept of a united Christian society for their audience. I will say that *the Jew of Malta* is unique in its portrayal of an immoral Christian society but it still reflects English Tragedy's use of a protagonist to explore an unstable social structure that falls apart as the plot progresses to horrify the audience into valuing unity over conflict. The best examples of this are in Shakespeare's Tragedies that center around self-destructing royal families and Marlowe's use of characters that desire to expand beyond the limitations of their society and suffer as a result. As for Renaissance Comedy, not every play has a singular threatening character like the Jewish outsider but they do all have a disruption or threat to the unity of the play's society that the characters must overcome. This disruption can come in forms like that of Johnson's trickster characters or Shakespeare's conniving characters whose actions complicate the marriage plots. Neither has the same effect on their audience, but both are necessary to fulfill this function because without Tragedy one cannot explore how people interact with their society while a lack of Comedy plays could not explore how those interactions develop that society in the first place.

III.   The Theatre of the Absurd (1940ad-1969ad)

This period of time is significant because it marks one of the greatest departures from the theatre's Greek and Roman origins while still utilizing many of the classical characteristics of Comedy and Tragedy. The Theatre of the Absurd and its popularity following WWII was a direct

response to the changing reality of the world. Martin Esslin establishes the worldwide societal

changes that made this era of theatre different from all that preceded it:

The decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic social and biological progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrational and unconscious forces within the human psyche, the loss of a sense of control over rational human development in an age of totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction, have all contributed to the erosion of the basis for a dramatic convention in which the action proceeds within a fixed and self-evident framework of generally accepted values. (6)

 In other words, following the rapid changes in many societies in response to two world wars,

modernism and the loss of a unified social morality, the theatre, acting on its role of imitating

human nature within its societal context, needed to reflect these changes to fulfill its societal

function. As such, the Theatre of the Absurd relied on Tragicomedies rather than the classical

versions of Comedy and Tragedy.

Roger Eberhart's argument that Tragedy no longer has a place in a modern context

originates in the theatre's shift away from using these classical genres. His argument is accurate

in the sense that classical Tragedy could no longer fulfill a societal function since it could not

adequately represent the fragmented social identity of the time; however, the fundamental nature

of Tragedy exists within Tragicomedy. The type of Comedy Eberhart describes is detached from

sympathy. To reflect a society that has "lost a basic respect for the human condition," Eberhart

argues that only the cynical, intellectual laughter of Comedy can effectively represent a post-

World War II society by distancing the audience from humanity through the absurdity of its

characters' actions (9). A function of absurd Comedy and Tragicomedy is to satirize social

structures and identities by having characters act them out, revealing their ridiculous nature, but

there is a sympathy we feel for these characters that is entirely tragic in origin. Who can watch

Waiting for Godot and not feel pity for Gogo and Didi's suffering? What individual does not

recognize the horror of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's condition as they hurtle toward their

untimely end? The laughter is not cold and unsympathetic, but rather filled with pity as the audience sees themselves in the characters' fallen states. This recognition is absurd Tragicomedy's societal function.

Tragicomedy existed for centuries before this era, but it was the first time the genre fulfilled the societal function of both Comedy and Tragedy. This does not mean that absurd Tragicomedies are superior in quality to the two genres but rather that it best functioned as a representation of humanity from the perspective of a more modern society. It might be better to think of Tragicomedy as serving the inverse function of the Comedies and Tragedies of Greece, Rome and the English Renaissance. Whereas the societal functions of those plays unified society under one moral system or identity, absurd Tragicomedy fulfills its societal function by representing society as inherently fragmented as absolute concepts like a universal morality or societal identity are shown to be ridiculous and unsustainable. Tragicomedy accomplishes this not by representing tragic events through a comic perspective like in the Satyr plays or by making a comedic plot tragic, but rather by merging the tragic and comedic perspectives of human nature until they are indistinguishable from each other.

In "Beckett, Ionesco, and the Tradition of Tragicomedy," Enoch Brater analyzes the function of Tragicomedy and Comedy in general through the popularization of the absurd theatre. Brater focuses much of his initial attention on Samuel Beckett and his audiences' originally confused reaction to his work: "Centuries of theatre-going had trained them to laugh at the comic and weep at the tragic—now here was Beckett suggesting that the responses could be integrated and sometimes reversed" (114). Rather than present Comedy and Tragedy as oppositional genres, Beckett complicated the classical generic structures by intermixing their two perspectives into one absurd but deeply sympathetic portrayal of human existence. Tragicomedy

confused audiences because it departed from all the known functions of theatre up to that point by feeling no need to be rational or demand a particular emotional response from them.

This form of Tragicomedy that valued seemingly nonsensical language and surreal character interactions was the perfect genre for exploring society's fractured identity of the mid-twentieth century. With the moral and social absolutes like religious belief and national identity losing their influence over society, plays that possess no single meaning or lesson allowed the audience to contextualize the absurdity of their shifting reality with the absurdity on stage. However, this does not mean that these plays were completely devoid of meaning or purpose as Esslin states, "[n]ot only do all these plays make sense, though perhaps not obvious or conventional sense, they also give expression to some of the basic issues and problems of our age, in a uniquely efficient and meaningful manner, so that they meet some of the deepest needs and unexpressed yearnings of their audience" (4). In its absurdity, the Tragicomedy possesses a deeply relatable quality. Despite the audiences' initial reservations to the strange abstraction of human beings on stage, the Theatre of the Absurd provided an opportunity for a generation of people who lost a common social identity to war, technological advancement and/or social progress to accept their new reality. To understand how the Tragicomedy fulfilled this societal function using elements of both Comedy and Tragedy, an analysis of one of these plays is necessary. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* possesses most of the characteristics of the absurd theatre so looking at how he represents society in the play will provide a useful foundation for understanding how this genre could replace its classical predecessors during this time.

As with all absurd Tragicomedies during this time, *Waiting for Godot*'s plot centers around the interactions between the two primary clown characters: Didi (Vladimir) and Gogo (Estragon). There are other characters like Pozzo, Lucky and the boy that enters at the end of

each act, but the play's focus is always centered on Gogo and Didi's attempts at meaning-making

through language. These attempts usually end in failure as language reveals itself to be a faulty

method of communicating:

> Estragon. (feebly). Help me!
> Vladimir. It hurts?
> Estragon. (angrily). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!
> Vladimir. (angrily). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what
> you'd say if you had what I have.
> Estragon. It hurts?
> Vladimir. (angrily). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts! (Beckett 7)

Their conversations approach the edge of expressing their feelings to each other before the

language falls comically short and the topic shifts. The characters' inability to express meaning

is a representation of a fragmented society. In a classic Comedy structure, relationships are

established through language, unifying the characters under a single ideal or identity. For

Greek/Roman Comedy, they revive society through the continuation of their social morality in a

new generation while in English Renaissance Comedy the characters must use language rather

than force to remove the threats to their united social structure. As such, Gogo and Didi's

constant misunderstandings reflect a society that can no longer unite under one identity. The lack

of a reliable method of conveying meaning prevents characters from reforming the society that

classical Comedies represented.

      The fallen nature of language in *Godot* is a common characteristic of all absurd

Tragicomedies. Esslin's assessment of the absurd theatre's use of dialogue is that it is often at

odds with the play's action as characters speak philosophical non-sense that acts as a kind of

smokescreen for the characters' behavior which reflects greater meaning than words are capable

of conveying (11). As such, an exploration of the absurd theatre requires one to see beyond the

literal dialogue on stage to the reasons why those character speak the way they do. *Godot*'s Gogo

and Didi engage in many conversations but they all serve the purpose of distracting the characters from their suffering rather than conveying any specific meaning: "That passed the time" (Beckett 35). Beneath the comically absurd language is an undercurrent of a tragic reality that it is obscuring. Gogo and Didi shield themselves from realizing that Godot is not coming, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to ignore their approaching demise, and *The Lesson*'s increasingly absurd interactions between the Professor and the Pupil make comical the abusive power dynamics of their relationship. The language of the absurd always directs the audience's attention to implicitly tragic details so the meaning of the words matters less than the tragic reality it implicitly conveys.

However, this does not mean that the non-sense language is not important or necessary since it represents the comical perspective in the play. Gabriella Varró's analysis of the absurd Tragicomedy's clown characters touches on this perspective when she states, "[c]lowns took center-stage in the dark comedies partly because they were manifesting the existential angst of the age, but also because they were taking a critical perspective in relation to it. The absurd's clown is both metaphor and critic of the postwar world" (208). The absurd interactions of the clowns provided a necessary comical perspective of the complicated reality following WWII. By framing the tragic undertones from this perspective, the absurd theatre could fulfill its societal function by inventing abstract satirical representations of humanity, providing the audience with an opportunity to laugh at their own absurd reality. This perspective is why even when Gogo and Didi are contemplating suicide the play still presents it as funny despite the implied suffering that the conversation reveals about the characters' existence.

One might see this use of clownish dialogue as a neutralization of the more tragic subject matter since it makes suffering funny; however, the absurd theatre never allows the audience to

distance themselves so far from the action that they cannot sympathize with the characters. Absurdist Tragicomic writers closed this distance between audience and stage through different methods like Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* when the characters seem to possess some awareness that they will die at the end of the play. Beckett does so by having Gogo and Didi speak directly to the audience. Didi does this briefly when he looks out into the audience and declares "There! Not a soul in sight!" before turning away (Beckett 57). Although this moment is more comedic in nature, Didi's brief but surprising break from the world the stage represents into reality is enough to remind the audience of their role as observers of these characters' suffering. Beckett builds off this moment near the end of the play with Didi's final speech to the audience where he seems to have developed an awareness of his looped existence within the play: "Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?" (67).

This moment is significant because it is deeply grounded in Tragedy. Like Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech, Didi acknowledges the futility of continuing his existence in a world where no absolute meaning or truth is present to guide him. Only the hope that Godot will come sustains him but the audience knows that Godot will never arrive to give them meaning. This hope represents the tragic perspective of the play. Within the absurdly funny interactions of the characters is a desperate hope for salvation from the new world that they inhabit, which causes the audience to pity their fallen existence by the end. This pity comes in the form of a kind of sympathetic laughter that, while directed at the absurd reality that the characters' interactions represent, is connected to the empathy the audience feels towards the clownish characters on stage.

It is through this sympathetic laughter, which is the result of combining the perspectives of Comedy and Tragedy, that audiences cope with the fragmented social structure of their reality.

As such, Tragicomedy fulfilled the societal function that Comedy and Tragedy could not accomplish on their own; however, they still played an important role by acting as the foundation from which the Theatre of the Absurd could rise. Comedy's absurd perspective combined with Tragedy's sympathetic perspective created a messy, complicated representation of human nature that was perfect for a time where society underwent radical changes in how they constructed their identity. In a world devoid of absolutes, absurd Tragicomedy allowed people to laugh at the absurdity of their new situation while also mourning the loss of comforting social structures that provided them with purpose and meaning.

Modern audiences now rely more on television and films to fulfill Comedy and Tragedy's societal functions, but the influences of both genres still exist and often intermingle in the new mediums. Some persist in contrasting the importance of each genre but they are often not productive since they rely on many subjective points like the audience's reaction to certain types of theatre, the seriousness of the message of each play, and their importance in the societies where they functioned. Instead, one would be better off considering how their influences carried through different theatrical genres and even different artforms like literature or film. This kind of consideration for the genres helps us understand art's relationship in various societies while also presenting a fascinating perspective of how each society adapted Comedy and Tragedy to fulfill a necessary societal function, reflecting how they not only perceived themselves but also their reality.

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