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Modes of Drama: Tragedy and Comedy

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.

— F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

“The world,” wrote Horace Walpole in 1770, “is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.” All of us, of course, both think and feel, and all of us have moments when we stand back and laugh, whether ruefully or with glee, at life’s absurdities, just as we all have times when our hearts are broken by its pains and losses. Thus, the modes of tragedy and comedy, diametrically opposed to one another though they are, do not demand that we choose between them: both of them speak to something deep and real within us, and each of them has its own truth to tell about the infinitely complex experience of living in this world.

Tragedy

By **tragedy** we mean a play that portrays a serious conflict between human beings and some superior, overwhelming force. It ends sorrowfully and disastrously, and this outcome seems inevitable. Few spectators of *Oedipus the King* wonder how the play will turn out or wish for a happy ending. “In a tragedy,” French playwright Jean Anouilh has remarked, “nothing is in doubt and everyone’s destiny is known. . . . Tragedy is restful, and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn’t any hope. You’re trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is shout.”¹

Many of our ideas of tragedy (from the Greek *tragoidia*, “goat song,” referring to the goatskin dress of the performers), go back to ancient Athens; the plays of the Greek dramatists Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides exemplify the art of tragedy. In the fourth century B.C., the philosopher Aristotle described Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and other tragedies he had seen, analyzing their elements and trying to account for their power over our emotions. Aristotle’s observations will make more sense after you read *Oedipus the King*, so we will save our principal discussion of them for the

¹Preface to *Antigonè*, translated by Louis Galantière (New York: Random, 1946).

next chapter. But for now, to understand something of the nature of tragedy, let us take a brief overview of the subject.

One of the oldest and most durable of literary genres, tragedy is also one of the simplest—the protagonist undergoes a reversal of fortune, from good to bad, ending in catastrophe. However simple, though, tragedy can be one of the most complex genres to explain satisfactorily, with almost every principal point of its definition open to differing and often hotly debated interpretations. It is a fluid and adaptive genre, and for every one of its defining points, we can cite a tragic masterpiece that fails to observe that particular convention. Its fluidity and adaptability can also be shown by the way in which the classical tragic pattern is played out in pure form in such unlikely places as Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Chinua Achebe's great novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958): in each of these works, a man of high position and character—one a multimillionaire newspaper publisher, the other a late nineteenth-century African warrior—moves inexorably to destruction, impelled by his rigidity and self-righteousness. Even a film such as *King Kong*—despite its oversized and hirsute protagonist—exemplifies some of the principles of tragedy.

To gain a clearer understanding of what tragedy is, let us first take a moment to talk about what it is not. Consider the kinds of events that customarily bring the term “tragedy” to mind: the death of a child, a fire that destroys a family's home and possessions, the killing of a bystander caught in the crossfire of a shootout between criminals, and so on. What all of these unfortunate instances have in common, obviously, is that they involve the infliction of great and irreversible suffering. But what they also share is the sense that the sufferers are innocent, that they have done nothing to cause or to deserve their fate. This is what we usually describe as a tragedy in real life, but tragedy in a literary or dramatic context has a different meaning: most theorists take their lead from Aristotle (see the next chapter for a fuller discussion of several of the points raised here) in maintaining that the protagonist's reversal of fortune is brought about through some error or weakness on his part, generally referred to as his **tragic flaw**.

Despite this weakness, the hero is traditionally a person of nobility, of both social rank and personality. Just as the suffering of totally innocent people stirs us to sympathetic sorrow rather than a tragic response, so too the destruction of a purely evil figure, a tyrant or a murderer with no redeeming qualities, would inspire only feelings of relief and satisfaction—hardly the emotions that tragedy seeks to stimulate. In most tragedies, the catastrophe entails not only the loss of outward fortune—things such as reputation, power, and life itself, which even the basest villain may possess and then be deprived of—but also the erosion of the protagonist's moral character and greatness of spirit.

In keeping with this emphasis on nobility of spirit, tragedies are customarily written in an elevated style, one characterized by dignity and seriousness. In the Middle Ages, just as *tragedy* meant a work written in a high style in which the central character went from good fortune to bad, *comedy* indicated just the opposite, a work written in a low or common style, in which the protagonist moved from adverse circumstances to happy ones—hence Dante's great triptych of hell, purgatory, and heaven, written in everyday Italian rather than scholarly Latin, is known as *The Divine Comedy*, despite the relative absence of humor, let alone hilarity, in its pages. The tragic view of life, clearly, presupposes that in the end we will prove unequal to the challenges we must face, while the comic outlook asserts a sense of human possibility in which our common sense and resilience—or pure dumb luck—will enable us to win out.

Tragedy's complexity can be seen also in the response that, according to Aristotle, it seeks to arouse in the viewer: pity and fear. By its very nature, pity distances the one who pities from the object of that pity, since we can feel sorry only for those whom we perceive to be worse off than ourselves. When we watch or read a tragedy, moved as we may be, we observe the downfall of the protagonist with a certain detachment; "better him than me" may be a rather crude way of putting it, but perhaps not an entirely incorrect one. Fear, on the other hand, usually involves an immediate anxiety about our own well-being. Even as we regard the hero's destruction from the safety of a better place, we are made to feel our own vulnerability in the face of life's dangers and instability, because we see that neither position nor virtue can protect even the great from ruin.

The following is a scene from Christopher Marlowe's classic Elizabethan tragedy *Doctor Faustus*. Based on an anonymous pamphlet published in Germany in 1587 and translated into English shortly thereafter, this celebrated play tells the story of an elderly professor who feels that he has wasted his life in fruitless inquiry. Chafing at the limits of human understanding, he makes a pact with the devil to gain forbidden knowledge and power. The scene presented here is the decisive turning point of the play, in which Faustus seals the satanic bargain that will damn him. Stimulated by his thirst for knowledge and experience, spurred on by his pride to assume that the divinely ordained limits of human experience no longer apply to him, he rushes to embrace his own undoing. Marlowe dramatizes Faustus's situation by bringing a good angel and a fallen angel (i.e., a demon) to whisper conflicting advice in this pivotal scene. (This good angel versus bad angel device has proved popular for centuries. One still sees it today in everything from TV commercials to cartoons such as *The Simpsons*.) Notice the dignified and often gorgeous language Marlowe employs to create the serious mood necessary for tragedy.

Christopher Marlowe

*Scene from Dr. Faustus*²

about 1588

EDITED BY SYLVAN BARNET

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury, England, in February 1564, about ten weeks before William Shakespeare. Marlowe, the son of a prosperous shoemaker, received a B.A. from Cambridge University in 1584 and an M.A. in 1587, after which he settled in London. The rest of his short life was marked by rumor, secrecy, and violence, including suspicions that he was a secret agent for Queen Elizabeth's government and allegations against him of blasphemy and atheism—no small matter in light of the political instability and religious controversies of the times. Peripherally implicated in several violent deaths, he met his own end in May 1593 when he was stabbed above the right eye during a tavern brawl, under circumstances that have never been fully explained. Brief and crowded as his life was, he wrote a number of intense, powerful, and highly influential tragedies—Tamburlaine the Great, Parts 1 and 2 (1587), Doctor Faustus (1588), The Jew of Malta (1589), Edward the Second (c. 1592), The Massacre at Paris (1593), and Dido, Queen of Carthage (c. 1593, with Thomas Nashe). He is also the author of the lyric poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," with its universally known first line: "Come live with me and be my love."

²This scene is from the 1616 text, or "B-Text," published as *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. Modernizations have been made in spelling and punctuation.



Doctor Faustus with the Bad Angel and the Good Angel, from the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2005 production

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Doctor Faustus
Good Angel
Bad Angel
Mephistophilis, a devil

ACT II

SCENE I

(Enter Faustus in his study.)

Faustus: Now, Faustus, must thou needs be damned;
Canst thou not be saved!
What boots^o it then to think on God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies, and despair—
Despair in God and trust in Belzebub!
Now go not backward Faustus; be resolute!
Why waver'st thou? O something soundeth in mine ear,
“Abjure this magic, turn to God again.”

5

3 boots avails

Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
 To God? He loves thee not. 10
 The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite
 Wherein is fixed the love of Belzebub!
 To him I'll build an altar and a church,
 And offer lukewarm blood of newborn babes!

(Enter the two Angels.)

Bad Angel: Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art. 15
Good Angel: Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art.
Faustus: Contrition, prayer, repentance? What of these?
Good Angel: O, they are means to bring thee unto heaven.
Bad Angel: Rather illusions, fruits of lunacy,
 That make men foolish that do use them most. 20
Good Angel: Sweet Faustus, think of heaven and heavenly things.
Bad Angel: No, Faustus, think of honor and of wealth.

(Exeunt Angels.)

Faustus: Wealth!
 Why, the signory of Emden^o shall be mine!
 When Mephistophilis shall stand by me 25
 What power can hurt me? Faustus, thou art safe.
 Cast no more doubts! Mephistophilis, come,
 And bring glad tidings from great Lucifer.
 Is't not midnight? Come Mephistophilis,
Veni, veni, Mephostophile!^o 30

(Enter Mephistophilis.)

Now tell me, what saith Lucifer thy lord?
Mephistophilis: That I shall wait on Faustus whilst he lives,
 So he will buy my service with his soul.
Faustus: Already Faustus hath hazarded that for thee.
Mephistophilis: But now thou must bequeath it solemnly 35
 And write a deed of gift with thine own blood,
 For that security craves Lucifer.
 If thou deny it I must back to hell.
Faustus: Stay Mephistophilis and tell me,
 What good will my soul do thy lord? 40
Mephistophilis: Enlarge his kingdom.
Faustus: Is that the reason why he tempts us thus?
Mephistophilis: *Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris.*^o
Faustus: Why, have you any pain that torture other?^o
Mephistophilis: As great as have the human souls of men. 45
 But tell me, Faustus, shall I have thy soul—
 And I will be thy slave and wait on thee
 And give thee more than thou hast wit to ask?

24 *signory of Emden* lordship of the rich German port at the mouth of the Ems 30 *Veni, veni, Mephostophile!* Come, come, Mephistophilis (Latin) 43 *Solamen . . . doloris* Misery loves company (Latin) 44 *other* others

- Faustus*: Ay Mephistophilis, I'll give it him.^o
- Mephistophilis*: Then, Faustus, stab thy arm courageously, 50
 And bind thy soul, that at some certain day
 Great Lucifer may claim it as his own.
 And then be thou as great as Lucifer!
- Faustus*: Lo, Mephistophilis: for love of thee
 Faustus hath cut his arm, and with his proper^o blood 55
 Assures^o his soul to be great Lucifer's,
 Chief Lord and Regent of perpetual night.
 View here this blood that trickles from mine arm,
 And let it be propitious for my wish.
- Mephistophilis*: But, Faustus, 60
 Write it in manner of a deed of gift.
- Faustus*: Ay, so I do—But Mephistophilis,
 My blood congeals and I can write no more.
- Mephistophilis*: I'll fetch thee fire to dissolve it straight. (Exit.)
- Faustus*: What might the staying of my blood portend? 65
 Is it unwilling I should write this bill?^o
 Why streams it not that I may write afresh:
 "Faustus gives to thee his soul"? O there it stayed.
 Why should'st thou not? Is not thy soul thine own?
 Then write again: "Faustus gives to thee his soul." 70
 (*Enter Mephistophilis, with the chafer^o of fire.*)
- Mephistophilis*: See, Faustus, here is fire. Set it^o on.
- Faustus*: So, now the blood begins to clear again.
 Now will I make an end immediately.
- Mephistophilis (aside)*: What will not I do to obtain his soul!
- Faustus*: *Consummatum est!*^o This bill is ended: 75
 And Faustus hath bequeathed his soul to Lucifer.
 —But what is this inscription on mine arm?
Homo fuge!^o Whither should I fly?
 If unto God, He'll throw me down to hell.
 My senses are deceived; here's nothing writ. 80
 O yes, I see it plain! Even here is writ
Homo fuge! Yet shall not Faustus fly!
- Mephistophilis (aside)*: I'll fetch him somewhat^o to delight his mind.
 (*Exit Mephistophilis*)
 (*Enter Devils, giving crowns and rich apparel to Faustus. They dance and then depart.*)
 (*Enter Mephistophilis.*)
- Faustus*: What means this show? Speak, Mephistophilis.
- Mephistophilis*: Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind, 85
 And let thee see what magic can perform.

49 *him* i.e., to Lucifer 55 *proper* own 56 *Assures* conveys by contract 66 *bill* contract 70 s.d. *chafer* portable grate 71 *it* i.e., the receptacle containing the congealed blood 75 *Consummatum est* It is finished. (Latin: a blasphemous repetition of Christ's words on the Cross; see John 19:30.) 78 *Homo fuge* fly, man (Latin) 83 *somewhat* something

Faustus: But may I raise such spirits when I please?

Mephistophilis: Ay, Faustus, and do greater things than these.

Faustus: Then, Mephistophilis, receive this scroll,

A deed of gift of body and of soul: 90

But yet conditionally that thou perform

All covenants and articles between us both.

Mephistophilis: Faustus, I swear by hell and Lucifer

To effect all promises between us both.

Faustus: Then hear me read it, Mephistophilis: 95

“On these conditions following:

First, that Faustus may be a spirit^o in form and substance.

Secondly, that Mephistophilis shall be his servant, and be by him
commanded

Thirdly, that Mephistophilis shall do for him and bring him whatsoever. 100

Fourthly, that he shall be in his chamber or house invisible.

Lastly, that he shall appear to the said John Faustus, at all times, in what
shape and form soever he please.

I, John Faustus of Wittenberg, Doctor, by these presents, do give both body
and soul to Lucifer, Prince of the East, and his minister Mephistophilis, and 105
furthermore grant unto them that, four and twenty years being expired, and
these articles written being inviolate^o, full power to fetch or carry the said
John Faustus, body and soul, flesh, blood, into their habitation wheresoever.

By me John Faustus.”

Mephistophilis: Speak, Faustus, do you deliver this as your deed? 110

Faustus: Ay, take it, and the devil give thee good of it!

Mephistophilis: So, now Faustus, ask me what thou wilt.

Faustus: First, I will question with thee about hell.

Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?

Mephistophilis: Under the heavens. 115

Faustus: Ay, so are all things else, but whereabouts?

Mephistophilis: Within the bowels of these elements,

Where we are tortured, and remain forever.

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed,

In one self place, but where we are is hell, 120

And where hell is there must we ever be.

And to be short, when all the world dissolves,

And every creature shall be purified,

All places shall be hell that is not heaven!

Faustus: I think hell's a fable. 125

Mephistophilis: Ay, think so still—till experience change thy mind.

Faustus: Why, dost thou think that Faustus shall be damned?

Mephistophilis: Ay, of necessity, for here's the scroll

In which thou hast given thy soul to Lucifer.

97 *spirit* evil spirit, devil. (But to see Faustus as transformed now into a devil deprived of freedom to repent is to deprive the remainder of the play of much of its meaning.) 107 *inviolate* unviolated

- Faustus*: Ay, and body too; but what of that? 130
 Think'st thou that Faustus is so fond^o to imagine,
 That after this life there is any pain?
 No, these are trifles, and mere old wives' tales.
- Mephistophilis*: But I am an instance to prove the contrary,
 For I tell thee I am damned, and now in hell! 135
- Faustus*: Nay, and this be hell, I'll willingly be damned—
 What, sleeping, eating, walking, and disputing?
 But leaving this, let me have a wife,
 The fairest maid in Germany,
 For I am wanton and lascivious, 140
 And cannot live without a wife.
- Mephistophilis*: Well, Faustus, thou shalt have a wife.
 (*He fetches in a woman Devil.*)
- Faustus*: What sight is this?
Mephistophilis: Now, Faustus, wilt thou have a wife?
Faustus: Here's a hot whore indeed! No, I'll no wife. 145
Mephistophilis: Marriage is but a ceremonial toy,^o
 (*Exit she-devil.*)
- And if thou lov'st me, think no more of it.
 I'll cull thee out^o the fairest courtesans
 And bring them every morning to thy bed.
 She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have, 150
 Were she as chaste as was Penelope,^o
 As wise as Saba,^o or as beautiful
 As was bright Lucifer before his fall.
 Here, take this book and peruse it well.
 The iterating^o of these lines brings gold; 155
 The framing^o of this circle on the ground
 Brings thunder, whirlwinds, storm, and lightning;
 Pronounce this thrice devoutly to thyself,
 And men in harness^o shall appear to thee,
 Ready to execute what thou command'st. 160
- Faustus*: Thanks, Mephistophilis, for this sweet book.
 This will I keep as chary as my life.
 (*Exeunt.*)

QUESTIONS

1. What specifically motivates Faustus to make his satanic compact? Cite the text to back up your response.
2. How does his behavior constitute a compromise of his nobility?
3. "Is not thy soul thine own?" Faustus asks rhetorically (line 69). Discuss the implications of this statement in terms of the larger thematic concerns of the work.
4. Does Faustus inspire your pity and fear in this scene? Why or why not?

131 *fond* foolish 146 *toy* trifle 148 *cull thee out* select for you 151 *Penelope* wife of Ulysses, famed for her fidelity 152 *Saba* the Queen of Sheba 155 *iterating* repetition 156 *framing* drawing 159 *harness* armor



Traditional masks of Comedy and Tragedy

Comedy

The best-known traditional emblem of drama—a pair of masks, one sorrowful (representing tragedy) and one smiling (representing comedy)—suggests that tragedy and comedy, although opposites, are close relatives. Often, comedy shows people getting into trouble through error or weakness; in this respect it is akin to tragedy. An important difference between comedy and tragedy lies in the attitude toward human failing that is expected of us. When a main character in a comedy suffers from overweening pride, as does Oedipus, or if he fails to recognize that his bride-to-be is actually his mother, we laugh—something we would never do in watching a competent performance of *Oedipus the King*.

Comedy, from the Greek *komos*, “a revel,” is thought to have originated in festivities to celebrate spring, ritual performances in praise of Dionysus, god of fertility and wine. In drama, comedy may be broadly defined as whatever makes us laugh. A comedy may be a name for one entire play, or we may say that there is comedy in only part of a play—as in a comic character or a comic situation.

Many theories have been propounded to explain why we laugh; most of these notions fall into a few familiar types. One school, exemplified by French philosopher Henri Bergson, sees laughter as a form of ridicule, implying a feeling of disinterested superiority; all jokes are *on* somebody. Bergson suggests that laughter springs from situations in which we sense a conflict between some mechanical or rigid pattern of behavior and our sense of a more natural or “organic” kind of behavior that is possible.³ An example occurs in Buster Keaton’s comic film *The Boat*. Having launched a little boat that springs a leak, Keaton rigidly goes down with it, with frozen face. (The more natural and organic thing to do would be to swim for shore.) Other thinkers view laughter as our response to expectations fulfilled or to expectations set up but then suddenly frustrated. Some hold it to be the expression of our delight in seeing our suppressed urges acted out (as when a comedian hurls an egg at a pompous stuffed shirt); some, to be our defensive reaction to a painful and disturbing truth.

Derisive humor is basic to **satiric comedy**, in which human weakness or folly is ridiculed from a vantage point of supposedly enlightened superiority. Satiric comedy may be coolly malicious and gently biting, but it tends to be critical of people, their

³See Bergson’s essay “Le Rire” (1990), translated as “Laughter” in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Anchor, 1956).

manners, and their morals. It is at least as old as the comedies of Aristophanes, who thrived in the fifth century B.C. In *Lysistrata*, the satirist shows how the women of two warring cities speedily halt a war by agreeing to deny themselves to their husbands. (The satirist's target is men so proud that they go to war rather than make the slightest concession.)

Comedy is often divided into two varieties—"high" and "low." **High comedy** relies more on wit and wordplay than on physical action for its humor. It tries to address the audience's intelligence by pointing out the pretension and hypocrisy of human behavior. High comedy also generally avoids derisive humor. Jokes about physical appearance would, for example, be avoided. One technique it employs to appeal to a sophisticated, verbal audience is use of the **epigram**, a brief and witty statement that memorably expresses some truth, large or small. Oscar Wilde's plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) sparkle with such brilliant epigrams as: "I can resist everything except temptation"; "Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes"; "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." A type of high comedy is the **comedy of manners**, a witty satire set in elite or fashionable society. The comedy of manners was especially popular in the **Restoration period** (the period after 1660 when Charles II, restored to the English throne, reopened the London playhouses, which had been closed by the Puritans, who considered theater immoral). The great Restoration playwrights such as William Congreve and George Farquhar especially excelled at comedies of manners. In the modern period splendid comedies of manners continue to be written. Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), which eventually became the musical *My Fair Lady*, contrasts life in the streets of London with that in aristocratic drawing rooms. Contemporary playwrights such as Tom Stoppard, Michael Frayn, Tina Howe, John Guare, and the late Joe Orton have all created memorable comedies of manners.

Low comedy explores the opposite extreme of humor. It places greater emphasis on physical action and visual gags, and its verbal jokes do not require much intellect to appreciate (as in Groucho Marx's pithy put-down to his brother Chico, "You have the brain of a five-year-old, and I bet he was glad to get rid of it!"). Low comedy does not avoid derisive humor; rather, it revels in making fun of whatever will get a good laugh. Drunkenness, stupidity, lust, senility, trickery, insult, and clumsiness are inexhaustible staples of this style of comedy. Although it is all too easy for critics to dismiss low comedy, like high comedy it also serves a valuable purpose in satirizing human failings. Shakespeare indulged in coarse humor in some of his noblest plays. Low comedy is usually the preferred style of popular culture, and it has inspired many incisive satires on modern life—from the classic films of W. C. Fields and the Marx Brothers to the weekly TV antics of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*.

Low comedy includes several distinct types. One is the **burlesque**, a broadly humorous parody or travesty of another play or kind of play. (In the United States, *burlesque* is something else: a once-popular form of show business featuring stripteases interspersed with bits of ribald low comedy.) Another valuable type of low comedy is the **farce**, a broadly humorous play whose action is usually fast-moving and improbable. The farce is a descendant of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* ("artistic comedy") of the late Renaissance, a kind of theater developed by comedians who traveled from town to town, regaling crowds at country fairs and in marketplaces. This popular art featured familiar stock characters in masks or whiteface: Harlequin, a clown; Columbine, his peppery sweetheart; and Pantaloon, a doddering duffer. Lately

making a comeback, the more modern farces of French playwright Georges Feydeau (1862–1921) are practically all plot, with only the flattest of characters, mindless ninnyes who play frantic games of hide-and-seek in order to deceive their spouses. **Slapstick comedy** (such as that of the Three Stooges) is a kind of farce. Featuring pratfalls, pie-throwing, fisticuffs, and other violent action, it takes its name from a circus clown’s device—a bat with two boards that loudly clap together when one clown swats another.

Romantic comedy, another traditional sort of comedy, is subtler. Its main characters are generally lovers, and its plot unfolds their ultimately successful strivings to be united. Unlike satiric comedy, romantic comedy portrays its characters not with withering contempt but with kindly indulgence. It may take place in the everyday world, or perhaps in some never-never land, such as the forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Romantic comedy is also a popular staple of Hollywood, which depicts two people undergoing humorous mishaps on their way to falling in love. The characters often suffer humiliation and discomfort along the way, but these moments are funny rather than sad, and the characters are rewarded in the end by true love.

Here is a short contemporary comedy by one of America’s most ingenious playwrights.

David Ives

Sure Thing

1988

David Ives (b. 1950) grew up on the South Side of Chicago. He attended Catholic schools before entering Northwestern University. Later Ives studied at the Yale Drama School—“a blissful time for me,” he recalls, “in spite of the fact that there is slush on the ground in New Haven 238 days a year.” Ives received his first professional production in Los Angeles at the age of twenty-one “at America’s smallest, and possibly worst theater, in a storefront that had a pillar dead center in the middle of the stage.” He continued writing for the theater while working as an editor at Foreign Affairs, and gradually achieved a reputation in theatrical circles for his wildly original and brilliantly written short comic plays. His public breakthrough came in 1993 with the New York staging of All in the Timing, which presented six short comedies, including Sure Thing. This production earned ecstatic reviews and a busy box office. In the 1995–1996 season, All in the Timing was the most widely performed play in America (except for the works of Shakespeare). In 1997 a second group of one-act comedies, Mere Mortals, was produced with great success in New York City; it was published with Lives of the Saints, another cycle of his one-act plays, in the volume Time Flies (2001). His full-length plays are Don Juan in Chicago (1995), Ancient History (1996), The Red Address (1997), and Polish Joke (2000); they are collected in the volume Polish Joke and Other Plays (2004). Ives also writes short stories and screenplays for both motion pictures and television. He lives in New York City.

CHARACTERS

Betty

Bill

SCENE: A café. Betty, a woman in her late twenties, is reading at a café table. An empty chair is opposite her. Bill, same age, enters.



Original 1993 Off-Broadway production of *Sure Thing* by Primary Stages

Bill: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

Betty: Excuse me?

Bill: Is this taken?

Betty: Yes it is.

Bill: Oh. Sorry.

Betty: Sure thing.

(A bell rings softly.)

Bill: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

Betty: Excuse me?

Bill: Is this taken?

Betty: No, but I'm expecting somebody in a minute.

Bill: Oh. Thanks anyway.

Betty: Sure thing.

(A bell rings softly.)

Bill: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

Betty: No, but I'm expecting somebody very shortly.

Bill: Would you mind if I sit here till he or she or it comes?

Betty (glances at her watch): They do seem to be pretty late. . . .

Bill: You never know who you might be turning down.

Betty: Sorry. Nice try, though.

Bill: Sure thing.

(Bell.)

Is this seat taken?

Betty: No it's not.

Bill: Would you mind if I sit here?

Betty: Yes I would.

Bill: Oh.

(Bell.)

Is this chair taken?

Betty: No it's not.

Bill: Would you mind if I sit here?

Betty: No. Go ahead.

Bill: Thanks. (*He sits. She continues reading.*) Everyplace else seems to be taken.

Betty: Mm-hm.

Bill: Great place.

Betty: Mm-hm.

Bill: What's the book?

Betty: I just wanted to read in quiet, if you don't mind.

Bill: No. Sure thing.

(Bell.)

Everyplace else seems to be taken.

Betty: Mm-hm.

Bill: Great place for reading.

Betty: Yes, I like it.

Bill: What's the book?

Betty: *The Sound and the Fury*.

Bill: Oh. Hemingway.

(Bell.)

What's the book?

Betty: *The Sound and the Fury*.

Bill: Oh. Faulkner.

Betty: Have you read it?

Bill: Not . . . actually. I've sure read *about* it, though. It's supposed to be great.

Betty: It is great.

Bill: I hear it's great. (*Small pause.*) Waiter?

(Bell.)

What's the book?

Betty: *The Sound and the Fury*.

Bill: Oh. Faulkner.

Betty: Have you read it?

Bill: I'm a Mets fan, myself.

(Bell.)

Betty: Have you read it?

Bill: Yeah, I read it in college.

Betty: Where was college?

Bill: I went to Oral Roberts University.

(Bell.)

Betty: Where was college?

Bill: I was lying. I never really went to college. I just like to party.

(Bell.)

Betty: Where was college?

Bill: Harvard.

Betty: Do you like Faulkner?

Bill: I love Faulkner. I spent a whole winter reading him once.

Betty: I've just started.

Bill: I was so excited after ten pages that I went out and bought everything else he wrote. One of the greatest reading experiences of my life. I mean, all that incredible psychological understanding. Page after page of gorgeous prose. His profound grasp of the mystery of time and human existence. The smells of the earth . . . What do you think?

Betty: I think it's pretty boring.

(Bell.)

Bill: What's the book?

Betty: *The Sound and the Fury*.

Bill: Oh! Faulkner!

Betty: Do you like Faulkner?

Bill: I love Faulkner.

Betty: He's incredible.

Bill: I spent a whole winter reading him once.

Betty: I was so excited after ten pages that I went out and bought everything else he wrote.

Bill: All that incredible psychological understanding.

Betty: And the prose is so gorgeous.

Bill: And the way he's grasped the mystery of time—

Betty: —and human existence. I can't believe I've waited this long to read him.

Bill: You never know. You might not have liked him before.

Betty: That's true.

Bill: You might not have been ready for him. You have to hit these things at the right moment or it's no good.

Betty: That's happened to me.

Bill: It's all in the timing. (*Small pause.*) My name's Bill, by the way.

Betty: I'm Betty.

Bill: Hi.

Betty: Hi. (*Small pause.*)

Bill: Yes I thought reading Faulkner was . . . a great experience.

Betty: Yes. (*Small pause.*)

Bill: *The Sound and the Fury*. . . . (Another small pause.)

Betty: Well. Onwards and upwards. (She goes back to her book.)

Bill: Waiter—?

(Bell.)

You have to hit these things at the right moment or it's no good.

Betty: That's happened to me.

Bill: It's all in the timing. My name's Bill, by the way.

Betty: I'm Betty.

Bill: Hi.

Betty: Hi.

Bill: Do you come in here a lot?

Betty: Actually I'm just in town for two days from Pakistan.

Bill: Oh. Pakistan.

(Bell.)

My name's Bill, by the way.

Betty: I'm Betty.

Bill: Hi.

Betty: Hi.

Bill: Do you come in here a lot?

Betty: Every once in a while. Do you?

Bill: Not so much anymore. Not as much as I used to. Before my nervous breakdown.

(Bell.)

Do you come in here a lot?

Betty: Why are you asking?

Bill: Just interested.

Betty: Are you really interested, or do you just want to pick me up?

Bill: No, I'm really interested.

Betty: Why would you be interested in whether I come in here a lot?

Bill: I'm just . . . getting acquainted.

Betty: Maybe you're only interested for the sake of making small talk long enough to ask me back to your place to listen to some music, or because you've just rented this great tape for your VCR, or because you've got some terrific unknown Django Reinhardt record, only all you really want to do is fuck—which you won't do very well—after which you'll go into the bathroom and pee very loudly, then pad into the kitchen and get yourself a beer from the refrigerator without asking me whether I'd like anything, and then you'll proceed to lie back down beside me and confess that you've got a girlfriend named Stephanie who's away at medical school in Belgium for a year, and that you've been involved with her—*off and on*—in what you'll call a very "intricate" relationship, for the past *seven YEARS*. None of which *interests* me, mister!

Bill: Okay.

(Bell.)

Do you come in here a lot?

Betty: Every other day, I think.

Bill: I come in here quite a lot and I don't remember seeing you.

Betty: I guess we must be on different schedules.

Bill: Missed connections.

Betty: Yes. Different time zones.

Bill: Amazing how you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it.

Betty: I know.

Bill: City life.

Betty: It's crazy.

Bill: We probably pass each other in the street every day. Right in front of this place, probably.

Betty: Yep.

Bill (*looks around*): Well the waiters here sure seem to be in some different time zone. I can't seem to locate one anywhere. . . . Waiter! (*He looks back.*) So what do you—(*He sees that she's gone back to her book.*)

Betty: I beg pardon?

Bill: Nothing. Sorry.

(*Bell.*)

Betty: I guess we must be on different schedules.

Bill: Missed connections.

Betty: Yes. Different time zones.

Bill: Amazing how you can live right next door to somebody in this town and never even know it.

Betty: I know.

Bill: City life.

Betty: It's crazy.

Bill: You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

Betty: Actually I was.

Bill: Oh. Boyfriend?

Betty: Sort of.

Bill: What's a sort-of boyfriend?

Betty: My husband.

Bill: Ah-ha.

(*Bell.*)

You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

Betty: Actually I was.

Bill: Oh. Boyfriend?

Betty: Sort of.

Bill: What's a sort-of boyfriend?

Betty: We were meeting here to break up.

Bill: Mm-hm . . .

(*Bell.*)

What's a sort-of boyfriend?

Betty: My lover. Here she comes right now!

(Bell.)

Bill: You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

Betty: No, just reading.

Bill: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here, all by yourself?

Betty: Do you think so?

Bill: Well sure. I mean, what's a good-looking woman like you doing out alone on a Friday night?

Betty: Trying to keep away from lines like that.

Bill: No, listen—

(Bell.)

You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

Betty: No, just reading.

Bill: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here all by yourself?

Betty: I guess it is, in a way.

Bill: What's a good-looking woman like you doing out alone on a Friday night anyway? No offense, but . . .

Betty: I'm out alone on a Friday night for the first time in a very long time.

Bill: Oh.

Betty: You see, I just recently ended a relationship.

Bill: Oh.

Betty: Of rather long standing.

Bill: I'm sorry. (*Small pause.*) Well listen, since reading by yourself is such a sad occupation for a Friday night, would you like to go elsewhere?

Betty: No . . .

Bill: Do something else?

Betty: No thanks.

Bill: I was headed out to the movies in a while anyway.

Betty: I don't think so.

Bill: Big chance to let Faulkner catch his breath. All those long sentences get him pretty tired.

Betty: Thanks anyway.

Bill: Okay.

Betty: I appreciate the invitation.

Bill: Sure thing.

(Bell.)

You weren't waiting for somebody when I came in, were you?

Betty: No, just reading.

Bill: Sort of a sad occupation for a Friday night, isn't it? Reading here all by yourself?

Betty: I guess I was trying to think of it as existentially romantic. You know—
cappuccino, great literature, rainy night . . .

Bill: That only works in Paris. We *could* hop the late plane to Paris. Get on a
Concorde. Find a café . . .

Betty: I'm a little short on plane fare tonight.

Bill: Darn it, so am I.

Betty: To tell you the truth, I was headed to the movies after I finished this sec-
tion. Would you like to come along? Since you can't locate a waiter?

Bill: That's a very nice offer, but . . .

Betty: Uh-huh. Girlfriend?

Bill: Two, actually. One of them's pregnant, and Stephanie—

(Bell.)

Betty: Girlfriend?

Bill: No, I don't have a girlfriend. Not if you mean the castrating bitch I dumped
last night.

(Bell.)

Betty: Girlfriend?

Bill: Sort of. Sort of.

Betty: What's a sort-of girlfriend?

Bill: My mother.

(Bell.)

I just ended a relationship, actually.

Betty: Oh.

Bill: Of rather long standing.

Betty: I'm sorry to hear it.

Bill: This is my first night out alone in a long time. I feel a little bit at sea, to tell
you the truth.

Betty: So you didn't stop to talk because you're a Moonie, or you have some
weird political affiliation—?

Bill: Nope. Straight-down-the-ticket Republican.

(Bell.)

Straight-down-the-ticket Democrat.

(Bell.)

Can I tell you something about politics?

(Bell.)

I like to think of myself as a citizen of the universe.

(Bell.)

I'm unaffiliated.

Betty: That's a relief. So am I.

Bill: I vote my beliefs.

Betty: Labels are not important.

Bill: Labels are not important, exactly. Take me, for example. I mean, what does it matter if I had a two-point at—

(Bell.)

three-point at—

(Bell.)

four-point at college? Or if I did come from Pittsburgh—

(Bell.)

Cleveland—

(Bell.)

Westchester County?

Betty: Sure.

Bill: I believe that a man is what he is.

(Bell.)

A person is what he is.

(Bell.)

A person is . . . what they are.

Betty: I think so too.

Bill: So what if I admire Trotsky?

(Bell.)

So what if I once had a total-body liposuction?

(Bell.)

So what if I don't have a penis?

(Bell.)

So what if I spent a year in the Peace Corps? I was acting on my convictions.

Betty: Sure.

Bill: You just can't hang a sign on a person.

Betty: Absolutely. I'll bet you're a Scorpio.

(Many bells ring.)

Listen, I was headed to the movies after I finished this section. Would you like to come along?

Bill: That sounds like fun. What's playing?

Betty: A couple of the really early Woody Allen movies.

Bill: Oh.

Betty: You don't like Woody Allen?

Bill: Sure. I like Woody Allen.

Betty: But you're not crazy about Woody Allen.

Bill: Those early ones kind of get on my nerves.

Betty: Uh-huh.

(Bell.)

Bill: Y'know I was headed to the—

Betty (*simultaneously*): I was thinking about—

Bill: I'm sorry.

Betty: No, go ahead.

Bill: I was going to say that I was headed to the movies in a little while, and . . .

Betty: So was I.

Bill: The Woody Allen festival?

Betty: Just up the street.

Bill: Do you like the early ones?

Betty: I think anybody who doesn't ought to be run off the planet.

Bill: How many times have you seen *Bananas*?

Betty: Eight times.

Bill: Twelve. So are you still interested? (*Long pause.*)

Betty: Do you like Entenmann's crumb cake. . . .

Bill: Last night I went out at two in the morning to get one. Did you have an Etch-a-Sketch as a child?

Betty: Yes! And do you like Brussels sprouts? (*Pause.*)

Bill: No, I think they're disgusting.

Betty: They *are* disgusting!

Bill: Do you still believe in marriage in spite of current sentiments against it?

Betty: Yes.

Bill: And children?

Betty: Three of them.

Bill: Two girls and a boy.

Betty: Harvard, Vassar, and Brown.

Bill: And will you love me?

Betty: Yes.

Bill: And cherish me forever?

Betty: Yes.

Bill: Do you still want to go to the movies?

Betty: Sure thing.

Bill and Betty (*together*): *Waiter!*

BLACKOUT

QUESTIONS

1. Ives originally planned to set *Sure Thing* at a bus stop. What does its current setting in a café suggest about the characters?
2. What happens on stage when the bell rings?
3. Who is the protagonist? What does the protagonist want?
4. Does the play have a dramatic question?
5. When does the climax of the play occur?

6. Is *Sure Thing* a romantic comedy or a farce? (See pages 1258–59 for a discussion of these types of comedy.)
7. “*Sure Thing* was not a funny play because it isn’t realistic. Conversations just don’t happen this way.” Discuss that opinion. Do you agree or disagree?

Here is another one-act comedy by a contemporary American playwright that—like David Ives’s *Sure Thing*—also deals with such issues as how we see ourselves, how we present ourselves to others, and what we want out of our relationships. Notice how the author combines some very up-to-date references with a very old fictional device, the wish-granting genie in the magic lamp, to achieve a striking blend of satire and insight.

Jane Martin

Beauty

2001

*The identity of Jane Martin is a closely guarded secret. No biographical details, public statements, or photographs of this Kentucky-based playwright have been published, nor has she given any interviews or made any public appearances. Martin first came to public notice in 1981 for Talking With, a collection of monologues that received a number of productions worldwide and won a Best Foreign Play of the Year award in Germany. Of Martin’s many plays, others include What Mama Don’t Know (1988), Cementville (1991), Keely and Du (which was a finalist for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize), Middle-Aged White Guys (1995), Jack and Jill (1996), Mr. Bundy (1998), Anton in Show Business (2000), Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage (2001), and Good Boys (2002). Her most recent work is a contribution to Bill of (W)rights (2004), a program of short plays based on the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution.**

CHARACTERS

Carla

Bethany

SCENE: *An apartment. Minimalist set. A young woman, Carla, on the phone.*

Carla: In love with me? You’re in love with me? Could you describe yourself again? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And you spoke to me? (*A knock at the door.*) Listen, I always hate to interrupt a marriage proposal, but . . . could you possibly hold that thought? (*Puts phone down and goes to door. Bethany, the same age as Carla and a friend, is there. She carries the sort of mid-eastern lamp we know of from Aladdin.*)

Bethany: Thank God you were home. I mean, you’re not going to believe this!

Carla: Somebody on the phone. (*Goes back to it.*)

Bethany: I mean, I just had a beach urge, so I told them at work my uncle was dying . . .

Carla (Motions to Bethany for quiet.): And you were the one in the leather jacket with the tattoo? What was the tattoo? (*Carla again asks Bethany, who is*

*Please see the Caution Notice in the Acknowledgments, page xx, that gives important information about using this play in performance.

gesturing wildly that she should hang up, to cool it.) Look, a screaming eagle from shoulder to shoulder, maybe. There were a lot of people in the bar.

Bethany (*Gesturing and mouthing.*): I have to get back to work.

Carla (*On phone.*): See, the thing is, I'm probably not going to marry someone I can't remember . . . particularly when I don't drink. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. (*She hangs up.*) Madness.

Bethany: So I ran out to the beach . . .

Carla: This was some guy I never met who apparently offered me a beer . . .

Bethany: . . . low tide and this . . . (*The lamp.*) . . . was just sitting there, lying there . . .

Carla: . . . and he tracks me down . . .

Bethany: . . . on the beach, and I lift this lid thing . . .

Carla: . . . and seriously proposes marriage.

Bethany: . . . and a genie comes out.

Carla: I mean, that's twice in a . . . what?

Bethany: A genie comes out of this thing.

Carla: A genie?

Bethany: I'm not kidding, the whole Disney kind of thing, swirling smoke, and then this twenty-foot-high, see-through guy in like an Arabian outfit.

Carla: Very funny.

Bethany: Yes, funny, but twenty feet high! I look up and down the beach, I'm alone. I don't have my pepper spray or my hand alarm. You know me, when I'm petrified I joke. I say his voice is too high for Robin Williams, and he says he's a castrati. Naturally. Who else would I meet?

Carla: What's a castrati?

Bethany: You know . . .

(The appropriate gesture.)

Carla: Bethany, dear one, I have three modeling calls. I am meeting Ralph Lauren!

Bethany: Okay, good. Ralph Lauren. Look, I am not kidding!

Carla: You're not kidding what?!

Bethany: There is a genie in this thingamajig.

Carla: Uh-huh. I'll be back around eight.

Bethany: And he offered me wishes!

Carla: Is this some elaborate practical joke because it's my birthday?

Bethany: No, happy birthday, but I'm like crazed because I'm on this deserted beach with a twenty-foot-high, see-through genie, so like sarcastically . . . you know how I need a new car . . . I said fine, gimme 25,000 dollars . . .

Carla: On the beach with the genie?

Bethany: Yeah, right, exactly, and it rains down out of the sky.

Carla: Oh sure.

Bethany (*Pulling a wad out of her purse.*): Count it, those are thousands. I lost one in the surf.

(Carla sees the top bill. Looks at Bethany, who nods encouragement. Carla thumbs through them.)

Carla: These look real.

Bethany: Yeah.

Carla: And they rained down out of the sky?

Bethany: Yeah.

Carla: You've been really strange lately, are you dealing?

Bethany: Dealing what, I've even given up chocolate.

Carla: Let me see the genie.

Bethany: Wait, wait.

Carla: Bethany, I don't have time to screw around. Let me see the genie or let me go on my appointments.

Bethany: Wait! So I pick up the money . . . see, there's sand on the money . . . and I'm like nuts so I say, you know, "Okay, look, ummm, big guy, my uncle is in the hospital" . . . because as you know when I said to the people at work my uncle was dying, I was on one level telling the truth although it had nothing to do with the beach, but he was in Intensive Care after the accident, and that's on my mind, so I say, okay, Genie, heal my uncle . . . which is like impossible given he was hit by two trucks, and the genie says, "Yes, Master" . . . like they're supposed to say, and he goes into this like kind of whirlwind, kicking up sand and stuff, and I'm like, "Oh my God!" and the air clears, and he bows, you know, and says, "It is done, Master," and I say, "Okay, whatever-you-are, I'm calling on my cell phone," and I get it out and I get this doctor who is like dumbstruck who says my uncle came to, walked out of Intensive Care and left the hospital! I'm not kidding, Carla.

Carla: On your mother's grave?

Bethany: On my mother's grave.

(They look at each other.)

Carla: Let me see the genie.

Bethany: No, no, look, that's the whole thing . . . I was just, like, reacting, you know, responding, and that's already two wishes . . . although I'm really pleased about my uncle, the \$25,000 thing, I could have asked for \$10 million, and there is only one wish left.

Carla: So ask for \$10 million.

Bethany: I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean, I gotta focus in here. Do you have a sparkling water?

Carla: No. Bethany, I'm missing Ralph Lauren now. Very possibly my one chance to go from catalogue model to the very, very big time, so, if you are joking, stop joking.

Bethany: Not joking. See, see, the thing is, I know what I want. In my guts. Yes. Underneath my entire bitch of a life is this unspoken, ferocious, all-consuming urge . . .

Carla *(Trying to get her to move this along.)*: Ferocious, all-consuming urge . . .

Bethany: I want to be like you.

Carla: Me?

Bethany: Yes.

Carla: Half the time you don't even like me.

Bethany: Jealous. The ogre of jealousy.

Carla: You're the one with the \$40,000 job straight out of school. You're the one who has published short stories. I'm the one hanging on by her fingernails in modeling. The one who has creeps calling her on the phone. The one who had to have a nose job.

Bethany: I want to be beautiful.

Carla: You are beautiful.

Bethany: Carla, I'm not beautiful.

Carla: You have charm. You have personality. You know perfectly well you're pretty.

Bethany: "Pretty," see, that's it. Pretty is the minor leagues of beautiful. Pretty is what people discover about you after they know you. Beautiful is what knocks them out across the room. Pretty, you get called a couple of times a year; *beautiful* is 24 hours a day.

Carla: Yeah? So?

Bethany: So?! We're talking *beauty* here. Don't say "So!" Beauty is the real deal. You are the center of any moment of your life. People stare. Men flock. I've seen you get offered discounts on makeup for no reason. Parents treat beautiful children better. Studies show your income goes up. You can have sex anytime you want it. Men have to know me. That takes up to a year. I'm continually horny.

Carla: Bethany, I don't even like sex. I can't have a conversation without men coming on to me. I have no privacy. I get hassled on the street. They start pressuring me from the beginning. Half the time, it never occurs to them to start with a conversation. Smart guys like you. You've had three long-term relationships, and you're only twenty-three. I haven't had one. The good guys, the smart guys are scared to death of me. I'm surrounded by male bimbos who think a preposition is when you go to school away from home. I have no woman friends except you. I don't even want to talk about this!

Bethany: I knew you'd say something like this. See, you're "in the club" so you can say this. It's the way beauty functions as an elite. You're trying to keep it all for yourself.

Carla: I'm trying to tell you it's no picnic.

Bethany: But it's what everybody wants. It's the nasty secret at large in the world. It's the unspoken tidal desire in every room and on every street. It's the unspoken, the soundless whisper . . . millions upon millions of people longing hopelessly and forever to stop being whatever they are and be beautiful, but the difference between those ardent multitudes and me is that I have a goddamn genie and one more wish!

Carla: Well, it's not what I want. This is me, Carla. I have never read a whole book. Page 6, I can't remember page 4. The last thing I read was "The Complete Idiot's Guide to WordPerfect." I leave dinner parties right after the dessert because I'm out of conversation. You know the dumb blond joke about on the application where it says, "Sign here," she put Sagittarius? I've done that. Only beautiful guys approach me, and that's because they want to borrow my eye shadow. I barely exist outside a mirror! You don't want to be me.

Bethany: None of you tell the truth. That's why you have no friends. We can all see you're just trying to make us feel better because we aren't in your league. This only proves to me it should be my third wish. Money can only buy things. Beauty makes you the center of the universe.

(Bethany picks up the lamp.)

Carla: Don't do it. Bethany, don't wish it! I am telling you you'll regret it.

(Bethany lifts the lid. There is a tremendous crash, and the lights go out. Then they flicker and come back up, revealing Bethany and Carla on the floor where they have been thrown by the explosion. We don't realize it at first, but they have exchanged places.)

Carla/Bethany: Oh God.

Bethany/Carla: Oh God.

Carla/Bethany: Am I bleeding? Am I dying?

Bethany/Carla: I'm so dizzy. You're not bleeding.

Carla/Bethany: Neither are you.

Bethany/Carla: I feel so weird.

Carla/Bethany: Me too. I feel . . . *(Looking at her hands.)* Oh, my God, I'm wearing your jewelry. I'm wearing your nail polish.

Bethany/Carla: I know I'm over here, but I can see myself over there.

Carla/Bethany: I'm wearing your dress. I have your legs!!

Bethany/Carla: These aren't my shoes. I can't meet Ralph Lauren wearing these shoes!

Carla/Bethany: I wanted to be beautiful, but I didn't want to be you.

Bethany/Carla: Thanks a lot!!

Carla/Bethany: I've got to go. I want to pick someone out and get laid.

Bethany/Carla: You can't just walk out of here in my body!

Carla/Bethany: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. What's eleven eighteenths of 1,726?

Bethany/Carla: Why?

Carla/Bethany: I'm a public accountant. I want to know if you have my brain.

Bethany/Carla: One hundred thirty-two and a half.

Carla/Bethany: You have my brain.

Bethany/Carla: What shade of Rubenstein lipstick does Cindy Crawford wear with teal blue?

Carla/Bethany: Raging Storm.

Bethany/Carla: You have my brain. You poor bastard.

Carla/Bethany: I don't care. Don't you see?

Bethany/Carla: See what?

Carla/Bethany: We both have the one thing, the one and only thing everybody wants.

Bethany/Carla: What is that?

Carla/Bethany: It's better than beauty for me; it's better than brains for you.

Bethany/Carla: What? What?!

Carla/Bethany: Different problems.

BLACKOUT

QUESTIONS

1. Reread the discussion of *high* and *low comedy* on page 1258. Which of the two terms, in your view, better applies to *Beauty*? Explain and support your choice.
2. Much of the point of the play depends on Carla and Bethany seeing one another as opposites. But do they also have any important traits in common?
3. Is Bethany's unhappiness with herself a demonstration of her own superficiality, or is it a commentary on the superficiality of our culture? Can it be both at the same time?
4. Do Carla's claims of unhappiness with her appearance and her life seem genuine, or are they more accurately described by Bethany's reactions to them?
5. Reread Bethany's speech beginning "But it's what everybody wants," just before she makes her final wish. How validly, in your view, does she speak for "everybody" here?
6. What elements of tone and characterization help make *Beauty* an effective comedy?

WRITING EFFECTIVELY

WRITERS ON WRITING

David Ives

On the One-Act Play

2006

Moss Hart said that you never really learn how to write a play, you only learn how to write *this* play. That is as true of one-acts as of two-, three-, four- or five-acts. To my mind the challenge of the one-act may be even greater than the challenge of larger and necessarily messier plays, in the same way that the sonnet with only fourteen lines remains the ever-attempted Everest of poetry. For what the one-act demands is a kind of concentrated perfection. "A play," said Lorca, "is a poem standing up," and I can't think of a better description of a one-act.

The long play, like the symphony, luxuriates in development and recapitulation. The one-act has no time for them. Develop the story and you start to look overly melodramatic, forcing too much event into too little time. Develop the characters and you look like you're not doing them justice. (In fact you start to look like you want to write a larger play.) Develop your theme and you start to sound like one of those guys at a party trying to explain all of particle theory between two grabs at the canapés. Recapitulate and you're dead.



DAVID IVES

A one-act masterpiece like Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* would be tedious and attenuated if stretched over two hours. It says all it needs to say—and that's volumes—in a quarter of that, then stops. *Death of a Salesman* as a one-act would look either like a character study or a short story transcribed for the stage. A full-length is a four-ton, cast-steel, Richard Serra ellipse that you can walk around in; a one-act, a piece of string draped by Richard Tuttle on a gallery wall. Not a ride on the *Titanic*, but a single suitcase left floating in the middle of a theatrical sea.

So what does a one-act like, if not development and recapitulation?

Compression, obviously. Think of a one-act and chances are good you're thinking of something short and sharp, a punch in the nose, the rug pulled out from under you, over before you know it—as if an actor had turned on a camera on the audience and flashed a picture. A good one-act should leave you blinking. Think of a one-act and chances are also good you're picturing something like a small, bare, black-box stage with just a park bench, or a table and chair, or a bus-stop sign. One or two people. Minimal props. There is something necessarily stripped-down about the mere staging of one-acts, and this goes to the heart of the nature of one-acts themselves. They are *elemental*.

From *The Dramatist*

WRITING ABOUT COMEDY

Getting Serious About Comedy

If you have ever tried to explain a punchline to an uncomprehending friend, you know how hard it can be to convey the essence of humor. Too much explanation makes any joke fizzle out fast. We don't often stop to analyze why a joke strikes us as funny. It simply makes us laugh. For this reason, writing about comedy can be challenging.

In analyzing a stage comedy, however, it can be enlightening to have a sense of what makes the play amusing. You may find it helpful to pin down the sort of comedy with which you are dealing. Perhaps it is a romantic comedy, featuring protagonists you root for and identify with, even as you laugh at their exploits. Maybe it is a satire, in which human folly is ridiculed. Or it may be a black comedy, mingling the comic with the tragic.

Consider, also, the flavor of the humor itself. Does low comedy (slapstick, visual gags, and unsophisticated verbal humor) prevail? Or does the humor tend toward the sophistication and wit associated with high comedy? Is the humor primarily verbal or mostly physical? Keep in mind that a play may mix different kinds of comedy. If this is the case, what is the effect of the mixture? Finally, when trying to account for why a particular bit of dialogue or a piece of dramatic action is funny, don't overlook the importance of character.

Even when comedy arises out of a situation, character is likely to play an important role. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, a spell is cast, causing the fairy queen Titania to fall in love with the weaver Bottom, whose head has been transformed into that of an ass. Though the situation is funny in its own right, the humor is intensified by the personalities involved, the proud fairy queen chasing after the lowly and foolish tradesman.

The unlikelihood of Titania's romance with Bottom is, in large part, what makes it funny. Humor often may be found in the unexpected, a twist on the normal and the logical.

CHECKLIST**Writing About a Comedy**

- ✓ Is the play a romantic comedy? A slapstick comedy? A satire?
- ✓ How can you tell?
- ✓ Identify moments of high comedy in the play. Now look for low comedy. Which style of comedy prevails?
- ✓ Look for verbal humor. Look for physical comedy. Does one type prevail?
- ✓ Focus on a key comic moment. Does the comedy grow out of situation? Character? A mix of both?
- ✓ How does the play end? In a wedding or romance? A reconciliation? Mutual understanding?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT ON COMEDY

Choose and read a comedic play from this chapter (either *Beauty* or *Sure Thing*). Write a brief analysis of what makes the play amusing or humorous. Provide details to back up your argument. See pages 1257 to 1259 for more information on specific types of humor.

TOPICS FOR WRITING ON TRAGEDY

1. According to Oscar Wilde, “In this world there are only two tragedies: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” Write an essay in which you discuss this statement in its application to the scene from *Doctor Faustus*.
2. Imagine that Faustus, after his death, has sought forgiveness and salvation with the claim, “The Devil tricked me. I didn’t know what I was doing.” Write a “judicial opinion” setting forth the grounds for the denial of his plea.

TOPICS FOR WRITING ON COMEDY

3. Consider either *Sure Thing* or *Beauty*. What or who is being satirized? How true or incisive do you find this satire? Why?
4. “*Sure Thing* isn’t good drama because it doesn’t have a plot or conflict.” Write a two-page response to that complaint.
5. Are Carla and Bethany in *Beauty* flat characters or round ones? See Chapter 2 for a discussion of flat versus round characters. Provide evidence from the play to back up your opinion.
6. Write about a recent romantic comedy film. How does its plot fulfill the notion of comedy?
7. Write about a movie you’ve seen lately that was meant to be funny but fell short. What was lacking?