

# Comedy Summary

In a modern sense, **comedy** (from the Greek: κωμωδία, *kōmōidia*) is a genre of fiction that refers to any discourse or work generally intended to be humorous or amusing by inducing laughter, especially in theatre, television, film, stand-up comedy, books or any other medium of entertainment. The origins of the term are found in Ancient Greece. In the Athenian democracy, the public opinion of voters was influenced by the political satire performed by the comic poets at the theaters. The theatrical genre of Greek comedy can be described as a dramatic performance which pits two groups or societies against each other in an amusing agon or conflict. Northrop Frye depicted these two opposing sides as a "Society of Youth" and a "Society of the Old." A revised view characterizes the essential agon of comedy as a struggle between a relatively powerless youth and the societal conventions that pose obstacles to his hopes. In this struggle, the youth is understood to be constrained by his lack of social authority, and is left with little choice but to take recourse in ruses which engender very dramatic irony which provokes laughter.

Satire and political satire use comedy to portray persons or social institutions as ridiculous or corrupt, thus alienating their audience from the object of their humor. Parody subverts popular genres and forms, critiquing those forms without necessarily condemning them.

Other forms of comedy include screwball comedy, which derives its humor largely from bizarre, surprising (and improbable) situations or characters, and black comedy, which is characterized by a form of humor that includes darker aspects of human behavior or human nature. Similarly scatological humor, sexual humor, and race humor create comedy by violating social conventions or taboos in comic ways. A comedy of manners typically takes as its subject a particular part of society (usually upper-class society) and uses humor to parody

or satirize the behavior and mannerisms of its members. [Romantic comedy](#) is a popular genre that depicts burgeoning romance in humorous terms and focuses on the foibles of those who are falling in love.

The word "comedy" is derived from the [Classical Greek](#) κωμῳδία *kōmōidia*, which is a compound of [κῶμος](#) *kōmos* (revel) and ᾠδή *ōidē* (singing; ode). The adjective "comic" (Greek κωμικός *kōmikós*), which strictly means that which relates to comedy is, in modern usage, generally confined to the sense of "laughter-provoking". Of this, the word came into modern usage through the Latin *comoedia* and Italian *commedia* and has, over time, passed through various shades of meaning.

The [Greeks](#) and [Romans](#) confined their use of the [word](#) "comedy" to descriptions of stage-plays with happy endings. [Aristotle](#) defined comedy as an imitation of men worse than the average (where [tragedy](#) was an imitation of men better than the average). However, the characters portrayed in comedies were not worse than average in every way, only insofar as they are Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter is something ugly and distorted without causing pain. In the [Middle Ages](#), the term expanded to include narrative poems with happy endings. It is in this sense that [Dante](#) used the term in the title of his poem, [La Commedia](#).

As time progressed, the word came more and more to be associated with any sort of performance intended to cause laughter. During the Middle Ages, the term "comedy" became synonymous with [satire](#), and later with [humour](#) in general.

Aristotle's [Poetics](#) was translated into [Arabic](#) in the [medieval Islamic world](#), where it was elaborated upon by [Arabic writers](#) and [Islamic philosophers](#), such as [Abu Bishr](#), and his pupils [Al-Farabi](#), [Avicenna](#), and [Averroes](#). They disassociated comedy from [Greek](#)

dramatic representation and instead identified it with Arabic poetic themes and forms, such as hija (satirical poetry). They viewed comedy as simply the "art of reprehension", and made no reference to light and cheerful events, or to the troubling beginnings and happy endings associated with classical Greek comedy.

After the Latin translations of the 12th century, the term "comedy" gained a more general meaning in medieval literature.

In the late 20th century, many scholars preferred to use the term laughter to refer to the whole gamut of the comic, in order to avoid the use of ambiguous and problematically defined genres such as the grotesque, irony, and satire.

Starting from 425 BCE, Aristophanes, a comic playwright and satirical author of the Ancient Greek Theater, wrote 40 comedies, 11 of which survive. Aristophanes developed his type of comedy from the earlier satyr plays, which were often highly obscene. The only surviving examples of the satyr plays are by Euripides, which are much later examples and not representative of the genre. In ancient Greece, comedy originated in bawdy and ribald songs or recitations apropos of phallic processions and fertility festivals or gatherings.

Around 335 BCE, Aristotle, in his work Poetics, stated that comedy originated in phallic processions and the light treatment of the otherwise base and ugly. He also adds that the origins of comedy are obscure because it was not treated seriously from its inception.<sup>[14]</sup> However, comedy had its own Muse: Thalia.

Aristotle taught that comedy was generally positive for society, since it brings forth happiness, which for Aristotle was the ideal state, the final goal in any activity. For Aristotle, a comedy did not need to involve sexual humor. A comedy is about the fortunate rise of a sympathetic character. Aristotle divides comedy into three categories or subgenres: farce, romantic comedy, and satire. On the other hand, Plato taught that comedy is

a destruction to the self. He believed that it produces an emotion that overrides rational self-control and learning. In [\*The Republic\*](#), he says that the guardians of the state should avoid laughter, "for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction." Plato says comedy should be tightly controlled if one wants to achieve the ideal state.

Also in *Poetics*, Aristotle defined comedy as one of the original four genres of [literature](#). The other three genres are [tragedy](#), [epic poetry](#), and [lyric poetry](#). Literature, in general, is defined by Aristotle as a [mimesis](#), or imitation of life. Comedy is the third form of literature, being the most divorced from a true mimesis. Tragedy is the truest mimesis, followed by epic poetry, comedy, and lyric poetry. The genre of comedy is defined by a certain pattern according to Aristotle's definition. Comedies begin with low or base characters seeking insignificant aims and end with some accomplishment of the aims which either lightens the initial baseness or reveals the insignificance of the aims.

"Comedy", in its [Elizabethan](#) usage, had a very different meaning from modern comedy. A Shakespearean comedy is one that has a happy ending, usually involving marriages between the unmarried characters, and a tone and style that is more light-hearted than Shakespeare's other plays.

The [Punch and Judy](#) show has roots in the 16th-century Italian [commedia dell'arte](#). The figure of Punch derives from the Neapolitan stock character of [Pulcinella](#). The figure who later became Mr. Punch made his first recorded appearance in England in 1662. Punch and Judy are performed in the spirit of outrageous comedy — often provoking shocked laughter — and are dominated by the anarchic clowning of Mr. Punch. Appearing at a significant period in British history, professor Glyn Edwards states: "[Pulcinella] went down particularly well with Restoration British audiences, fun-starved after years of [Puritanism](#). We soon changed Punch's name, transformed him from a marionette to a hand puppet, and he became, really, a spirit of

Britain — a subversive maverick who defies authority, a kind of puppet equivalent to our [political cartoons](#)

In early 19th century England, [pantomime](#) acquired its present form which includes slapstick comedy and featured the first mainstream [clown Joseph Grimaldi](#), while comedy routines also featured heavily in British [music hall](#) theatre which became popular in the 1850s. British [comedians](#) who honed their skills in music hall sketches include [Charlie Chaplin](#), [Stan Laurel](#) and [Dan Leno](#). English music hall comedian and theatre impresario [Fred Karno](#) developed a form of sketch comedy without dialogue in the 1890s, and Chaplin and Laurel were among the comedians who worked for his company. Karno was a pioneer of [slapstick](#), and in his biography, Laurel stated, "Fred Karno didn't teach Charlie [Chaplin] and me all we know about comedy. He just taught us most of it". Film producer [Hal Roach](#) stated: "Fred Karno is not only a genius, he is the man who originated slapstick comedy. We in Hollywood owe much to him."<sup>[22]</sup> American [vaudeville](#) emerged in the 1880s and remained popular until the 1930s, and featured comedians such as [W. C. Fields](#), [Buster Keaton](#) and the [Marx Brothers](#).

[Surreal humour](#) (also known as 'absurdist humour'), or 'surreal comedy', is a form of [humour](#) predicated on deliberate violations of [causal](#) reasoning, producing events and behaviours that are obviously [illogical](#). Constructions of surreal humour tend to involve bizarre juxtapositions, incongruity, [non-sequiturs](#), irrational or absurd situations and expressions of [nonsense](#). The humour arises from a subversion of audience's expectations, so that amusement is founded on [unpredictability](#), separate from a logical analysis of the situation. The humour derived gets its appeal from the ridiculousness and unlikeliness of the situation. The genre has roots in [Surrealism](#) in the arts.

Surreal humour is the effect of [illogic](#) and [absurdity](#) being used for humorous effect. Under such premises, people can identify precursors and early examples of surreal humour at

least since the 19th century, such as [Lewis Carroll's \*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland\*](#) and [Through the Looking-Glass](#), which both use illogic and absurdity ([hookah-smoking caterpillars](#), [croquet](#) matches using live [flamingos](#) as mallets, etc.) for humorous effect. Many of [Edward Lear's](#) children stories and poems contain [nonsense](#) and are basically surreal in approach. For example, *The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World* (1871) is filled with contradictory statements and odd images intended to provoke amusement, such as the following:

After a time they saw some land at a distance; and when they came to it, they found it was an island made of water quite surrounded by earth. Besides that, it was bordered by evanescent isthmuses with a great Gulf-stream running about all over it, so that it was perfectly beautiful, and contained only a single tree, 503 feet high.<sup>[24]</sup>

In the early 20th century, several [avant-garde](#) movements, including the [dadaists](#), [surrealists](#), and [futurists](#), began to argue for an art that was random, jarring and illogical. The goals of these movements were in some sense serious, and they were committed to undermining the solemnity and self-satisfaction of the contemporary artistic [establishment](#). As a result, much of their art was intentionally amusing.

A famous example is [Marcel Duchamp's \*Fountain\*](#) (1917), an inverted urinal signed "R. Mutt". This became one of the most famous and influential pieces of art in history, and one of the earliest examples of the [found object](#) movement. It is also a joke, relying on the inversion of the item's function as expressed by its title as well as its incongruous presence in an art exhibition.