**What is comedy?**

**Characteristics of Dramatic Comedy/Structure of Dramatic Comedy**

Harmony  
Complication  
Disorder or Chaos  
Resolution  
Restoration

**Where did it all begin...?**

**HISTORY**

The Greeks established some of the rules for comedies.  
The Greek word ‘komos’ means celebration.  
Popular public figures or gods were often made to look unimportant.  
They would have been pantomime-like.  
Greek comedic writers include Sophocles and Aristophanes (5th Century Greece).

The Romans developed the Greek comedies using the same rules but adding their own rules and features.  
Features such as stereotypes were added by the Romans.  
Well known Roman comic writers were Plautus (254 - 184 BCE) and Terence (190 – 159 BCE).

Many medieval comedies were based on Christianity and the Bible.   
Through the use of puns, double entendres and making fun of local people, the audience were given a break from the theological themes.   
Not surprisingly, comedy and the Bible did not please everyone!  
Desiderius Erasmus, in 1469, wrote Praise of Folly: a criticism of the failures of the church, but written as a comedy.

**Shakespeare and Comedy**

Shakespeare wrote a collection of different types of comedies.   
Mix-ups, disorder and the foolishness of human beings are themes of Shakespeare's comedies.

**Examples:**  
  
A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595)  
Twelfth Night (1601)  
Much Ado About Nothing (1598)  
As You Like It (1599)  
Measure for Measure (1604)

The tripartite model comes from the theories of Northrop Frye who wrote extensively on Shakespeare:  
**The Old World** belongs to an older generation and is repressive and often urban.  
**The Green World** usually takes place in a rural setting and represents disorder.  
**The New World** is where resolution is found where people have learned from their past mistakes and solved previously unresolved problems.

Puritanism and the Civil War in England (16th & 17th Centuries) put a stop to many comedies on stage.

However, during the reign of King Charles II (1649-1651) comedy flourished again.

**Restoration Comedy**

Restoration Comedy looked at sexual relationships in upper class society.   
They used many of the rules established by the Greeks, but were lighter and more farcical.   
Significantly, women were now allowed to act on stage.

**Key Components of Restoration Comedy**

Marriage is a central theme.  
Mainly written in prose, but with some verse.  
A focus on repartee and wit.  
The tone is bawdy, cynical and amoral.  
There can be double or triple plot lines.  
Money, sex and social class are key issues.  
Stock characters include: beaus, fops, bawds, squires, older women and rakes.

**Examples:**

*The Way of the World* by William Congreve  
*The Provok'd Wife* by George Vanbrugh  
*The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar  
*Wild Oats* by John O'Keeffe  
*The Rover* by Aphra Behn

**Modern Comedies**

By the start of the 20th Century, comedy was changing.  
These modern comedies dealt with how society was decaying and disintegrating.   
Two world wars meant people had less faith in Christianity and traditional values. A sense of alienation, frustration and helplessness were felt.   
Modern comedies reflected this and while elements such as marriage and disguise disappeared, other elements remained such as the old world, green world, new world transition.

**Russian Comedy**

Naturalist techniques.  
Suggests that the world had no concern for the individual.  
*The Cherry Orchard* (1903) was written as a comedy, even containing elements of farce, but is often interpreted as tragedy.  
This illustrates the seriousness in these kinds of plays.

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860 - 1904): Chekhov’s plays combined more than one genre.   
Looked at dark forces that could restrict individuals.  
Comic conflicts of thought and belief - a kind of intellectual comedy.  
Laughter is generated by characters living in a world they cannot understand.  
The aim of many of these plays is to show that the established social order is in fact an illusion and life is full of absurd moments.  
Moves away from a Christian view to a more humanist or secular position.  
Focused more on the lower or under classes.  
Settings could be more abstract in an attempt to show that the same issues and problems face everyone.

**Absurdist and Black Comedy**

*Waiting for Godot* - Samuel Beckett (1906 - 1989): an early piece of 'theatre of the absurd'.   
Originally written in French, though Beckett was from Dublin.  
The dialogue is very disjointed, circular and bleak and employs a stream-of-consciousness style.   
Themes include: existentialism, secularism and the pointlessness of life.   
A response to the realist tradition of modern comedy and rejects expected themes.  
Perhaps Beckett is suggesting we are trapped in the green world, where confusion never ends!

Harold Pinter (1930 - 2008): plays such as *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Birthday Party* (1957) show the futility of modern life.   
On the face of them, they may not seem like dramatic comedies, but contain some highly comic moments.   
Pinter's plays have been described as 'comedy of menace' suggesting something more dark and menacing under the surface.   
The dialogue is infused with implications of threat and also contains colloquial language and long pauses.  
The long pauses may suggest that what is not said is as important as what is said.

**Contemporary comedy incorporates lots of elements of other genres.** **This makes it harder to define.**It still uses many of the traditional comedy elements, but reworks them in new and alternative ways.  
Very often the comedy exposes and explores the human condition.  
Can incorporate dark and surreal elements and can be known as 'in your face' theatre.   
Draws on trends and developments in contemporary Britain as well as reflecting the political, social, economic and religious concerns of the time.   
Black comedy is popular perhaps because it reflects the cynicism of modern Britain.

**Contemporary Dramatic Comedy**

Presents love as a motivating force which can also cause people to do foolish things.   
Shows that people face difficult situations and serious problems.  
Human endeavour is often seen as being pretentious and ludicrous and therefore foolish.  
Exposes foolishness of customs or laws.  
Often uses exaggerations, stereotypes and caricature.   
Presents bizarre and absurd situations to reflect the absurdity of the human condition.

**Examples:**

Comedians (1975) by Trevor Griffiths  
Top Girls (1982) by Caryl Churchill  
Jerusalem (2009) by Jez Butterworth  
Abigail's Party (1977) by Mike Leigh  
Henna Night (1999) by Amy Rosenthal

**DEFINITIONS:**

Caricature: an exaggerated portrayal of a person of type of person for comic effect.

Pantomime: in modern culture, a play generally based on a fairy-tale or folk-tale, often performed around Christmas. In theatre, pantomime has a long tradition of a variety of styles.

Stereotype: a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

Pun: a play on words - often exploiting either similar-sounding words or words with a variety of meanings. They are often used to comic effect.  
  
Double entendre: an expression or figure of speech that has two meanings. The first meaning may be obvious, but a second meaning may be either ironic or intentionally rude.

Verse: rhymed or (most usually) unrhymed poetry that is found in Shakespearean and other dramas of the period, and is usually spoken by higher class or noble characters.  
  
Beaus: relaxed, attractive and self-confident men.   
  
Fops: men who are a little effeminate. They often pay a lot of attention to their clothes and appearance.   
  
Bawd: a woman who is humorously indecent.   
  
Squires: gentlemen from the countryside. Usually satirised in restoration comedy for not having the manners of style of the city. They often come from the North or the West.   
  
Rakes: men who live an irresponsible and immoral life.

Alienation: the process through which a person feels exiled from and forgotten about by their own community.

Naturalistic: a style of drama that aims to be more natural in terms of performance than previous dramas.  
  
Farce: a comic play featuring improbable situations.

Absurdist Comedy: drama that examines life outside common sense and the usual conventions.   
  
Black Comedy: comedy that looks at dark or depressing themes in a comic way.   
  
Humanism: an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.

Stream-of-consciousness: a writing system that involves writing down ideas as soon as they are thought of and not ordering them, to imitate more accurately the reality of experience.  
  
Existentialism: a system of thought that emphasises that people are free to choose their own actions.   
  
Realist Tradition: where literature seeks to hold a mirror up to life and seeks to reproduce it as accurately as possible.

‘In-your-face' theatre: a form of theatre that is quite aggressive and tough, reflecting a very realistic look at contemporary life.