

Questions of Genre

This essay offers suggestions for how material on the Great Writers Inspire site can be used as a starting point for exploration of or classroom discussion about genre. Questions for reflection or discussion are highlighted in the text. Links in the text point to resources in the Great Writers Inspire site. The resources can also be found via the '[Questioning of Genre](#)' start page [1]. Further material can be found via [our Library](#) [2] and via the various writers and theme pages.

This page can be downloaded as a pdf, suitable for printing, by clicking on the '[Download as pdf](#)' link [3] here or at the bottom of the page.

By [Kate O'Connor](#) [4]

The word 'genre' comes from the Latin word 'genus', meaning class or kind. The terms 'Tragedy' and 'Comedy' harken back to Greek theatre, during the festival that took place at the Theatre of Dionysus. Tragedy and comedy were the two categories under which playwrights could enter their plays competitively.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discussed how one distinguishes between the different genres of poetry. The three criteria to be examined in order to determine genre were matter (comprised of language, rhythm, and melody), subjects (human characters and their nature), and method (the style of narration and speech). According to Aristotle, a tragedy is a representation of a serious and important action presented with embellished speech (or, speech with rhythm and melody). A tragedy must evoke pity and terror through catharsis, not simply through narration instructing the audience how to feel.

In early modern England, genres were stratified dramatically with the release of the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio, which advertised in its frontispiece, "MR. WILLIAM SHAKESPERES COMEDIES, HISTORIES, & TRAGEDIES. Publi?hed according to the True Orginall Copies." The folio's artificial division of the plays presented all kinds of problems that persist in modern Shakespeare scholarship. In the Folio only English plays were classified as histories. Despite its happy ending and its modern classification as a romance, *Cymbeline* was listed as a tragedy. *Troilus and Cressida* was not included in the folio's table of contents, but was placed between the histories and tragedies, and was titled "THE TRAGEDIE OF Troylus and Cressida." Yet the first quarto published in 1609 gives the title, "THE Hi?torie of Troylus and Cresseida." Today many critics consider *Troilus and Cressida* a comedy. The folio's complications demonstrate the nuances of trying to classify any sort of fiction by genre. In *Hamlet* act two, scene two, Lord Polonius insists that the arriving actors are "the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individiabile, or poem unlimited." This scene suggests that not only was the difficulty of classifying genre known in the early modern period, it was worthy of a good joke.

So what qualifies as a tragicomedy? What makes a comedy depicting the author's contemporary society into a satire? When is a satire a parody, and when is it allegory? When does Romance become a romantic

comedy? Do modern genres in cinema and television have any similarities to the genres of Ancient Greece or Renaissance England, or are they simply groupings aligned by theme or audience expectations? Certainly attempts to answer these questions, especially by comparing different author's approaches to a genre, can feed into the kinds of comparative analysis of literature that will help with the LITB2: Dramatic Genres and LITB3: Texts and Genres units. The following resources can help students in their quest to tackle questions of genre.

We acknowledge the genres listed below are fairly artificial categories, partly as a result of the fundamental problem of the genre system? a problem that bears classroom discussion.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES (available via the links in this list and the '[Questioning Genre](#)' start page [1]).

TRAGEDY

- Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings' 'What is Tragedy?' series:
In this series of short but useful podcasts, Taplin and Billings engage in a dialogue intended to pin down the origins, nature, and impact of tragedy.
 - [Defining Tragedy](#) [5]
In the first dialogue between Oliver Taplin and Joshua Billings on tragedy, they discuss what 'tragedy' means, from its origins in Greek culture to philosophical notions of what tragedy and tragic drama are.
 - [What Does Tragedy do for People?](#) [6]
A discussion of what the use of tragedy is, and whether the emotional experience of tragic theatre is simply a passing thrill or a vital part of life.
 - [Does Tragedy Teach?](#) [7]
In the third dialogue on the nature of tragedy, they talk about whether tragic theatre teaches people, and if it does, how and what it teaches.
 - [Is Tragedy Still Alive?](#) [8]
In the final dialogue they discuss whether or not tragedy still exists in modern culture, whether in films, modern theatre and/or other creative arts.
- [Richard II](#) [9]
From 5:29-13:11 in this podcast that is part Great Writers Inspire's Approaching Shakespeare series, Dr. Emma Smith discusses the significance of the arrangement of Shakespeare's first folio into genre categories, and talks about the difference between history plays and tragedies.
- [King Lear](#) [10]
From 2:45, Smith examines Eagleton's attempts to define tragedy, and applies these definitions to King Lear.
- [Antony and Cleopatra](#) [11]
Smith tries to determine just whose tragedy Antony and Cleopatra really is, and how tragedy is impacted by the refusal to provide a single tragic hero.
- [The Revenger's Tragedy](#) [12]
In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on The Revenger's Tragedy, she discusses the bizarre black comedy of this gruesome tragedy by Thomas Middleton.
- [The Duchess of Malfi](#) [13]
In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on The Duchess of Malfi, she discusses how the classic tragedy weighs in on questions about female autonomy and class distinction.

COMEDY

- [Comedy of Errors](#) [14]
In this podcast, from 11:21 Dr. Emma Smith discusses how Comedy of Errors defies usual valuations of Shakespeare's comedies as a part of the tradition of Elizabethan festival culture or as an outlet for toying with ideas of gender and sexuality. Smith introduces some alternative theories of comedy to allow for a better understanding of the play and of comedy in general.

- The city comedies of Thomas Dekker [15] or Ben Jonson [16]
How do they shed light on the social ills of early modern England?
- The Shoemaker's Holiday [17]
Dr. Emma Smith discusses some of the societal ills that intrude on the otherwise comedic play by Thomas Dekker. Like a Busby Berkeley depression-era musical, Dekker's comedy is a feel-good antidote to a context of shortages, political malaise and general pessimism, but real life in the shape of war, class antagonism and civic tensions, always threatens to intrude.
- The works of Oscar Wilde [18] are an A-level comedy staple, but are far more nuanced than just their one-liners. *After watching Professor Sir Richard Evans' Gresham College lecture The Victorians: Gender and Sexuality [19], what can you notice in Wilde's plays that challenge his contemporary's view of sex and social relations?*

TRAGICOMEDY

- Measure for Measure [20]
In this podcast on Measure for Measure, Dr. Emma Smith tackles the complex question of the genre of one of Shakespeare's rather tragic comedies, and traces the evolution of the critical discussion framing Measure for Measure as a tragicomedy. Students could also look at All's Well that Ends Well [21] in this context.
- The Winter's Tale [22]
In this podcast, Dr. Emma Smith tries to make sense of a play that seems to veer wildly between the genres of tragedy and comedy.
- The works of Thomas Middleton [23]
Thomas Middleton toyed with dramatic genre and inverted our expectations arguably to a greater extent than William Shakespeare. Consider tragicomedies like *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, *The Witch*, *A Fair Quarrel*, *The Changeling*, and *The Old Law*.

ROMANCE & LOVE

- Dr. Nicholas Perkins' Podcast: The Romance of the Middle Ages [24]
Dr Nicholas Perkins talks about how romance functions as a genre in the middle ages, especially about how gifts and tokens were exchanged as signs of fidelity, specifically in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Gawain*, and *King Horn*.
- Ancient Wisdom and Modern Love: University of Notre Dame's Lecture series [25]
The University of Notre Dame's Professor David O'Connor offers a full lecture series on theories of love from ancient to modern, and how they are represented in literature. In particular, check out lectures 24 and 25 on Shakespeare's *Othello* and lectures 37 and 38 on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- The Romance of James Joyce's Ulysses [26]
Tara Prescott reads from a romantic passage of James Joyce's *Ulysses* at the 2012 International James Joyce Symposium, giving students a sense of one of the more accessibly romantic passages of the daunting work.
- The works of Jane Austen [27]
The works of Jane Austen are all too often dismissed as nothing more than romantic comedies, but in fact employ some biting social satire about Austen's social and financial world. Which leads us to...

SATIRE

- Dr. Abigail Williams' essays on Jonathan Swift:
- A Tale of a Tub [28]
In the section 'Parody and Allegory', Williams discusses Swift's use of parody and allegory.
- Gulliver's Travels [29]
In the section 'Gulliver's Travels and Travel Writing', Williams discusses Swift's simultaneously

- drawing from and parodying the popular genre of travel writing. The essay also addresses Swift's blurring of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.
- *Jonathan Swift and the Art of Undressing* [30]
Dr. Williams discusses who exactly is the butt of the joke of Jonathan Swift's poem The Lady's Dressing Room.

GENERAL RESOURCES

- Dr. Catherine Brown's *Eliot Genre & Justice* [31]
Dr. Brown discusses Eliot's employment of narrative justice in relation to the genres of tragedy and comedy.
- Dr. Jane Rickard's podcasts on Genre, [Part 1](#) [32] & [Part 2](#) [33]
Dr. Jane Rickard (University of Leeds) discusses genre in the context of the creation and interpretation of literary texts, from Austen to Shakespeare.

Source URL (modified on 03/05/2020 - 09:49): <http://writersinspire.org/content/questions-genre>

Links

- [1] <http://writersinspire.org/themes/questioning-genre>
- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/library>
- [3] <http://writersinspire.org/printpdf/3489>
- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/people/kate-oconnor>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/defining-tragedy>
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- [11] <http://writersinspire.org/content/antony-cleopatra>
- [12] <http://writersinspire.org/content/revengers-tragedy-thomas-middleton>
- [13] <http://writersinspire.org/content/duchess-malfi-john-webster>
- [14] <http://writersinspire.org/content/comedy-errors>
- [15] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-dekker>
- [16] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/ben-jonson>
- [17] <http://writersinspire.org/content/shoemakers-holiday-thomas-dekker>
- [18] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/oscar-wilde>
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- [23] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-middleton>
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- [31] <http://writersinspire.org/content/george-eliot-2-genre-justice>
- [32] <http://writersinspire.org/content/genre-pt1>
- [33] <http://writersinspire.org/content/genre-pt2>