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Omelianiuik Gennadii

Actor/Writer/Producer

(Vancouver WA)

ORCID: 0009-0006-4995-9003

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERCEIVING TRAGICOMEDY AND TONE BALANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SERIAL FORMAT

Summary. *The article examines the phenomenon of tragicomedy as a durable narrative mechanism in contemporary serial formats, which intertwine industrial, psychological, and artistic dimensions. The relevance of the study is determined, on the one hand, by the structural crisis of Peak TV, when the industry shifts from quantitative growth to a search for genre strategies of audience retention, and, on the other, by findings in cognitive psychology that confirm the efficacy of ambivalent emotions for memory, empathy, and viewers' emotional regulation. The work aims to identify regularities in the perception of mixed tone and to describe the mechanisms of the tonal pendulum at the levels of shot, episode, season, and metanarrative. The novelty of the study lies in interpreting tragicomedy not as a hybrid of genres but as an adaptive protocol of media storytelling that provides a dual-circuit regulation of experience: the coupling of hedonic impulses of immediate reward with eudaimonic demands for meaning. The main conclusions are that mixed tone enhances long-term retention through emotional dissonance, reduces overload thanks to coping humor, cultivates a habit of ambivalence, and promotes durable viewer engagement. The article will be particularly helpful to media scholars, perception psychologists, screenwriting specialists, and producers working in a volatile market for series.*

Key words: *tragicomedy, emotion perception, serial format, tonal balance, tonal pendulum.*

Introduction. Tragicomedy has proved to be precisely the galvanic genre that keeps the pulse of the Peak TV era—the phase when the number of original series reached a historical ceiling and then, like a swollen barometer, sharply declined. According to the FX research department, 600 adult drama and comedy projects premiered in 2022; yet, by 2023, the figure had dropped to 516—almost a fifth—a trend that network chief John Landgraf dubbed the end of an overheated market (Cobb, 2024). Amid such overproduction, viewers have grown weary of genre unilinearity, and it is tragicomedy, offering dual emotional fuel, that has become an evolutionary advantage: it gathers an audience eager to laugh and to experience catharsis at once.

Record harvests of awards corroborate this shift. At the 75th Emmys, dramedy titans *Succession* and *The Bear* won decisively in the main categories, and by 2025 *The Bear* had already accumulated thirteen nominations in the Comedy section despite an abundance of claustrophobic scenes of panic and pain, which once again reignited debate over the project’s genre identity (Esquibias, 2025). Thus, the academy itself is compelled to reconsider traditional boundaries between the comic and the tragic, acknowledging the hybrid tone as the new norm of quality.

Psychologists, meanwhile, identify the phenomenon of being moved, in which joy and sadness merge into a single, high-energy emotion; studies from 2023 demonstrate that precisely such blending amplifies both cognitive and physiological memory of the experienced event, strengthening attachment to the narrative (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2025). Moreover, experimental work comparing purely tragic and tragicomic events showed that scenes in which grief breaks through an ironic response generate a richer palette of feelings and, accordingly, a deeper viewer response (Xia et al., 2015).

Thus, the relevance of tragicomedy is determined along two axes. On the one hand, an industry exhausted by an endless race for volume seeks a genre that concentrates attention without relying on expensive special effects. On the other hand, neuropsychological data confirm that alternating laughter and dread acts as an emotional interferometer, allowing viewers to tune their coping mechanisms for anxiety finely. Even if Peak TV has formally ended, the viewer’s cultural physiology has already been reset to the rhythm of tragicomedy; therefore, the demand for doubly toned series remains not a matter of fashion but an intrinsic necessity of media consumption.

Materials and Methodology. The study is based on an interdisciplinary analysis that combines sources from the history of genres, the contemporary television industry, and the psychology of emotions. Materials include academic articles devoted to the historical and philosophical evolution of tragicomedy (Salehi, 2023; Tragicomedy, n.d.), as well as works analyzing the transformations of narrative in the era of complex TV and the contraction of seasonal structures (Mittell, 2006; Parrot Analytics, 2024). Alongside these, the corpus incorporates articles from psychology and cognitive science that track the effects of ambivalent experiences and the phenomenon of being moved (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2025; Xia et al., 2015). This selection made it possible to cover three strata at once: industrial, psychological, and narrative.

The theoretical foundation comprises studies that demonstrate how genre blending serves as an instrument of institutional recognition and industrial adaptation, as seen in the case of post-Peak television (Cobb, 2024) and the dominance of dramedy projects in awards (*Succession*, *The Bear*) (Esquibias, 2025). These data were juxtaposed with psychological research demonstrating the long-term influence of ambivalent emotions on memory and engagement (McClay et al., 2023; Possler et al., 2025), as well as with meta-analyses of the therapeutic action of laughter (Kramer & Leitaó, 2023) and its protective potential against anxiety disorders (Dionigi et al., 2023). This parallel selection of materials

made it possible to align cultural practices with psychophysiological mechanisms of perception.

Results and Discussion. Plautus’s ironic coinage of “tragicomedy” set a durable template in which high and low, grief and laughter, coexist within a single action—a scheme later formalized by Guarini and pushed to expressive extremes by Shakespeare, who shows that compassion and ironic relief can coexist without collapsing plot architecture (Tragicomedy, n.d.).

The genre was recast in the nineteenth–twentieth century avant-garde and absurdist stage, where playwrights like Beckett inverted expectations so that purification comes from the collision of meaning and its denial; recent analysis argues that Beckett turns tragicomedy into an “emotional short circuit” that tests the limits of sympathy (Salehi, 2023).

Transferred to multi-episode screens, tragicomedy gains new affordances: serial formats allow repeated tonal retunings—characters can fall into abyssal despair and reemerge in different emotional registers—making alternating comic and tragic registers a structural device of narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006). Industry data underscore this shift toward concentrated, tone-flexible storytelling: the average U.S. season length fell from 15.4 episodes in 2018 to 10.2 in 2023, with only 4.5% of new seasons exceeding twenty episodes—a format ecology that facilitates rapid swings between extremes (Parrot Analytics, 2024). In streaming projects, the share of seasons with a peak of demand near the final episode rose sharply in 2020–2021, dipped in 2022, and rebounded in 2023. In contrast, among broadcast networks, the dynamics were smoother with a slight decline after 2020, as shown in Figure 1.

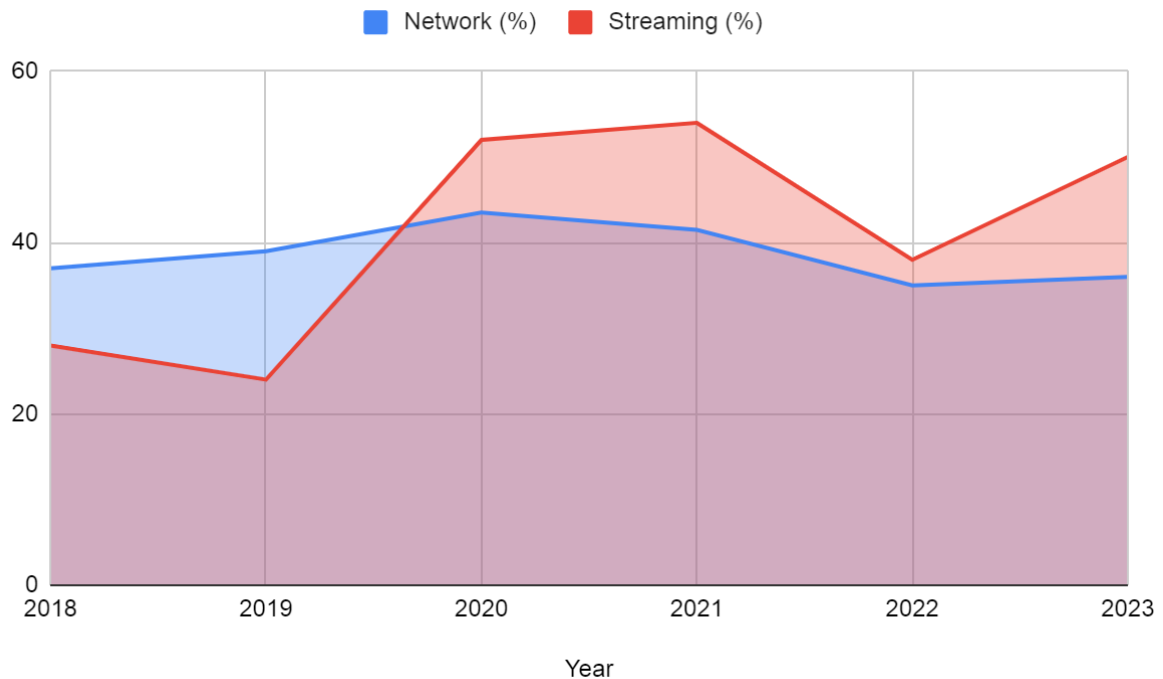


Fig. 1. Percentage of Seasons with a Peak of Demand Near the Last Episode's Date (Parrot Analytics, 2024)

These structural transformations push a departure from the classical three-act frame in favor of the novel-as-series. In the new model, exposition spreads across several episodes, the climax splits and multiplies, and the denouement is deferred indefinitely, enabling creators to alter the emotional timbre again and again. Such deferred finalization does not merely mimic the lexicon of the nineteenth-century feuilleton novel; it creates an effect of constant under-completed catharsis, keeping the viewer in a state of cognitive search—where will the pendulum of tone swing next. As a result, tragicomedy ceases to be a genre label of a single work. It becomes a mode of long-term storytelling capable of adapting both to industrial oscillations and to the mutable psychophysiology of the audience. At the same time, as shown in Figure 2, indifference to a series' finished status dominates across all ages; the propensity to always wait for the finale is slightly higher among 18–34-year-olds, while those 55+ more often than others report not waiting at all (Woods, 2023).

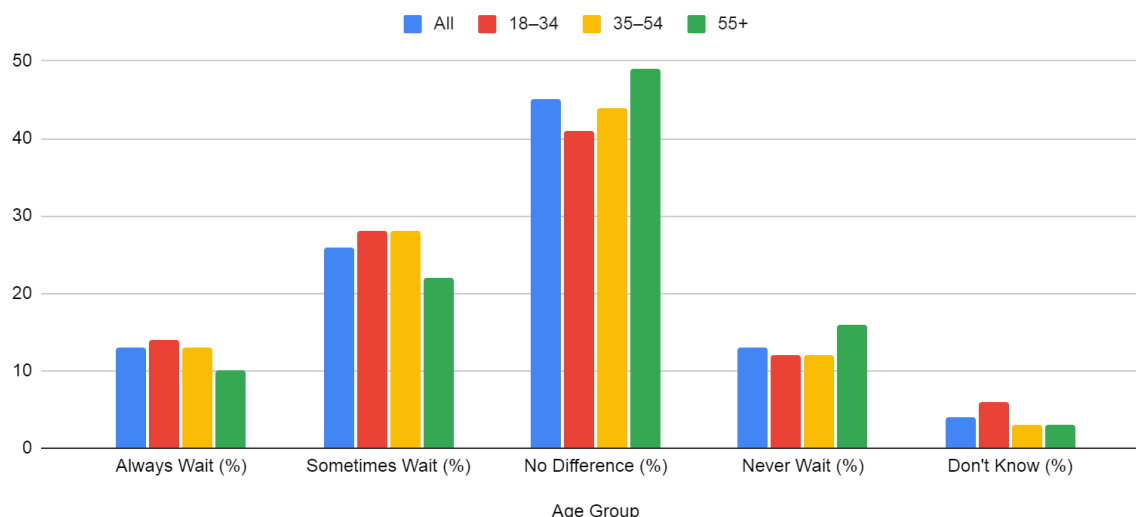


Fig. 2. UK Waiting Preferences for Streaming Originals by Age Group (Woods, 2023)

Tragicomedies operate on a double-circuit system of experience: if one urges immediate sensory fulfillment—laughter—the other prompts the appraisal of moral relief and a quest for meaning. An extensive quantitative survey of 427 Netflix subscribers found nearly equal strengths of hedonic and eudaimonic motives: the former characterized by instant, fleeting pleasure, and the latter by self-reflective drive; both increasing temporary interest in the series and intention to continue viewing (Riskos et al., 2024). The convergence of these motivations is further confirmed by a meta-review of a new dual-process paradigm in which hedonia and eudaimonia are not opposites but mutually reinforcing phases of a single experiential process (Possler et al., 2025). Thus, the very genre of tragicomedy becomes a stage on which the viewer, in one scene, takes a loan of light joy and, in the next, pays interest with reflection on the hero’s fate, without an emotional rupture, instead switching from one regulatory mode to another.

It is coping humor that sustains the pulsation, without physiological overload. A meta-analysis of eighteen interventional studies found that a ten-minute dose of spontaneous laughter reduced cortisol by 31.9% relative to controls, this effect occurring even after a single session, with lasting effects of up to three hours (Kramer & Leita, 2023). Results from an experiment involving

686 participants indicated that lighter forms of humor, such as protective-benevolent styles, predicted lower indices of anxiety and depression; in contrast, sarcasm and cynicism were correlated with increases in stress markers (Dionigi et al., 2023). In a tragicomic series, this mechanism functions as a safety device: a sharp joke at the moment of climactic pain breaks the sympathetic-adrenal activation circuit. It grants the viewer a few seconds for a respiratory reset, after which the tension can be raised again without risking emotional burnout.

The next layer comprises affective dispositions—that is, the viewer’s readiness automatically to place bets on characters with each change of tone. Tonal stakes in tragicomedy essentially keep this betting system in play: the watcher now backs the hero, now blames, and the mind becomes accustomed to rapid changes, thereby raising the level of mixed feelings in real life.

The paradox of dissonance makes the mixed tone not just an aesthetic choice but a mnemonic device. In one longitudinal study of episodic retention, a shift in valence that would mark an event boundary with sharpness was found to improve both detailed and contextual memory after 24 hours; positive turns stitch adjacent episodes, negative ones fragment them, thus allowing the brain to list experience more particularly (McClay et al., 2023). Hence the screenwriter’s effort: to place a joke precisely where emotional pressure nearly reaches boiling point to trigger a flash of memorability and deposit the scene into long-term storage.

Thus, tragicomedy does not merely yoke laughter to tears; it recruits a multichannel psychophysiological mechanism, shown in Figure 3, in which hedonia and eudaimonia alternate, humor damps the flames of stress, and micro-doses of dissonance solder episodes into memory.

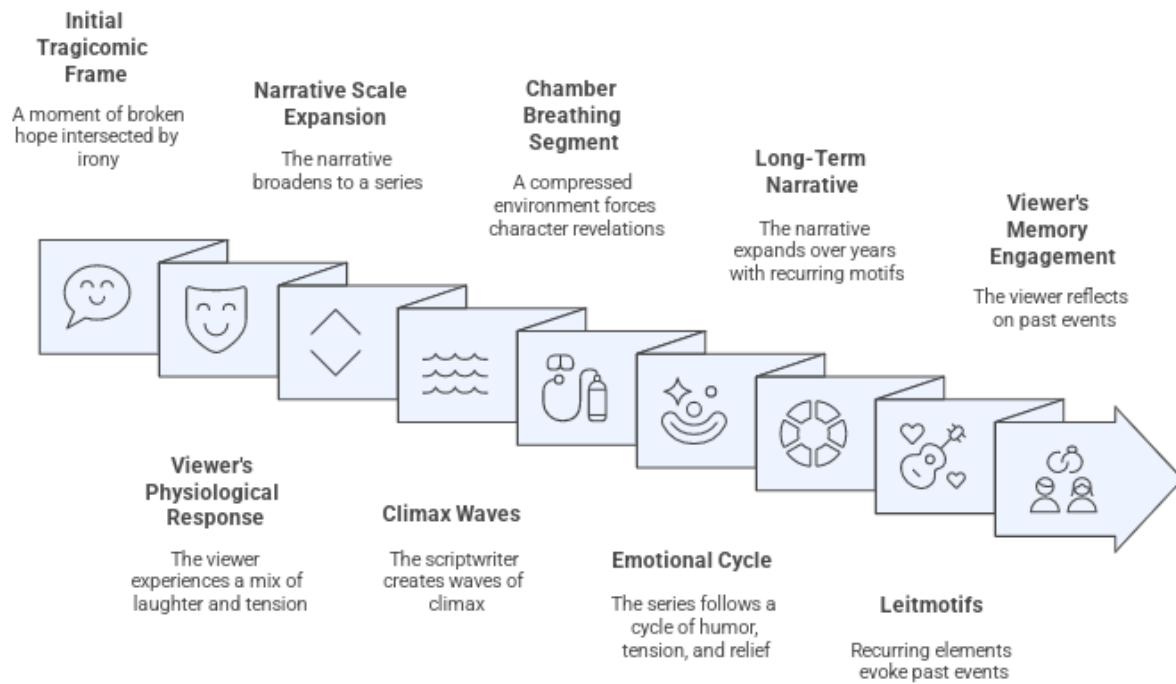


Fig. 3. Tragicomic Narrative Structure

Source: compiled by author

The tragicomedy, in its organic operation as an emotional mechanism at the series level, provides a swing between humor and pain, allowing feelings to keep moving. At the frame level, near-instantaneous release of venting opposing impulses—such as pain and irony—results in relief that maintains underlying tension. This dynamic will carry through the narrative, such that humor lightens the more profound moments of drama, setting into motion an emotional rhythm that keeps one engaged. The pattern builds up over an episode or even an entire season of a series: humor shifts to harm, followed by redemption, leaving some unresolved tension behind while making the viewer want to see harm turn to redemption again and again in the future. This also creates resonance on a much deeper level, as time is traversed through motifs—gestures, melodies, or objects—that become reminders of past moments. In the post-Peak era, this dual-circuit emotional regulation, between the hedonic and the eudaimonic, is no longer just a matter of style. It is a strategy that guarantees long-term engagement and memory retention.

Conclusion. Tragicomedy has evolved from mere hybridity to a solid mode of serial storytelling as part of the bid to compete for scarce attention within the industry and fulfill the quite different requirements of audiences for emotional investment. This is theoretically related to a change in market saturation, combining institutional validation with emotional studies on how mixing happiness with sadness improves memory and its emotional effects. Functioning like a dual-circuit regulator, tragicomedy balances surface pleasure against meaning beneath, tuning viewers to ambivalence yet not lowering empathy. It's a highly emotional structure that functions like a safety valve, opening the emotional circuits and solidifying memory through strategically placed dissonances.

Tragicomedy is no longer an aspect of style, but instead becomes a means of sustaining involvement, allowing delight and consideration to work in tandem. This change translates into structural variations in the swing from what was formerly a regular three-act play into the domain of the novel, with exposition by episode, manifold climaxes, and delayed resolutions. Short season lengths, general demand peaks, and disinterest in completeness all make incompleteness a resource to keep viewers engaged through tonal oscillation rather than finality.

The pendulum of tone operates at several narrative levels: from micro-scenes of present pain and irony to multi-season arcs where earlier humor returns in the form of consequences, this multilayered orchestration tolerance increases the space for ambivalence and puts the viewer actively back into a process of recalibration, an adaptive protocol tragicomedy couples economy with high cognitive impact that harmonizes industrial, psychological, and narrative planes. When mixed tones combine these three elements, it moves beyond being a fad. It becomes a narrative mechanism that tragicomedy is not merely a genre, but rather the basis of contemporary serialized storytelling.

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