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Meanings of Melodrama

While several overviews have noted its semantic ambiguity, the term *melodrama* seems to have adopted a more or less stable meaning in contemporary film studies. *Melodrama* as it generally is used today refers to a set of subgenres that remain close to the heart and hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality. But this was not at all the common usage in the early years of the film industry (or even much later, as Steve Neale has discovered in his excellent exhaustive research into the use of the word in trade journals in the 1950s).[1]

It is telling, for instance, that the word *melodrama* is never once used in a 1910 magazine article entitled "The Tear-Drenched Drama," which discussed what would seem to be the direct theatrical antecedent to Hollywood's woman's weepie. "The drama of heart-ache," Alan Dale observed, caters to "the rapacity of women for the love-woe. . . . Marriage and its many variations being the biggest factor in the feminine life, women take a breathless interest in woebegone stories that delay it, or render it impossible, or offer it as the result of terrific struggle."[2] Dale's synopsis of one such drama, *The Awakening of Helena Richie*, reads like the synopsis of a classical Hollywood domestic melodrama:

The heroine lived a life of unwedded marriage with a gay deceiver who, in the eyes of the world, was her brother. When the guileless people of Old

Chester, Pennsylvania, were present, Helena Richie was a formal and coldly affectionate sister to the man; when they were alone she would spring into his arms and fervently tell him how much she loved him! Later on, of course, her "past" was discovered by the "strait-laced" people of the village, who had "early Victorian" ideas unlike those of Helena, who talked about "living her own life" in her own way. She had adopted a boy whom she grew to love. When her "past" was revealed the good gentleman who had assigned the boy to her care felt it his duty to remove the lad. She was not a fit person to be entrusted with the care of children. Her lover, who had an adult daughter of his own, betrayed a marked disinclination to marry Helena. . . . . At this point the tears were shed lavishly. After scenes of pointless agony, in which Helena's soul underwent all sorts of contortions and gyrations, her "awakening" took place, and when she said good-bye to the little boy, in the unhappy "big" act, of course there wasn't a dry eye in the house.[3]

By contemporary generic rubrics, this story is melodrama pure and simple, an almost archetypal example. It anticipates many of the narrative conventions that would define Hollywood melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s: centering around a sympathetic heroine, it deals with the pathos of misplaced love and obstructed marriage, generational friction and the pressures of filling an impossible maternal space (Helena's relationship with her lover's daughter), the dignity and difficulties of female independence in the face of conventional small-mindedness and patriarchal stricture, and, above all else, the pathetic nobility of self-sacrifice. The fact that "The Tear-Drenched Drama" should nowhere even mention the word *melodrama* suggests the term's dominant connotations may have shifted since the decades around the turn of the century. This is not to say that extreme pathos, domestic duress, and romantic distress had no place in popular melodrama a century ago—on the contrary. But it does suggest that in that period's common conception of melodrama, the sentimental side may have been somewhat overshadowed by other aspects.[4]

Attempts to define melodrama can take a few tacks. One approach is to highlight a primary defining element that manifests itself in various ways throughout all the genre's many permutations, or in other words, to discern an underlying foundation that structures the genre's array of surface attributes and conventions. The essential element perhaps most often associated with melodrama is a certain "overwrought"

or "exaggerated" quality summed up by the term *excess*. Although the currency of this notion in film criticism stems from several sources, one important one was Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's brief essay "Minnelli and Melodrama" (1977).[5] Nowell-Smith argued that the genre was subject to a kind of textual "conversion hysteria." Melodrama foments psychic energies and emotions which the narrative "represses," blocks from full expression, gratification, or resolution, because they are fundamentally incompatible with the demands of dominant patriarchal ideology. As a consequence of this repression on the narrative level, the undischarged emotions, "which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance" (by which Nowell-Smith presumably means emotions like Oedipal or homoerotic drives), are diverted or "siphoned off." Like neurotic symptoms, they find an outlet through other channels of expression—especially spilling into nonnaturalistic mise-en-scène and swelling music. In Sirk's 1950s family melodramas, for example, the mise-en-scène is conspicuously oversaturated with glaring colors, overstuffed with too much furniture and too many mirrors, and overdetermined with props that are often "too symbolic," too obvious in their sexual implications (such as the ubiquitous phallic oil rigs in *Written on the Wind*, or, in the same film, the five-year-old boy intently getting his jollies on a rocking horse just as the protagonist is informed that he is impotent).

While the premise that texts can manifest symptoms just like human psyches may not seem quite as compelling today as it did twenty years ago, the basic idea of a connection between melodrama and expressionist excess is widely accepted. The idea can be extended in useful ways to incorporate other aspects of the genre. To begin with, melodrama obviously showcases emotional excess. Hollywood melodramas are brimming with characters on the verge of hysteria and collapse, or at least by characters suffering extreme emotional duress. Classical melodrama—melodrama based around a truly evil villain that victimizes an innocent, purely good soul—portrays emotional excess in the villain's expressions of hatred, envy, jealousy, spite, or malice. Traditionally, particularly in stage melodrama, these emotions were conveyed through codified modes of histrionic "overacting" that further accentuated the quality of excess.

Melodrama also activates various kinds of excess in the spectator's visceral responses. A good Hollywood melodrama is one that makes you cry, or one that arouses strong sentiment, particularly powerful feelings

of pathos. Melodramatic excess is a question of the body, of physical responses. The term *tearjerker* underscores the idea that powerful sentiment is in fact a physical sensation, an overwhelming feeling.[6] Over and above the poignant emotion of pathos, melodrama thrives on stimulating the sensation of agitation—for example, the physical, visceral thrill created by situations of acute suspense. Classic cliffhangers (like *North By Northwest*, with its literal cliffhanging, or virtually any contemporary action film), or situations in which the protagonist is unaware of imminent peril (such as in *Rear Window* when Lisa searches Thorwald's apartment as he is putting his key in the door to enter), or race-to-the-rescue sequences with life-and-death deadlines (a powerful subgenre since Griffith's day), are designed to create a nervous charge in the spectator, a kind of sensory excess.

Melodrama triggers another variety of agitation as well: the agitation that comes from observing extreme moral injustice, the feeling of distress, of being profoundly disturbed or outraged when we see vicious power victimizing the weak, usually involving some kind of bodily violence. A waif being battered (as in *Broken Blossoms*), an animal being abused (*Lassie Come Home*), or a mother having her baby torn away from her by a group of puritanical busybodies (for example, *The Mother and the Law*, *Way Down East*, *The Awakening of Helena Richie*): such scenes are designed to generate unbridled agitation, a mode of visceral excess in the spectator. One could add to this the sensation of intense hatred. Classical melodrama, particularly on stage, gave the audience the cathartic pleasure of the very purest, unequivocal kind of hatred, repulsion, or disdain for the villain. Melodrama was designed to arouse, and morally validate, a kind of primal bloodlust, in the sense that the villain is so despicable, hated so intensely, that there was no more urgent gratification than to see him extinguished. It was this aspect of melodrama's visceral and emotional excess that prompted Ludwig Lewisohn, writing in *The Nation* in 1920, to associate the genre with the primal brutality of the mob:

> *[For the average American] his highest luxury is the mass enjoyment of a tribal passion. War, hunting, and persecution are the constant diversions of the primitive mind. And these that mind seeks in the gross mimicry of melodrama. Violence, and especially moral violence, is shown forth, and the audience joins vicariously in the pursuits and triumphs of the action. Thus its hot impulses are slaked. It sees itself righteous and erect, and the*

object of its pursuit, the quarry, discomfited or dead. For the great aim of melodrama is the killing of the villain. . . . The villain, whether tribal enemy, mere foreigner, or rebel against the dominant order, is always represented as an unscrupulous rake. He attacks the honor of native women, and thus—especially if his skin is a tinge darker—there is blended with the other motives of pursuit the motive of a vicarious lynching party of the orthodox kind. The melodrama of this approved pattern brings into vicarious play those forces in human nature that produce mob violence in peace and mass atrocities in war. Nations addicted to physical violence of a simpler and more direct kind have cultivated the arena and the bull ring. Those who desire their impulses of cruelty to seem the fruit of moral energy substitute melodrama.[7]

As we will see in chapter 5, the association between melodrama and "the mob" informed much of the criticism against it, although usually the simple fact of the mass's enjoyment of melodrama, irrespective of any bloodlust, was enough to secure its ill repute.

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Along with excess, another concept merits consideration as the essential core of melodrama. In an ambitious essay, Lea Jacobs has suggested that at the heart of melodrama is the element of "situation."[8] *Situation* is a rather difficult concept to narrow down, but it could be defined as a striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic tension. Situation often entails a startling reversal or twist of events that creates a dramatic impasse, a momentary paralysis stemming from a deadlock or dilemma or predicament that constrains the protagonist's ability to respond immediately. Action might be temporarily suspended when characters are stunned by shocking news (the villain who has been trying to kill the heroine is really her uncle who has stolen her inheritance!), or faced with a deadly peril (the hero looks with alarm as the buzz saw draws ever nearer), or fixed in a deadlock among counterbalancing forces (the hero is in a triangular gun standoff threatening death for all if anyone tries to shoot first—a situation used, for example, in *Pulp Fiction*). Situation involves a considerable amount of suspense—suspense about how the deadlock will be broken, how the protagonist will get out of the plight. Victorian stage melodrama literalized the aspect of arrested action in the form of the tableau, in which actors froze in an arrangement that stark-

ly revealed the dramatic conflict among opposing parties. A contemporary counterpart might be the tense immobility just before the commercial break in a TV soap opera when characters register facial reactions to some kind of bombshell or stiffen in pensive contemplation of the current interpersonal state of affairs. The notion of situation also evokes the serial film's cliffhanger climaxes where narrative action is suspended not only while the wide-eyed protagonist assesses a grave peril but indeed for a full week until the next episode resolves the predicament.

The importance of situation as a peculiar earmark of melodrama is indicated by the frequency with which the term appeared, sometimes in quotation marks, in discussions of melodrama. As a critic maintained in 1907: "What people have always come first to care for [in melodrama] is dramatic situation. . . . They [are] eager to see something happen; they want to have their emotions stirred, their blood quickened. . . . There is an abundance, an inordinate abundance, of situation."[9] A 1914 essay called simply "Ten-Twenty-Thirty" similarly remarked, "There must be a 'situation' . . . two wills clashing together; words that lead and parry, words with a 'punch' behind them."[10] A critic writing in 1919 bemoaned the fact that, "At present the method adopted [in writing melodramas] would appear to be that some person conceives an abomination known as 'a situation': the more ludicrous and revolting it be the more he treasures it."[11]

While the notion of situation provides a valuable conceptual lens for examining melodrama, and while it is clearly applicable to a great many melodramatic moments, one might question whether it can be generalized as the genre's essential defining element.[12] One problem is that it is a very broad and malleable concept and the boundary between a bona fide situation and a more "ordinary" level of dramatic incident is rather hazy. Situation may be a distinguishing feature of melodrama, but one could argue that it is the foundation of many other kinds of stories as well. To this objection one could reply, probably with some justification, that there is indeed a qualitative difference in the intensity of situation in melodrama. Perhaps a more difficult problem has to do with the question of whether situation is in fact a necessary component of *all* melodrama. Does it pertain equally well to both classical melodramas and Hollywood family melodramas and women's pictures of the 1930s–1950s? What if a narrative does not contain an urgent climax involving a shocking reversal or revelation, or a deadlock, or a tem-

porarily immobilizing deadly peril? While Hollywood melodramas may have high points of strong emotion and swelling music, some might maintain a more even dramatic tenor, or contain dramatic peaks that are not sudden, startling, tense, or perilous enough to deliver the kind of swift, powerful impact distinctive of a *situation*.

Jacobs is mindful of the need to relate the concept of situation not only to classical melodrama but to Hollywood melodrama as well. There is a connection, she suggests, in that the female protagonists of Hollywood melodrama are characteristically caught in no-win dilemmas that prevent them from effecting meaningful positive change in their lives. Drawing on an observation by Thomas Elsaesser, Jacobs notes that, "Melodrama tends to generate impasses in which the characters are trapped and find it difficult to take action, to make choices, or to move directly towards some goal."[13] The connection Jacobs proposes highlights the element of arrested or suspended action, action made difficult to implement. There would seem to be a difference, however, between Jacobs's original conception of situation as a brief, climactic local instant of arrested action and the much more diffuse condition of frustration or futility spanning almost the entire plot of a typical Hollywood melodrama. An example of the latter would be the premise of *Written on the Wind* as described by Elsaesser: "Dorothy Malone wants Rock Hudson who wants Lauren Bacall who wants Robert Stack who just wants to die."[14] As I understand her argument, Jacobs would consider this scenario an example of situation because of the narrative impasse portrayed—the characters' inability to fulfill their desires. The definition of situation appears to have slipped from meaning something roughly equivalent to a "thrill"—a highly focused charge of narrative excitement—to meaning something more like an entire scenario. Both classical melodrama and Hollywood melodrama present human crises, but the crises are "situational" in different ways. In the latter, they tend to be more general life crises whose causes span relatively long periods in the protagonist's personal history. Although the films may be punctuated with moments of crisis (for example, people falling down grand stairways as in *Written on the Wind*, *Gone with the Wind*, or *La Signora Di Tutti*), in general the situations in Hollywood melodramas do not quite match the definition of a situation as an intense, climactic plight that is crystallized in a flash and, after a moment of suspense, broken to allow another thrill to develop. Although a very productive critical tool, it remains an open question whether the concept of situation is able to

function as a common denominator or essential element linking all forms of melodrama.

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An alternative approach toward a definition of melodrama is more piecemeal and hence less prone to the difficulty of fitting everything under one umbrella. Rather than looking for a single essence or foundation, I prefer to analyze melodrama as a "cluster concept," that is, to view melodrama as a term whose meaning varies from case to case in relation to different configurations of a range of basic features or constitutive factors. If a word has a set range of applicable features, the meaning of the word in any given instance will depend on precisely which features come into play, and in what combinations.[15] Charting melodrama's genealogy has proven so problematic, and the literature on melodrama is so inconsistent, because over the last two hundred years the genre's basic features have appeared in so many different combinations. An early attempt to define melodrama as a cluster concept was made by William S. Dye in a 1919 dissertation: "In reality, no one form of melodrama exists today. . . . A fair definition would include many characteristics, not all of which might be found in any one play. The definitions might with truth state that either singly or in combination [a range of] elements are to be found in melodrama."[16] Dye goes on to list more than a dozen typical features of melodrama.[17] I will focus on five key constitutive factors (some of which have already been touched on), although certainly more could be justified, as Dye's breakdown suggests.

Pathos The presentation of strong pathos (i.e., the elicitation of a powerful feeling of pity) is, of course, a common element of melodrama, particularly as it is understood in contemporary film studies. Aristotle defined pity as "a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might imagine to happen to ourselves."[18] This is an insightful definition. The first part aptly describes the experience of pathos as a kind of visceral physical sensation triggered by the perception of moral injustice against an undeserving victim. The second part touches on the sense in which pathos requires identification, which, by extension, leads to the notion that pity often (or always?) involves an element of self-pity. Eric Bentley made this observation very directly: "The tears shed by the audience at a Victorian melodrama come under

the heading of a good cry. . . . The phrase 'having a good cry' implies feeling sorry for oneself. The pity is self-pity. . . . Most pity is self-pity. We are identified with those others who are threatened; the pity we feel for them is pity for ourselves."[19] This conception affirms the degree to which the power of pathos derives from a process of emotional identification or, perhaps more accurately, of association, whereby spectators superimpose their own life (melo)dramas onto the ones being represented in the narrative. Melodrama is so moving because it hits home. (Offering support for this notion, students in my melodrama class have often reported that the first thing they did after our screening of *Stella Dallas* was to rush back to their dorm rooms to call their mothers to say how much they love them and to thank them for all their sacrifices.)

Overwrought Emotion Overlapping the strand of pathos to a very large degree, but not entirely, is melodrama's interest in overwrought emotion and heightened states of emotive urgency, tension, and tribulation. As a 1914 screenwriting manual says, "in melodrama . . . all emotion is passion."[20] While the representation of pathos generally involves this kind of dramatic intensity, not all instances of highly charged emotion necessarily involve pathos. For example, the intense emotions portrayed in daytime TV soap operas (jealousy, compassion, envy, greed, spitefulness, lust, etc.) often involve a melodramatic register of overwrought feeling (particularly as amplified by soap opera codes of acting and camerawork) without necessarily depicting the kinds of martyrdom, miscommunication, or helplessness characterizing pathos. A cinematic example might be the scene in the Sirk version of *Imitation of Life* in which the Meredith daughter (Sandra Dee) confronts her mother (Lana Turner) with anger / frustration / resentment / disappointment about the fact that she (Mom) was always too busy with her acting career to really be there for her as a conventionally nurturing mother. This outburst is followed by the mother's own self-defensive reaction of anger/frustration/resentment/disappointment. The scene is melodramatic in its expression of raw emotion, the overcoming of repression in a supercharged climax of full articulation, but there is nothing especially pathos-inducing about the scene.

Moral Polarization An aspect of melodrama invariably mentioned by turn-of-the-century critics is an extreme moral polarization between good and evil—a moral absolutism and transparency in which, in the

blunt phrasing of the 1914 manual cited above, "the hero and the heroine are very, very good; the villain and the adventuress are very, very bad."[21] Melodrama's worldview is simplified; everyone's ethical status is immediately legible. As a critic commented in 1907,

> *The crowd behind the footlights hisses [at the villainness]. . . . She is very wicked, and the wicked are to be held in derision. That is to say, in melodrama. In real life it is often difficult to distinguish between the wicked and the elect; but here,—why her very name is Zidella St. Mar. Can any good come out of Zidella? [Melodrama offers] dear familiar sentiments of primitive black and white morality.*[22]

Another critic writing about a decade later reiterated the motif of black and white moral clarity: "In melodrama black is black and white is white; and the black is of coal-like hue and the white akin to driven snow; there are no half-tones in the coloring."[23] The clarity of melodrama's moral dichotomy stemmed from "a normal sympathy for virtue and hatred for vice [that] wants to express itself,—a sympathy which in real life is often puzzled by circumstances, but which here finds all lines sharply drawn, all actions clearly labeled upon the stage."[24] Melodrama's interest in moral intelligibility reflected, as this writer suggested, a fundamental human impulse, but it was also an impulse inflected by history. Many recent scholars (as I discuss in chapter 5) have interpreted melodrama's insistence on moral affirmation as a symptomatic response to a new condition of moral ambiguity and individual vulnerability following the erosion of religious and patriarchal traditions and the emergence of rampant cultural discontinuity, ideological flux, and competitive individualism within capitalist modernity. Melodrama expressed the anxiety of moral disarray and then ameliorated it through utopian moral clarity.

Nonclassical Narrative Structure A fourth aspect of melodrama has to do with what one might call its nonclassical narrative mechanics. Compared with the classical narrative's logical cause-and-effect structure, melodrama has a far greater tolerance, or indeed a preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be able to be kept in line by a cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression. This is a dimension of melodrama that bourgeois critics traditionally have found particularly objectionable. As

Boston newspaper reviews complained about an 1891 production of *The Wolves of New York*: "Inconsistency and incongruity play very prominent parts in this play. . . . Plot is conspicuous only by its almost utter absence. . . . The spectator goes home with but a vague idea of the plot which he has seen."[25] Rollin Lynde Hartt reiterated this gripe in 1909: "Conceived as a play, [melodrama] involves non sequiturs, discrepancies, contradictions; it makes your head swim. . . . No one cares if there are too many scenes. Nobody cares if the scenes won't hang together."[26] In the same vein, Harry James Smith noted in 1907:

To attempt to give an account of the plot would be useless. The more you examine it, the less there is. There is an abundance, an inordinate abundance, of situation, . . . but when you try to work out the interrelations you are doomed to failure. It would take a higher intelligence to answer all the hows and whys. . . . If your mind is sophisticated enough to insist on logic, it is bound to be left in some confusion.[27]

A British touring manager in the late Teens carped:

Modern melodrama is a shapeless, formless thing. . . . Your melodramatist is ignorant of the rudiments of play-making. The absence of construction in most of his efforts is amazing: no form, no coherence; a story that lags, falters half-way, dodges down blind alleys. . . . A main theme that will carry the play through from beginning to end is hard to find. Without a backbone, wobble is inevitable.[28]

And, lest there be any doubt about melodrama's deviation from the classical model, Henry Tyrell bemoaned in 1904:

In the bright lexicon of the melodramatic playwright, there are no such words as "motive," "character," or "logical development"; but "scene," "startling situation," "appalling peril and heroic rescue" are writ large. His world is indeed a strange one, where the impossible is of everyday occurrence; where miracles come and hunt people up to participate in them; where it is biff! bang! a constant series of phenomena, without preparation or proper sequence.[29]

All these critics point to a melodramatic tendency toward episodic construction resulting from a greater concern for vivid sensation (or "situation") than for narrative continuity. Continuity and "sustained elaboration" was relatively unimportant in melodrama since, as Hartt put it: "Each new shocker obliterates its predecessor, and it is precisely this

brevity of perspective that makes a series of unrelated episodes more facile of interpretation. . . . Make scene depend upon scene and you cruelly overtask the Neolithic mentality."[30] Although with a somewhat milder presumption of stupidity, Smith similarly noted the melodrama audience's short attention span and anticontemplative nature:

> *Whatever situation is proposed must come to its culmination rapidly, directly, and by means which require no thought in order to be fully grasped. There can be no real plot structure here: only episodes; the situations presented simply become more and more startling as the play nears its conclusion.*[31]

Melodrama, Smith stressed, constituted an aesthetic of astonishment, an aesthetic whose focus on rapid, powerful impressions worked against measured causal progression. A variation on this notion has become familiar to recent scholars in the form of "the cinema of attractions." Indeed, Smith made an overt connection between popular melodrama and early cinema. It was no coincidence, he suggested, that the other amusements preferred by the melodrama audience—vaudeville and "penny-in-the-slot arcades" (i.e. movie peep-show kinetoscopes)—were similarly "disjointed and scattering in [their] make-up."

Sensationalism The final constitutive factor of melodrama I propose follows from the one just described. Crucial to a great deal of popular melodrama was sensationalism, defined as an emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of physical peril. This may have been the term's key denotation around the turn of the century—and presumably the one intended for Melodrama in the 1915 Edison quality-control chart mentioned in the introduction. As Frederic Taber Cooper noted in a 1906 article entitled "The Taint of Melodrama": "Ask the next person you meet casually how he defines a melodramatic story, and he will probably tell you that it is a hodge-podge of extravagant adventures, full of blood and thunder, clashing swords and hair's-breadth escapes."[32] Christopher Strong, writing in 1912, declared: "The paranoic who wrote the plays did so because he didn't know Art from Hank; he *did* know that people like *action*, so he gave them more action (and of the same sort) than you would find in an asylum full of delirium tremens fiends and St. Vitus's dance artists."[33] Melodrama's classic iconography, as described by an essayist in 1908, included: "Trap-doors, bridges to be blown up, walls to be scaled, instruments of torture for the

persecuted heroines, freight elevators to crush out the lives of the deserving characters, elevated trains to rush upon the prostrate forms of gagged and insensible girls."[34] A *Harper's Weekly* essayist put it concisely in 1890: "Melodrama . . . must reek with gore."[35] The equating of melodrama with action and violence was reiterated once again in 1919 by Pennsylvania's chief film censor: "One speaks of melodrama as meaning that it in some way is devoted to the exploitation of crime; there is a good deal of crime in it—a murder or two, some robbery and all sorts of violence and everything of that kind. That is the basis of a melodrama."[36]

At the heart of the sensationalism of classical melodrama was not simply action and violence but also a peculiar mode of scenic spectacle that tried to combine amazing sights with credible diegetic realism. As William S. Dye wrote in 1919,

> *Melodrama . . . is a play of . . . dire distresses, of hazardous situations, of thrilling rescues, of theatrical and sensational clap-trap, of suspense and surprise. . . . Throughout all, there is a liberal use of mechanical and electrical effects that run the gamut from a representation of a thunder shower with real rain to a train wreck, a burning steamboat, or an automobile accident, and heroes and heroines are rescued in the nick of time from burning buildings or pulled from the very teeth of huge circular saws in real log-sawing machines, while villains are strapped to switchboards and light through the bodies the great white ways of cities.*[37]

In chapter 6 I will explore in depth sensational melodrama's efforts at spectacular scenographic realism. In the meantime, a brief excursus on melodrama and realism will help avoid some of the confusion that often surrounds the issue.

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Discussions of realism and melodrama can get rather convoluted because several different senses of the word begin to stumble over one another. In many ways, melodrama is patently antirealist—and critics never tired of deriding it as "glaringly false-to-life," "lacking any true realism," and so on. Here, realism would denote something basically akin to "naturalism"—the depiction of ordinary quotidian reality, with an attempt to portray fully developed, psychologically multidimensional "real" characters experiencing "real" situations.[38] Popular stage melodrama occupied the other end of the spectrum—its sensational situations were strikingly out-of-the-ordinary, characters were one-dimen-

sional ethical stand-ins, plot twists were highly implausible, acting was grandiosely artificial, etc. As a critic commented in 1904, "Of any effective analysis of . . . character motives the yellow drama is utterly and grotesquely incapable."[39] A critic writing in 1912 concurred: "Melodrama went on the general principle of taking what was diametrically opposed to actual life and playing that falsity up with all the feverish activity of a lunatic asylum."[40] Melodrama offended the aesthetic sensibilities of cultured theatergoers, who preferred works by Ibsen and others in "the modern school of [drama], the repressed-quietude-of-realism sort."[41] "What is wrong with the melodrama of today," complained a critic in 1919, "[is that playwrights do not] endeavor to make it at least an approach to a reflection of life and reality."[42] Melodrama was, according to a 1906 essay, "a series of happenings that would be impossible in real life, [which] makes you look upon life through defective lenses that magnify and distort reality to the verge of caricature."[43]

With this background, it might appear incongruous that melodrama around the turn of the century was often referred to as "the realistic class of plays."[44] This phrase points to the fact that melodrama immediately conjured up the aspiration toward spectacular diegetic realism. That kind of realism, for which A. Nicholas Vardac proposed the term "Romantic realism," aimed at credible accuracy in the depiction of incredible, extraordinary views. A 1916 publicity article entitled "Risks Life for Realism," describing a scene in a film serial in which a car drives across a 35-foot chasm at 60 mph, proclaimed, "It will give a thrill to the story, and that is what we are after, realism with a big 'R.'"[45] In chapter 6 I try to refine this conception of realism by distinguishing between two varieties of spectatorial apprehension, which I call *apperceptive realism* and *absorptive realism*. For now, it will suffice simply to underscore that sensational melodrama was preoccupied with diegetic realism in general, which involved both efforts at verisimilar mise-en-scène and the use of real objects on stage—real horses, real fire engines, real pile drivers, real water, etc. This sort of realism, not surprisingly, did not assuage proponents of naturalism. As Alan Dale argued in 1899, "Life is generally neglected in melodrama for the sake of a real lamp post, a noisy fire engine, or a mimic storm. . . . Real fire engines and unreal men and women make no appeal to the fastidious."[46] An 1894 review of *A Nutmeg Match* could barely suppress its contempt:

[This melodrama] was evidently written to appease the yearning among playgoers for a drama with a real steam pile-driver in it. It was intended to supply a long-felt want such as those that had been satisfied by the introduction of real fire engines, real patrol wagons and real locomotives as stage properties. The author's task was to take a pile-driver and write a play around it. . . . Now all the good people who were pining for a real pile-driver on the stage and declaring that they would never be truly happy till they had found one there should go and see A Nutmeg Match. *For others, the show possesses only a minor interest. The story is that of a good man and a bad man, who are enemies and rivals. The bad man is about to demolish the good man with the pile-driver when a good girl comes along and saves the good man's life.*[47]

For proponents of naturalism, spectacular diegetic realism was just superficial surface realism. It diverted attention from subtler, more interesting things like character psychology.

Despite melodrama's unabashed fascination with superficial spectacular realism, a considerable amount of criticism upholds melodrama as a genre possessing a kind of profound, beneath-the-surface realism. As Thomas Elsaesser noted in 1972, "Even if the situations and sentiments defied all categories of verisimilitude and were totally unlike anything in real life, the structure had a truth and a life of its own."[48] This third conception of realism shares with traditions of Platonic philosophy and Marxist aesthetics (among others) the presumption that true reality is not to be located in surface appearances. It can be found only at a deeper level, in the underlying forces governing surface phenomena. This approach to melodrama points to its power to expose important underlying dimensions of experience. For example, even though its characters lack psychological depth, melodrama has been championed for its capacity to reveal the reality of the psyche. Melodrama overcomes repression, giving full expression to the magnified passions, the intensities of love and hate residing deep (or not so deep) within us all. Peter Brooks has elaborated this notion most fully, but an earlier concise articulation is from Eric Bentley:

I am arguing, up to a point, that melodrama is actually more natural than Naturalism, corresponds to reality, not least to modern reality, more closely than Naturalism. . . . The melodramatic vision is in one sense simply normal. It corresponds to an important aspect of reality. It is the spontaneous, uninhibited way of seeing things. . . . Melodramatic acting, with

> *its large gestures and grimaces and its declamatory style of speech, is not an exaggeration of our dreams but a duplication of them. In that respect,* melodrama is the Naturalism of dream life. . . . *Melodrama is not so much exaggerated as uninhibited. In* The Interpretation of Dreams *Freud says that neurotics, like children, "exhibit on a magnified scale feelings of love and hatred for their parents." . . . Any nonmagnified feelings represent an ideal standard, and what we all have are the magnified feelings of the child, the neurotic, the savage.*[49]

In a somewhat different vein, melodrama may be said to reveal a basic existential truth about the human condition. As Clayton Hamilton observed in 1911:

> *[In] melodrama . . . the incidents determine and control the character. In both tragedy and comedy, the characters control the plot. . . Life is more frequently melodramatic than tragic. . . . Much of our life—in fact, by far the major share—is casual instead of causal. . . . Nearly all the good or ill that happens to us is drifted to us, uncommanded, undeserved, upon the tides of chance. It is this immutable truth—the persistency of chance in the serious concerns of life and the inevitable influence of accident on character—that melodrama aims to represent. . . . Since the purpose of the drama—like that of all the arts—is to represent the truth of life, the theatre must always rely on melodrama to complete its comment on humanity.*[50]

Melodrama has persisted as a dramatic mode because, in a fundamental sense, it succeeds in expressing "the truth of life," capturing a crucial existential truth, an aspect of life that affects everyone—namely, that, ultimately, we are all governed by random forces of happenstance. We are all flotsam and jetsam adrift in the "tides of chance." In literature this perspective is particularly evident, as Elsaesser recognized, in Dickensian melodrama:

> *What seems to me important in this form of melodrama . . . is the emphasis Dickens places on discontinuity, on the evidence of fissures and ruptures in the fabric of experience, and the appeal to a reality of the psyche—to which the notions of sudden change, reversal and excess lend a symbolic plausibility.*[51]

The universal force of chance and discontinuity may be a metaphysical constant, but it is also one with a sociohistorical trajectory. It loomed large during the rise of modernity, an era defined by cultural

and personal discontinuity, and it possessed particular pertinence for the working class that comprised melodrama's core audience. Hartt, in 1909, argued that there was a basic affinity between melodrama and the volatile nature of working-class life.

In the Grand [i.e., 10–20–30], pray notice, there are many who have had first-hand—or at least second-hand—acquaintance with the melodramatic. From among [them] come firemen, policemen, seamen, and those who gain their bread in trades replete with danger and daring. Meanwhile the tenement street has its daily melodramas, such as they are,—melodramas of crime, drunkenness, and frightful vice, though generally lacking the completeness that would fit them on the stage. . . . The life of the people gives a tremendous reality to the melodramatic.[52]

In other words, incongruous as it may sound, sensationalism actually contains a considerable degree of realism. Melodrama's sensation scenes of course surpassed those of ordinary experience (few members of the audience had dagger fights on the bottom of the East River, or hurtled off the Brooklyn Bridge after their automobile exploded), but the events portrayed nevertheless correlated, even if only loosely, with certain qualities of corporeality, peril, and vulnerability associated with working-class life.

* * *

The contrast between blood-and-thunder sensational melodrama—the melodrama of spectacular diegetic realism—and Hollywood family and maternal melodrama could not be more marked. Sensational melodrama had no interest in exploring emotional nuances in the portraiture of female martyrdom, disillusionment, repression, anxiety, resignation, and frustration. If the family melodrama can be described as a form in which, as Sirk said, everything happens "inside"—within a zone that is doubly "inside," concentrating on the interior spaces of the home and the heart—sensational melodrama was distinct in its externalization, its insistence that everything happen on the outside.[53] It virtually eradicated any characterological complexity, emotional entanglement, or sentiment in favor of a focus on physical action and violence. Sensational melodrama externalized psychology by proclaiming obvious, unequivocal dispositions of villainy, virtue, and valor. At the same time, it externalized its focus of diegetic interest, avoiding the private sphere in favor of an adamantly nondomestic mise-en-scène of criminal dens, submarines, lumber mills, diamond mines, munitions factories, racetracks,

abandoned warehouses, gothic mansions, military front lines, rooftops, airfields, highways, and railways.

As this contrast suggests, melodrama's nature as a cluster concept means that the genre's key constitutive factors can appear in any number of different configurations. One might have two completely distinct combinations—sharing none of the same elements—yet both warranting the label melodrama. Presumably, sometimes all five elements would manifest themselves within the same text, but more commonly, only a few of the factors combined to form particular varieties of melodrama. Hollywood melodramas of the studio-system era generally involved just two of the basic elements: pathos and emotional intensification. In fact, many Hollywood melodramas hinged on the absence of the element most accentuated in classic stage melodrama—i.e., moral polarization between good and evil. Hollywood melodramas focused not on the battle between good and evil characters, but rather on the pathos of situations of moral antinomy in which two or more morally good (or at least nonvillainous) characters find that their interests are fundamentally incompatible. The poignancy of *Stella Dallas*, for example, derives from the fact that one sympathizes with the mother and recognizes her goodness at the same time as one sympathizes with the daughter and recognizes the validity of her embarrassment about her mother's poor taste. The antinomy involves the incompatibility of two ethical imperatives: preserving the maternal family versus allowing the daughter to achieve the upward mobility for which she is so obviously suited. Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, in a similar way, involves the pathos of having to choose between two morally good but irreconcilable options: preserving the mother-daughter bond between Annie and Sarah Jane versus allowing Sarah Jane to escape the injustices of racial bigotry. A secondary (although, as mentioned earlier, somewhat less pathetic) antinomy opposes Lora Meredith's professional freedom as an ambitious actress against her maternal presence in the home—both morally positive but, in the film's logic, contradictory values. *Written on the Wind* also exemplifies the Hollywood melodrama's eschewal of moral polarization. Kyle Hadley, the volatile husband—the person responsible for the wife's suffering—is not vilified and punished, but rather pitied as a victim of alcoholism, depression, and bad parenting. Similarly, the suffering and loneliness of the Rock Hudson character Mitch Wayne (due to unrequited love for his best friend's wife) cannot be blamed on any sinister force, but rather results from his own moral code that compels him to honor the sanctity of marriage.

These examples illustrate the degree to which the melodramatic element of pathos often presupposes the exclusion of the melodramatic element of moral polarization. In contrast, action-oriented melodramas often reverse this formula: they present moral polarization without pathos. For example, serial-queen melodramas like *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *The Hazards of Helen* series (1913–1917), which I investigate in chapter 8, pit nefarious villains against plucky, athletic heroines that are entirely good but in no way pathetic. Because of their heroic agency, or at least their eagerness for risky adventure, the serial-queens' physical victimization never seems to translate into pathos, as it does in a melodrama like *Broken Blossoms* where the imbalance of power is more grossly lopsided and not activated by a voluntarily risk-taking heroine. As a rule, in action melodramas, villains victimize protagonists—through abduction, torture, and every form of imperilment—but if the victimization serves to showcase the protagonists' bravery and resilience, they do not really come across as victims. There is no intimation of weakness or pity, as there is in a pathetic melodrama where the protagonist suffers physical abuse and emotional distress without the power to fight back or respond without profound self-sacrifice.

My argument here differs with one made by Linda Williams. She writes:

> *Melodrama . . . offers some combination of pathos and action. . . . The important point is that action-centered melodrama is never without pathos and pathos-centered melodrama is never without, at least some, action. The dialectic of pathos and action is a crucial feature of all melodrama. . . . The study of melodrama has often suffered from the misperception that it was one or the other of these poles. Melodrama's greatest interest as a form is in the dialectic between them.*[54]

I would certainly agree that a great deal of melodrama interweaves pathos and action. *Way Down East*, which Williams analyzes, is an excellent example: there is superabundant pathos in the guiltless heroine's victimization and self-abnegation, and an impressive dose of action in the climactic waterfall-rescue sensation scene. Williams is astute, furthermore, in stressing that pathos and action serve the same function in the sense that they both establish moral legibility. It is through situations both pathetic and/or active that virtue and villainy are designated. The two are also related as triggers of affective arousal. As Alan Reynolds Thompson remarked in 1928, with reference to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

We should not be surprised that the emotional instability that permits sentimentality makes it possible for the same spectator to feel at the same play a lust for blood and horror. The liberated pendulum of passion swings from the one to the other, and unreasoning sympathy for a victim demands unreasoning hatred for an oppressor.[55]

Pathos and action both share a power to swing “the liberated pendulum of passion.”

However, I think it is an overstatement to assert that melodrama *must necessarily* incorporate both pathos and action. One need only think of any James Bond action thriller. I suppose one could say, with a bit of a stretch, that James Bond is a victim inasmuch as he is the target of attacks by villains intent on killing him, but his predicaments certainly never elicit anything that legitimately could be called pathos. The British playwright and essayist Richard Steele, writing in *The Tatler* in 1710, articulated the key distinction:

Gallant men who are cut off by the sword move our veneration rather than our pity, and we gather relief enough from their own contempt of death to make it no evil [since it] was approached with so much cheerfulness, and attended with so much honor. [However,] when we let our thought wander from such noble objects, and consider the havoc which is made among the tender and the innocent, pity enters with an unmixed softness, and possesses all our souls at once.[56]

We pity the perennially powerless who endure pain through no fault or action of their own. But hardship, abuse, punishment, even death, do not generate pathos if the victim enters into dangers voluntarily, or exhibits sufficient strength, skill, and fortitude of will to allow for the possibility of recuperation, retaliation, or glorification.[57]

* * *

It is important to recognize that just as one can have melodrama without pathos, one might also have pathos without melodrama. Although most narratives that elicit strong pathos are melodramas, they are not necessarily so. An example that comes to mind is Visconti’s *Death in Venice*. The drama of a dying man longing for, and mourning the loss of, youth, beauty, and impossible erotic plentitude, and particularly the final scenes in which he tries to disavow his decay through a grotesquely unsuccessful dandifying makeover, could not possibly be more poignant and pathetic. Like sentimental melodrama, *Death in Venice*

revolves around the pathos of desire for unrealizable love, the pathos of enduring pain caused by forces beyond control, of loss that can never be regained, of the irreversibility of time.[58] Nevertheless, I doubt anyone would categorize the film as part of the melodrama genre, or even as an example of a "melodramatic mode."

Why isn't *Death in Venice* a melodrama? This is a difficult question to answer. To some extent, it may have to do with the naturalism of Dirk Bogarde's performance style. While clearly his character is experiencing emotional turmoil, his expression of emotion (even as underscored by the emotiveness of the Mahler soundtrack) does not seem overwrought or excessive relative to his situation. Another explanation, following Thompson (who follows Clayton Hamilton), might assess the "universality" of the character's duress. For these critics, a defining feature of melodrama is that it preoccupies spectators with immediate sensational crises that have no broad implications beyond the specific narrative situation. The spectator is wrapped up in suspenseful agitation about whether Pauline will escape the buzz saw. Tragedy, on the other hand, supposedly provokes issues and identifications that have philosophical or spiritual weight and universal meaningfulness. Tragedy—and they would see *Death in Venice* as an example—prompts contemplation about the nature of the human condition. As Hamilton put it, tragedy "reveals some phase of the absolute, eternal Truth," that which has relevance to humanity as a whole, not just to the specific characters depicted. While this hypothesis merits further analysis, it is not immediately convincing because it obviously rests on a number of questionable assumptions (for example, about the universality of human nature, about the existence of something called Truth, or about the impossibility of extracting broad sociopsychological significance from melodramatic plights).[59]

A third possible explanation pertains to the complexity of character psychology. Robert B. Heilman proposes the distinction that melodrama characters are "whole" or "monopathic": they are defined by one-sided, unified, unchanging psychological attributes, and the problems that beset them derive from external forces. Tragedy, on the other hand, is built around protagonists who are "divided" or "polypathic," conflicted, torn between contradictory impulses and imperatives; and the problems they experience derive from drives within themselves.[60] Although *Death in Venice* centers around a problem that is, strictly speaking, external and beyond control (human ephemerality, the impossibility of

reversing time, the painful lure of unattainable beauty), the protagonist's situation definitely sets off a complex range of internal anxieties, fears, passions, doubts, and conflicting impulses. It may be the complexity, ambiguity, and delicacy of characterization that keeps *Death in Venice* from being a melodrama. But then again, considering Hollywood melodrama's structure of moral antinomy mentioned earlier, it is perhaps an oversimplification to suggest that melodramas cannot also feature the characterological complexity of divided protagonists. Sarah Jane in *Imitation of Life* is clearly anguished by her conflicting impulses as a daughter who loves her mother, and as a young woman refusing to acquiesce to a pernicious system of racial injustice. Why a film like *Imitation of Life* is a melodrama, but a film like *Death in Venice* is not, remains an open question.

* * *

Despite some lingering ambiguities, melodrama, I have argued, is a highly variable but not utterly amorphous genre. It contains works constructed out of many different combinations of a set of primary features: pathos, emotionalism, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative form, and graphic sensationalism. Whereas most film studies work on melodrama has focused on the first two of these elements, the chapters that follow concentrate on a form of melodrama that potentially combines all five elements, but at minimum absolutely requires two—moral polarization and sensational action and spectacle. Before examining the nature and history of sensational melodrama in popular-priced theater and cinema, we begin, in the next two chapters, by exploring melodrama's context in a broad sense, focusing not on melodrama specifically but on the phenomenon of modern sensationalism in general.