Melodrama as a "Foster Child"

of Art and Literature

Yakut AKBAY[*]

Abstract

Melodrama is an exaggerated characterization of stereotypical characters expressed with strong and sentimental emotions. The major focus of this subgenre is family issues, love, and marriage. Apart from its dramatic features, melodrama has musical elements combining speech and song onstage. Accommodating both musical and dramatic elements, melodrama may be viewed as a form of art and literature. This article examines various views of literary scholars who attempt to pinpoint melodrama suggesting a range of dramatic and artistic peculiarities shared by such literary genres and movements as tragedy and realism. It is argued that despite having so many common theatrical characteristics, melodrama has never been regarded as the highest artistic form; instead, it has always been marginalized and viewed as a "foster child" of art and literature.

Keywords: Art, Drama, Genre, Melodrama, Tragedy.

[*] Asst. Prof. Dr., Ankara Science University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English Translation and Interpretation, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1557-232X, E-mail: yakut.akbay@ankarabilim.edu.tr

Melodram: Sanat ve Edebiyatın "Üvey Evladı"

Öz

Melodram, güçlü ve duygusal duygularla ifade edilen basmakalıp karakterlerin abartılı bir şekilde ifade edilmesidir. Bu alt türün ana odak noktası aile sorunları, aşk ve evliliktir. Dramatik özelliklerinin yanı sıra, melodram, sahnede konuşma ve şarkıyı birleştiren müzik unsurlarına sahiptir. Hem müzikal hem de dramatik unsurları barındıran melodram, bir sanat ve edebiyat biçimi olarak görülebilir. Bu makale, trajedi ve realizm gibi edebi türler ve akımlar tarafından paylaşılan bir dizi dramatik ve sanatsal özelliği öne sürerek melodramı tanımlamaya çalışan edebiyat bilim adamlarının çeşitli görüşlerini incelemektedir. Bu kadar çok ortak teatral özelliğe sahip olmasına rağmen, melodramın hiçbir zaman en yüksek sanatsal tür olarak görülmediği savunulmaktadır; bunun yerine, melodram daima ötekileştirilmiş ve sanat ve edebiyatın "üvey evladı" olarak görülmüştür.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Sanat, Drama, Tür, Melodram, Trajedi.

Melodrama as a "Foster Child" of Art and Literature

Melodrama is regarded as one of the romantic subgenres of drama. It is accompanied by music to emphasize the effect of certain scenes. The word "melodrama" originated from a combination of the Greek "melos", meaning music and the French "drame", representing its presence in theatre (Cuddon, 2013, p. 428). Combining the elements of speech and song, the emergence of melodrama is thought to coincide with the beginning of opera in the 16th century in Europe (428). The development of opera, which was "an attempt to revive Classical tragedy", largely contributed to the flourishing of melodrama as the mixture of "music and drama". (Cuddon, 2013, p. 428). However, the position of this subgenre in literature took place much later, towards the end of the 18th century, when French dramatists began to develop melodrama as a distinct genre. They elaborated the dialogue and added more of "spectacle, action and violence" to it (Cuddon, 2013, p. 428). As a result, with sensational and extravagant appeal to the emotions of the audience, it gained popularity throughout Europe.

Some of the most remarkable examples of melodrama of the 18th century were Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1775), Gabiot's *L'Auto-da-fé* (1790) and Gilbert de Pixérécourt's *Coelina, ou l'enfant du mystère* (1800) (Cuddon, 2013, p. 429). The 19th century, in its turn, witnessed the further development of this subgenre as "a kind of naively sensational entertainment" that contained protagonists being "excessively virtuous or exceptionally evil" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 429). Moreover, there was "an abundance of blood, thunder, thrills and violent action" making use of "spectres, ghouls, witches, vampires and

many a skeleton from the supernatural cupboard, and also (in more domestic melodrama) a sordid realism in the shape of extravagant tales of the wickedness of drinking, gambling and murdering" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 429). Indeed, with all the above-mentioned theatrical effects, melodrama was the most popular kind of entertainment of the 19th century.

Scholars suggest various definitions as to the position of melodrama in art and literature. Considering the presence of exaggerated and unnatural effects and the fact that most of its audience came from various social backgrounds, Professor John defines melodrama as a subgenre which "evolved with an uneducated audience in mind, thus offering an ideal aesthetic template through which to reach those often excluded from serious literature" (John, 2009, p. 2). He furthers his argument by stating that for this reason "more people went to the theatre during the nineteenth century than at any time in history" (qtd .in John, 2009, p. 1). On the other hand, Ben Singer believes that "a middle-ground position will be most useful" for the situation of melodrama in literature (2001, p. 7). He suggests placing melodrama "somewhere between a specific, fixed, coherent single genre and a pervasive popular mode spanning many different genres" (Singer, 2001, p. 7). Singer's definitional scheme analyses melodrama as a "cluster concept" that involves different combinations of five key constitutive elements: "strong pathos; heightened emotionality; moral polarization; nonclassical narrative mechanics; and spectacular effects" (p. 7). Apart from its literary elements, Singer also emphasizes the factor of different historical phases undergone by melodrama, which adds more ambiguity to its position making it difficult to

pinpoint the genre. Furthermore, melodrama triggers another variety of agitation as well, which Singer explains as follows:

> 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. For instance, an animal being abused or a mother having her baby torn away from her are scenes designed to generate unbridled agitation, a mode of visceral excess in the spectator (p. 40).

Nevertheless, scholars strive to clarify the present position of melodrama in literature by putting forth more lucid and thus more intelligible description of this dramatic form. To illustrate, Booth explains that melodrama is "emotional theatre dealing with suffering, suspense, romance and evil deeds" and that "the main purpose of melodrama" is "not credibility, but the capacity to ignite the audience's reactions" (1965, p. 117). He clarifies his definition by identifying melodrama as a dramatic genre that has the basic universal moral, which consists in the "struggle between good and evil, and the re-establishment of a morally correct and just society" (p. 117). Melodramatic plays are based on "extreme situations and extreme states of being", such as "justice versus revenge, honesty versus dishonesty, and innocence versus corruption" (Booth, 1965, p. 117).

The plot structure in melodrama follows a neatly organized Freytag's pyramid, which consists of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Melodrama is typically set in the private sphere, whose subject matter is usually family issues, love, and marriage. The introduction in melodrama presents characters and the conflict where a provocation serves as

an initial cause driving the story to move forward. In most cases this provocation stems from the avarice or jealousy of a wicked character. Throughout the play, the protagonist conflicts with the antagonist, which leads to the penalty of the wicked character and the hero saving the day. As a dramatic form, melodrama also requires the use of powerful facial expressions, movements, and gestures. Booth explains that this acting style was "the norm for actors in 19th-century melodramas" and "audiences of this period took this form of theatre seriously and would see the highly dramatic and meaningful gesture as part of a great actor's success" (p. 118). Melodramatic characters are usually recognizable types often referred to as "stock characters". This set of characters consists of a hero, who is described as handsome, strong, brave, honest and reliable and whose status is either middle class or higher; a heroine, who is beautiful, courageous, innocent, and vulnerable and belongs either to the middle class or higher class; a villain, who is cunning, without morals, dishonest, cruel and evil and whose status is either middle class or higher; a villain's accomplice, who usually provides comic relief because he is the bumbling sidekick and whose status is lower class; a faithful servant, who comes from the lower class and who also provides comic relief, does the dirty work and usually discovers evidence against the villain; a maidservant, who is usually a lively a female character from the lower class, serving as a confidante of the heroine and flirting with the faithful servant (Booth, 1965, p. 118).

Despite the above characteristics and a stereotypical portrayal of characters, the status of melodrama as a dramatic form is still ambiguous. Distinguishing between tragedy and melodrama, Thompson states that "in

one fundamental respect both melodrama and tragedy have the same effect; both produce in the audience an illusion of reality", by which "the audience willingly suspend disbelief; for the time they identify themselves with the action" (2014, p. 814). However, the extent and force with which this illusion is produced in melodrama is much more exaggerated than in tragedy; otherwise, as Thompson argues, the spectator "could not enjoy the horrors in a melodrama" and "no melodrama succeeds as melodrama unless it can create this illusion in the minds of the audience" (p. 814). As compared to tragedy, in conventional melodrama, there is a clear-cut division between the serious and comic characters, which allows "the farcical scenes to be played solely by comic and subordinate characters" (Thompson, 2014, p. 814). Indeed, "at times a fool may be seen on the stage with a hero; but then the folly of the one and the serious qualities of the other are heightened by contrast, not confused" (p. 814). Due to the strict separation of the serious and the comic, some scholars consider melodrama "illogical and sometimes irrational tragedy", which "aims at startling, not at convincing, and is little concerned with causes so long as it attains effects" (Thompson, 2014, p. 815-6). Moreover, while tragedy deals with internal flaws, the focus of melodrama is external force.

Melodrama is also distinguished from another form of theatre – realism. Realism is an artistic representation of real life on the stage and for the characters to be believable, the actors must genuinely feel the same emotions as their character. Although there are certain melodramatic elements present both in realistic and naturalistic plays, melodrama is a presentational form of drama whose main purpose is not to convince the

audience in the plausibility of the events happening on the stage but to reach its audience igniting a reaction through exaggerated and sensational plots.

As a dramatic and artistic form, melodrama has never been regarded as one of the highest styles of expression either in art or in literature. Marginalized and hardly identified as drama, it has always been depicted as a light-hearted, unserious, and undesirable form of art. Its intensive and implausible characterization and plots emphasized by unnatural and thrilling effects have been disapproved by most of the art and theatre critics. Nevertheless, its existence within art and literature was made possible due to its major dramatic qualities and effects performed on the stage for centuries.

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