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# Melodrama

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The Melodrama plot structure is sometimes referred to as “women’s fiction,” as soap operas and television movies fall into this category, but this is not entirely accurate.

While both women’s fiction and Melodrama primarily focus on women’s lives, relationships, family, and the female point of view and are emotionally engaging, they differ in that women’s fiction also encompasses books such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, which is not considered Melodrama at all and has a fairly traditional plot structure to it.

Melodrama is at its core just that—melodramatic. In fact there are two types of Melodrama—the Female Melodrama and the Male Melodrama. This is why Melodrama is not just considered women’s fiction.

## The Two Types

Female Melodrama differs from women’s fiction in that it is always centered on tragedy, usually involving family relationships; it is sometimes open-ended and goes over-the-top in emotionality and sentiment as it primarily focuses on a Victim.

The male characters are brought into the female domestic space where they must learn to value domestic life. The Female Melodrama is left unresolved in the end. It is the process of and behavior within the narrative that brings pleasure to the reader or viewer, as the female character will usually lose out in the end. Patriarchal culture usually has no place for her outside of the standard female role and domestic sphere.

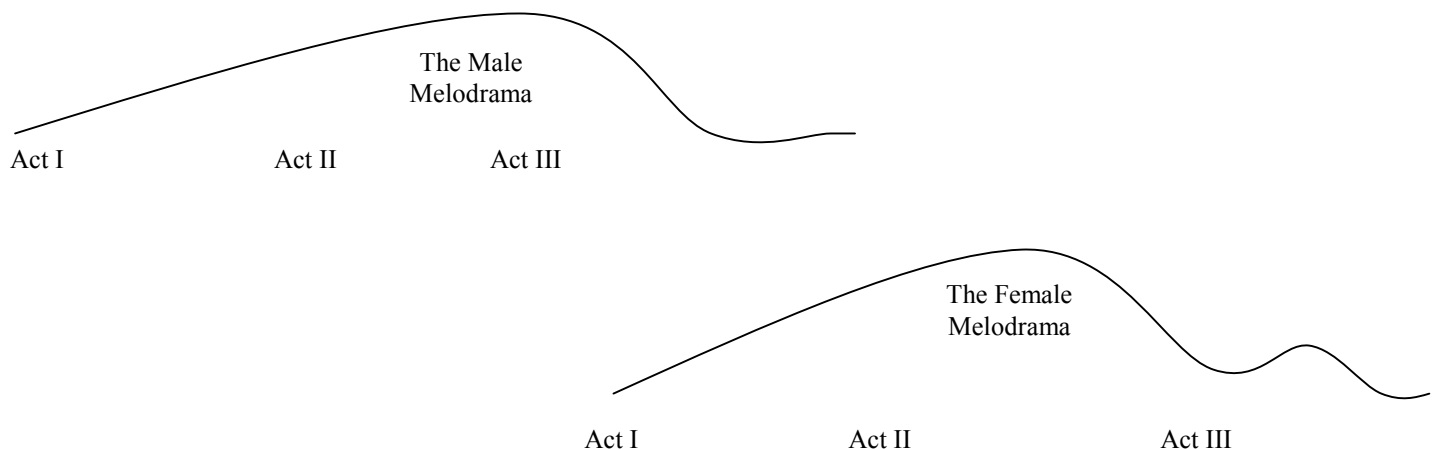
Of course many new writers are doing away with this type of tragic ending for the female melodramatic character, which is fine because Melodrama is centuries old and is constantly changing with the times. Melodrama first appeared in medieval morality plays and has since been in a state of revision according to the social structure of the time period.

The Male Melodrama encompasses many science fiction stories such as *Dune* and Westerns that deal with issues revolving around family. Susan Hayward, author of *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*, says,

The characters played by James Dean in his films of the 1950s certainly reflect an unwillingness to fulfill society’s expectation of male adulthood...In male weepies, through a portrayal of masculinity in crisis, melodramas exposes masculinity’s contradictions...The male either suffers from the inadequacies of his father, is in danger or extinction from his murderous father, or he fails his own family.

Unlike the Female Melodrama, the Male Melodrama is reconciled in the end, but the character must find a compromise between his family life and his “other” life outside the domestic sphere. The main focus of the Male Melodrama is on family relationships.

There is a sense of a clear three-act beginning, middle, and end to Melodrama, but the ending in the Female Melodrama is open-ended or ambiguous and follows a Final Obstacle. Like a soap opera, the Female Melodrama reader is left knowing the story will continue.



Both types of Melodrama are primarily character driven as the emotions, decisions, and dreams of the characters drive the story forward.

**Elements of Plot:** See class notes

## Act I Questions

- What makes you feel uncomfortable? Can you use that to set the Tone in the opening scenes?
- Who or what will the Villain be? If it is the Main Character hurting herself, how will you show this?
- Can you come up with different characters to use in the Turning Point? Is one more traumatic than the other? Is the Main Character closer to one over the other? Will this add betrayal to the Turning Point?
- Can you spice up a supporting character so he really rubs the Main Character the wrong way?

## Act II Questions

- What types of psychological issues does your Main Character have? Does she seek help at all? Is she even aware of it?
- How much Conflict will you have in this act? (There is never too much in Melodrama; make sure it is organic to the story and don't throw in extra characters just to make it work.)
- Will you have more than one Temporary Triumph? (In Melodramas you can. Using the previous example, the Main Character receives roses—but they're for the neighbor. Then the phone rings and she's all excited as she goes to answer it—but it's the wrong number. Finally she hears a car horn outside and rushes to the window as happy as ever—only to find an angry cabdriver yelling at the man in the street.)
- Will a theme start to emerge in this Act?

## Act III Questions

- If using Female Melodrama, will the hero be successful in the end? If so, in what ways is her life still unsuccessful?
- If using Female Melodrama, will the story continue on after this ending? (Think of soap operas that continue on indefinitely.)
- If using Male Melodrama, will the hero find peace in the end?
- What happens to other characters in the story? Do they change at all? Do they resist change and therefore extend the story beyond the ending?
- Will the Main Character have to separate from the family to grow?

## Examples

### All That Heaven Allows, DOUGLAS SPARK

A wealthy widow falls in love with a much younger gardener. This gives the country club set something to gossip about, and her children are ashamed that she plans to remarry below her station.

### The First Time, JOY FIELDING

Art dealer Mattie Hart seems to be enjoying a perfect life. But ever since her nasty marriage, her husband has been sleeping around and he now plans on leaving her. Just as he is about to tell her he's leaving, she is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

### Rebel Without a Cause, NICHOLAS RAY

A rebellious young man with a troubled past comes to a new town, finding friends and making enemies. HE hopes to fill the emptiness inside him, where his family's love should be.

