

Victorian Melodrama

What is melodrama?

Victorian melodrama was a particular theatrical style that emerged in the Victorian age. As the Industrial Revolution resulted in more people going out to work in urban areas, the working class wanted to relax after a long day at work by going to the theatre! However, many of the working class in Victorian Britain were illiterate, meaning they didn't know how to read or write, meaning that they didn't want to attend theatre that was going to be high-brow and difficult to understand. Melodrama is an incredibly successful and well-attended form of theatre, then and now! Melodrama was the precursor to a lot of exaggerated and dramatic movies that we can watch today.

There are characteristics that separate a play from a melodrama:

- It must be an exciting story and almost always have a happy ending.
- Good characters are rewarded, and bad characters are punished.
- It usually contains six stock characters: the mean villain, the sensitive hero, the persecuted heroine, the clown, the faithful friend, and the villain's accomplice.
- Audiences were encouraged to cheer and boo where appropriate.
- It has music! As "melo" is Greek for "music" (like in "melody"), and "drama" comes from the Greek "dran" which means "play."
- At certain moments, the actors would pause while music played so that audiences could have a moment to appreciate just how exciting the situation was.

One of the most iconic and popular melodramas of the Victorian age was called 'Under the Gaslight' and was written in 1867 by Augustin Daly. In 'Under the Gaslight', Daly created a very popular trope that would be seen in cartoons and movies for decades to come... a villain tying someone to train tracks, being saved seconds before being hit by a train. Typically, we see the heroine tied to the tracks, being saved by the hero, but in 'Under the Gaslight', it was originally a male character tied to the tracks, saved by a woman.

Acting in melodrama

Victorian theatres and music halls did not have microphones, meaning that actors and other performers needed to make it clear to large (and often rowdy) audiences when they were feeling particular emotions through mime and gestures. There were even some handbooks for Victorian actors that told them how to perform every emotion.