

Melodrama

NARRATIVE PROPERTY

Melodrama, in Western theatre, sentimental drama with an improbable [plot](#) that concerns the [vicissitudes](#) suffered by the virtuous at the hands of the villainous but ends happily with virtue triumphant. Featuring stock characters such as the noble hero, the long-suffering heroine, and the cold-blooded villain, the melodrama focusses not on character development but on sensational incidents and spectacular staging. In music, melodrama signifies lines spoken to a [musical](#) accompaniment

The melodramatic stage play is generally regarded as having developed in France as a result of the impact of [Jean-Jacques Rousseau's](#) *Pygmalion* (1762; first performed 1770) on a society torn by violent political and social upheaval and exposed to the influences of the English [Gothic novel](#) and of [Sturm und Drang](#) (Storm and Stress) and [Romanticism](#) from Germany. The pioneer and prime exponent of the 18th-century French melodrama with its music, singing, and spectacular effects was Guilbert de [Pixérécourt](#). His *Coelina, ou l'enfant de mystère* (1800) was translated as *A Tale of Mystery* (1802) by [Thomas Holcroft](#) and established the new [genre](#) in England. It was not utterly new to England, however; the restrictions of the Licensing Act of 1737 had been habitually evaded by combining drama with music, singing, and dancing.

Another prominent dramatist whose melodrama influenced other countries was the German [August](#) von Kotzebue. His *Menschenhass und Reue* (1789) became tremendously popular in England as *The Stranger* (1798); he also provided the original of [Richard Brinsley Sheridan's](#) *Pizarro* (1799). In the early 19th century, melodrama spread throughout the European theatre; in Russia the authorities welcomed it as diverting attention from more serious issues.

During the 19th century, music and singing were gradually eliminated. As technical developments in the theatre made greater realism possible, more emphasis was given to the spectacular—*e.g.*, snowstorms, shipwrecks, battles, train wrecks, [conflagrations](#), earthquakes, and horse races. Among the best known and most representative of the melodramas popular in England and the United States are *The Octoroon* (1859) and *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), both by [Dion Boucicault](#). More sensational were *The Poor of New York* (1857), *London by Night* (1844), and *Under the Gaslight* (1867). The realistic staging and the social evils touched upon, however perfunctorily and sentimentally, anticipated the later theatre of the Naturalists.

With the growing sophistication of the theatre in the early 20th century, the theatrical melodrama declined in popularity. It was a vigorous form, though, in [motion picture](#) adventure serials until the advent of sound. The exaggerated gestures, dramatic chases, emotional scenes, simple flat characters, and impossible situations were later revived and parodied. Melodrama makes up a good part of contemporary television drama.