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**SOAP OPERA – A LITERARY OR SOCIAL PHENOMENON?**

**Key words:** ancient drama, Aristotle, tragedy, melodrama, soap opera

***Abstract:*** *The article entitled “Soap Opera – A Literary or Social Phenomenon?” analyses the decline of ancient Greek drama into new genres, which, however, answer different social context than the ancient dramas. That inevitably affected the audience, genres, tone, and structure of plot as well as artistic aims of present day plays. The author of the article analyses the genre of melodrama in detail and sees its focus on emotional experience as the source of its immense popularity regardless to its low rationality. The author also points out the evolution of literary genres and illustrates it by the genesis of melodrama into present-day soap operas.*

**Introduction**

Soap operas such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and recently *ER* and *Desperate Housewives*, to name a few; have become a globalised commodity affecting worldwide audience of various ages and cultures, social classes and denominations. That classifies “soaps”, a light genre traditionally looked down on, among attention-deserving social phenomena, shaping many mainstream opinions regarding not only lifestyle and housekeeping but also major issues such as national identity. To understand, however, why soap operas are so effective and globally popular, we need to understand their birth and genesis within their literary and social context.

**History of ancient drama**

Aristotle (*Poetics*, 355 AD) defined the first two literary genres – tragedy and comedy [1:90]. He rated tragedy the highest and noblest genre for its didactic aim which was to improve morally not only individuals but the whole society through the tragic action of a play. The ancient Greeks believed in the ideal *kalokagathia* (a combination of two Greek words; *kalos*, “good”and *kagathos,* “virtuous”), celebrating perfection of physical body and moral character. Thus, for an ancient Greek, attending a tragedy in the coliseum was an exercise of soul comparable to exercise of his muscles in *gymnasion*.

Based on the period plays by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylos, Aristotle set several criteria for the classical tragedy. Formal criteria were later amended by the German literary critic and writer Gustav Freytag (1816-1895) and became famous as “Freytag´s pyramid“[2:216]:

**Reversal Climax (*Catharsis*)**

**Rising action Falling action**

**Exposition Resolution (Catastrophe)**

Apart from formal criteria Aristotle also suggested several content-related features of “perfect” tragedy. These Aristotelian criteria focused on several phenomena: the nature of tragic hero, the order of events (also known as tragic plot), tragic irony and many others. The most important perhaps was the emotional and intellectual peak of tragedy called *catharsis* usually defined as the irreversible point of events when both the tragic character and the spectator understand that even though tragic heroes decisions we pre-conceived by fate (Greek: *moira*, *aisa*), usually initiated by Greek gods, the hero could not have done otherwise and his (rarely her) decision was the only rational and logical one. Thus, the ancient tragedy was rational at the first place and the spectator found it easy to come to one with the main character both emotionally and rationally. Aristotle here speaks about the emotions of *eleon* (sympathy with what has happened to the tragic hero) and *phobon* (fear that something similar could happen to anybody) [3:24-44] and both these emotions lead to the peak point of tragedy – *catharsis*. *Catharsis* then was often translated as “purification”, emotional cleansing. The spectator through the tragic action experienced emotional rebirth and understood more about himself, other people and the society.

**Deterioration of ancient drama into “new” genres** – **melodrama, psychological drama and social drama.**

The originally noble and didactic ancient Greek tragedy later altered and many spoke about its downfall decline. Some of the changes were related to its contents, e. g. Roman tragedy introduced violence on the stage (unprecedented in the Greek tragedy where violence was always reported indirectly, for example by a messenger). However, most changes were introduced as a result of 19th century changes in the genres, topics, theatrical technology and also social changes. Many of these literary changes were rooted in literary and also social and cultural changes taking place in the newly formed country, the USA, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Originally, there was nothing like American theatre at all. The Puritans considered theatre and almost any impersonation of dramatic action as “satanic” and “devilish” and banned any form of dramatic arts [4:330-383]. The first theatrical performances on the American continent emerged mostly after the War of Independence; however, the aims of the first performances were commercial rather than artistic. One of the critics had it, at the time of its introduction to the American public; the American theatre was neither American nor theatre. The plays shown to the American 19th century spectators were mostly European borrowings including renowned authors such as Shakespeare and popular genres such as comedies; or, they were various forms of adaptations of famous plays for so called “boat shows” aimed at specific types of spectators – e. g. some plays were staged to help the Mississippi steamer passengers to pass long voyages [5:34]. Another immensely popular type of performance was represented by melodramas among which, *Three Musketeers* (1844) and *The* *Count of Monte Christo* (Alexandre Dumas, 1844-1845)were perhaps the most notable one.

Melodramas were opposite of ancient tragedies in many aspects. However, many melodramatic aspects often resemble traditional tragedy but in ironic, mocking form. An American critic T. W. Hatlen notes; melodrama is to tragedy as farce is to comedy [6:37-40].

Where do the major differences between tragedy and melodrama lie? First and the most striking difference is that the artistic aim of melodramas was entertaining (arising sensation and extreme emotions) rather than didactic (appealing both to reason and emotions). All the formal and content-based features of melodrama, including the typology of protagonists and antagonists, structure of plot, ending and many others were subordinated to its sensational function.

Melodramas attempted to show an exceptional individual just like tragedy; however, melodramas divided characters into rather schematic categories. There was a usual dichotomy – an extremely positive “hero”, and an antagonistic, extremely negative villain. The third character was usually a passive woman figure, “a lady in need”, who was saved, infatuated and often married by the hero.

Melodramatic plot involved numerous unpredictable twists of “fate” however; it was a parody of ancient Greek tragic fate – oftentimes represented by mediocre problems such as intrigues of the villain and pre-arranged marriage to an unloved man. The melodramatic hero proved his qualities by overcoming these obstacles and the melodrama ended either in happy ending or in so called “poetic justice” – villains were justly punished and the good characters justly rewarded [6:37].

As the aim of melodrama was to increase maximum sensation, the authors often fuelled the plot by sudden and unexpected events such as nuptials, kidnap, missing child later found, emergence of an evil twin, etc. Therefore, melodrama has several peaks, instead of one peak in tragedy. *The Count of Monte Christo* is a typical example of multiple emotional climaxes:



Picture 1: Top – extreme happiness, bottom – extreme unhappiness.

Structure of the plot of *The Count of Monte Christo:*

1. Edmond Dantes, a young promising sailor meets Napoleon, obtains his letter for rebels and is offered of a captain’s post in reward, expecting marriage to beautiful Mercedes.
2. Two villains, Danglars and Mondega were envious of Dantes´ success and tipped him to the police.
3. Dantes was imprisoned in fort D´If on his wedding day.
4. Dantes attempted suicide.
5. Dantes met an imprisoned scholar Abe Faria who taught Dantes languages and good manners; Dantes digged a tunnel from the prison.
6. Dantes escaped from the prison.
7. Dantes found the pirate treasure (thanks to the navigational and language skills learnt from Abe Faria).
8. Competing the revenge: Dantes, now Monte Christo, punished all the villains: Danglars was lead to bankruptcy, Mondega was disclosed as a traitor, Villeford lead to social disaster. Even Mercedes was abandoned.
9. Monte Christo leaves France with a young Haydeé.

The primary goal of melodrama was to maximize the emotional impact on the spectator, thus, the rationality was secondary and a chance often played a grave role in the development of the plot. For example, present-day spectators might find it hard to believe that Dantes (Monte Christo) was imprisoned and sentenced on the same day just seconds before his marriage. However, rationality in melodrama was secondary, and thus, melodramatic heroes often found themselves in similar, hard-to-believe circumstances: in deserts without water, in wilderness without proper equipment and fire or tangled in a net of hard-to-believe intrigues and plotting, just like count Monte Christo.

This multi-climax structure of melodrama was immensely popular and many plays were often derivational and structurally almost identical. However, at the beginning of the 20th century the American audience diverted their attention towards more plausible and rational plays. David Belasco, a renowned critic states the imperative of the period: “Everything must be realistic” [7:88].

Therefore, many early 20th century US dramatists introduced new elements into classical melodramas, or rather, changed both their structure and contend by introducing psychology (Eugene Gladstone O´Neill, Edward Albee), social aspects (Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams) and melodrama finally made way for more up to date genres such as social drama and psychological drama.

**“Soaps”**

Soap opera gained its title after its first sponsors, soap manufacturers who funded many early 20th century’s radio serials [8:80-81]. The first soap opera (*Painted Dreams,* written by Irna Phillips), intended for female audience had a premiere on October 20, 1930 in Chicago. The first national soap (*Betty and Bop*, created by Frank and Anne Hummert for NBC radio) emerged in1932. Phillips and Hummerts later created numerous “soaps” for radio, but Phillips gradually made transition to television and even after decades, Phillips wrote renowned serials *As the World Turns*, *The Guiding Light* and *Days* *of Our Lives* [8:81]. Other prolific soap opera writers were Ellen Carrington (*The Red Addams*), Agnes Nixon (*All My Children*), and Lee Phillip Bell (with her husband Will Bell, *The Young and The Restless*; *The Bold and The Beautiful*).

As gender roles changed after the Second World War, the target audience changed as well toward a more all-inclusive one, including not only housewives but also male viewers, teenagers and the elderly spectators. This change affected the choice of themes and topics which spanned from the original melodramatic hassles of love to property gaining and maintaining, family heritage and various adjacent legal and moral aspects.

In the 1970s, professional life became the centre of attention and many soap operas focused on specific professional areas, for example the medical field (*ER, General Hospital*), farm and factory-management (*Dallas, Dynasty*) and even beach management (*Baywatch*). Some modern soap operas, however, diverted from its original “light” artistic goals. Most recent soap operas (e. g. *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City*) dare to focus even on unprecedented taboo topics, such as abortion, infertility, depression, child abuse, AIDS and variety of other controversial topics [8:84]. Another present-day series, *Downton Abbey*, awarded by six Emmy Awards and two BAFTA awards [9], has many features of a classic soap opera. On the other hand, it incorporates many features of traditionally high genres – psychological insight into character´s mind, divorce from black-and-white melodramatic character structure, elaborated plot based on logical and believable subject, historically accurate details, to name a few. Thus, soap opera (or at least some of its more artistic and intellectually demanding representatives) made a giant leap back to the original high aims of classical drama.

**Conclusion**

Soap operas derived from late 19th century melodrama. Both melodramas and soaps became in their times immensely popular, yet they were looked down upon for their supposedly low artistic aspirations. Recent trends in modern soaps however demonstrate that any literary genre is a subject to evolution. A French critic, F. Bruntére was among the first who observed the evolution of literary genres in his study *L´Évolution des genres dans l´histoire de la littérature* in 1890. He divided the “life” of literary genres into five stages:

1. Creation of a genre,

2. Differentiating (from other genres),

3. Stabilisation of a genre,

4. Modification,

5. Transposition into other genres or integrating features of other genres [10:15].

The idea of evolution of literary genres has been followed by many scholars, for example J. Hvišč (*Problémy literárnej genológie*, 1979), J. Hrabák (*Poetika*,1973), J. Pašteka (*Estetické paralely umenia*, 1976), I. Pospíšil (*Rozpětí žánru*, 1994) and A. Miller (*Tragedy and the Common Man*, 1948) [11]. Many modern soap operas thus, as a result of various literary as well as extraliterary factors, including the development of most societies toward the ideas of liberalism, democracy and tolerance have altered. They borrow from other, more respectable and artistic genres and head more towards rationalism and psychological and historical accuracy. In this manner, they approximated in many aspects the original tragedies.

There are still many “soaps” that do not set for themselves any higher artistic goals. Observant spectators usually do not find it difficult to identify them. These modern melodramas copy the traditional structure of melodramas and rationality makes way to extreme, often hard-to-believe emotions. It is not; however, the failure of the genre but of the disrespect toward the natural development of genres and inability to divorce oneself from historical and dated genre forms.

Literary genres, just like human society, are subject to evolution. They reflect social changes, in terms of priorities, values, social hierarchy and also social taboos and codes [12:1-3] [13:1-10]. Filmmakers and screenwriters cannot ignore this development; otherwise they risk lack of plausibility of their art. The development of literary genres, even the “light” and “profane” ones is thus inevitable; however, modification and transposition of genres can result in new, artistically enhanced and improved forms.

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