

ANTI-RATIONAL DRAMA: VICTORIAN MELODRAMA
AND THE SILVER KING

by

GARY MICHAEL NIEMCZYK, B.A. in Ed.

A THESIS

IN

ENGLISH

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Technological College
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

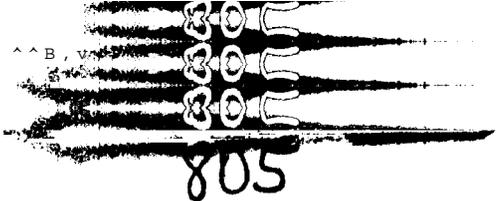
MASTER OF ARTS

Approved

TEXAS TECHNOLOGICAL COLLEGE

LUBBOCK, TEXAS

• **LIBRARY**



T3

Mo. 102
. Cop. Z

I am deeply indebted to
Professor Roger Leon Brooks
for his direction of this thesis

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. MELODRAMATIC ACTION	7
Melodramatic Action Defined	7
Loose, Episodic Structure	10
Physical Action	12
Thrills	17
Exaggerated Crises and Climaxes	22
Outrageous Coincidence	26
Arbitrary Poetic Justice and the Reassuring Ending	30
Heightened Language, the Aside, and the Soliloquy	32
III. MELODRAMATIC CHARACTER	36
Melodramatic Character Defined	36
The Melodramatic Hero	45
The Melodramatic Villain	54
IV. CONCLUSIONS	66
NOTES	74
LIST OF WORKS CITED	80

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Of all the arts practiced in the Victorian period, drama has fared the poorest in the face of posterity. The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature calls the plays of the nineteenth century, "in general, unimportant either as literature or drama." ^ One often-advanced explanation for this failure of the drama of the period is summed up by this excerpt from George Rowell's introduction to his edition of Victorian drama:

There need be no mystery about the literary shortcomings of the plays here collected. The nineteenth century saw and outlived a period of mob-rule in the English theatre, during which pit and gallery dictated terms to the stage. The theatres stretched their seating beyond the three thousand mark as they adjusted themselves to change; poetry and philosophy in the drama yielded to spectacle and sensation; the dramatist found himself subordinated to the actor and the scene-painter, and sometimes to the performing dog. As the unruly populace crowded back into the theatres, so polite Society neglected the drama for the opera and play-going for novel-reading . 2

Although correct in its description of nineteenth-century theatre conditions, this argument is not valid in the light of dramatic theory or theatre history. Drama is of necessity a popular art. "A single reader may be said to constitute an 'audience' for a poem or a novel; one viewer may be sufficient to encourage the

solitary artist who shows his painting. Theatre requires a larger number of people to convene at the same set time. The theatre is both a public and a composite art/social in the nature of its creation as well as in the

3

circumstance of its manifestation." If the nineteenth-century dramatist had to write for a theatre with a seating capacity in the thousands, Sophocles was compelled to write for an open-air theatre. If the Victorian playwright of necessity dealt with "an unruly populace," Shakespeare of a similar necessity wrote lines to be declaimed over the catcalls of groundlings. The mere existence of the populace in the theatre does not account for the failure of the plays v/ritten for that theatre. What may account for the failure is the nature of the Victorian public, including both its "unruly" and sophisticated members.

An intellectual and emotional uneasiness characterized the average playgoer during the Victorian period, Walter Houghton asserts in this passage:

"the great age of optimism was also an age of anxiety. . . . Expanding business, scientific development, the growth of democracy, and the decline of Christianity were sources of distress as v.^ell as satisfaction. But since optimism ^.^as expressed more often than anxiety (partly because it was more widely felt, and partly because any pessimistic attitude toward the human situation was considered weak or unmanly), we are still unaware of the degree to which the human consciousness—and especially the subconsciousness—v/as haunted by fear and v/orry, by guilt and frustration and loneliness."^

It is natural to assume that the Victorian, so beset and bewildered by his anxieties, would attempt to escape their sources both in his life and in his art.

The likeliest outlet in art for this reaction against thinking about his problems was that most public of the arts, the theatre. By regularly patronizing or not patronizing a theatre, he might cast his ballot for a realistic presentation of the problems concerning himself and his fellow Victorians or for an unrealistic exercise concerned with distracting him from these same problems. The majority of the Victorian playgoers voted overwhelmingly for the latter. In response to this demand for a form of drama which avoided Victorian problems, playwrights developed melodrama.

The term, "melodrama," is deceptively familiar. The twentieth-century playgoer treats himself to the viewing of an occasional burlesque of the nineteenth-century product, in which a mustachioed villain chases a fair-haired heroine about in an abandoned sa\Thill. The plot is simple, the characters ludicrous, and the moral a grossly oversimplified, almost meaningless truism. However, this sort of presentation is not particularly helpful to the serious student of the genre for the simple reason that, like most burlesques, it tends to distort and exaggerate some characteristics of the form while omitting others. More accurate is this

working definition of the form: melodrama is that drama which consists of these two basic elements: (1) a loose, episodic structure of thrilling action⁶ and (2) stereo-

6

7

typed plot-dominated characters . Melodramatic action, upon analysis, proves to be a failure from the viewpoint of dramatic theory. It is seen to be diffuse and superficial, ludicrous in its crude, inorganic and unconvincing presentation of the action of the melodrama. However, it is in the study of melodramatic character from another viewpoint, the rational viewpoint, that melodrama most candidly reveals its nature and the nature of its audience. Critics have isolated a strain of anti-rationalism in the Victorian mental atmosphere and defined it as "reliance upon authority or upon inner feeling, conscience, or intuition rather than upon logical

Q

reason." In drama, this anti-rationality found its expression in melodrama, a form which not only bases its existence on the principles named above, but takes on the additional anti-rational aspect of nullifying any dramatic possibilities inherent within itself for presenting a sincere imitation of life.⁹

The Silver King, by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, is an outstanding example of this nineteenth-century anti-rational form, for it achieved more critical and popular acclaim than any other melodramatic play of the nineteenth century. First produced on

November 16, 1882, the play was called by William Archer, "quite the best of modern English melodramas." No less a literary figure than Matthew Arnold praised the play for being "an honest melodrama," saying of the play, "In general thruout the piece the diction and sentiments are natural; they have sobriety and propriety; they are literature."¹¹ The success of The Silver King with the public may be evidenced by the comparison of the melodrama's popular reception with that of Jones' more rational and realistic play, Michael and his Lost Angel, made by Clayton Hamilton in his introduction to Jones' collected plays: "Students of the theatre, after reading 'Michael and his Lost Angel,' . . . which ran only two weeks in London and one week in New York, may find an ironic sort of interest in turning back to 'The Silver King,' which for forty years has been actor-proof and production-proof and has never failed to interest the theatre-going masses."¹²

It is the contention of this study that what interested Victorian playgoers was the anti-rational nature of melodrama, a nature which related directly to an anti-rational trend in Victorian thought. In order to prove this, this study shall define and discuss melodrama, according to action and character, the two elements included in the working definition above—and according to selected intellectual attitudes of the Victorian period. The study shall use The Silver King,

by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, as the model drama for the discussion. The first part of the study shall deal with melodramatic action, showing the superficiality of this element to be the chief cause for the form's failure as drama. Included in this part of the study will be a discussion of the most prominent characteristics of melodramatic action and their manifestation in The Silver King. The second part shall deal with melodramatic character, reviewing the realistic and expressionistic viewpoints on melodramatic character and positing and developing a third viewpoint, the rational. Included in this part will be a discussion of the two basic stereotypes of melodrama, the hero and the villain, and their manifestation in The Silver King. The relationship of the stereotypes to selected Victorian intellectual attitudes and their respective representations of anti-rationality and the collected nemeses of anti-rationality will also be considered.

CHAPTER II

MELODRAMATIC ACTION

Melodramatic Action Defined

The Victorian period was distinguished by an almost frenetic devotion to "concrete action." John Stuart Mill, in 1833, wrote, "The English public think nobody worth listening to, except in so far as he tells them something to be done, and not only that, but of something which can be done immediately." A certain amount of action is desirable in any race or time; however, the Victorian seemed often to be seeking action in order to avoid the painful task of serious thought. In this respect melodrama was indeed a mirror of its age, for action was definitely foremost among the two basic elements of melodrama.⁴ So great was the emphasis on action that one critic described the melodrama as "a play with a plot and nothing but a plot."⁵ However, melodramatic action, although emphasized, is characterized by a shallow, superficial nature. To understand why this is so, one must first understand what is meant by "action" in dramatic theory.

In dramatic theory action is not only what is done in a play, but it is an exhibition of character." It derives its strength and validity from life, more

specifically from "human conduct." This point is eloquently emphasized by William Archer, the nineteenth-century dean of drama criticism, in his refutation of the argument that Aristotle places action above character in his classification of the basic elements of drama.

A great deal of ink has been wasted in controversy over a remark of Aristotle's that the action or muthos, not the character or ethos, is the essential element in drama. The statement is absolutely true and wholly unimportant. A play can exist without anything that can be called character, but not without some sort of action. This is implied in the very word "drama," which means a doing, not a mere saying or existing. It would be possible, no doubt, to place Don Quixote, or Falstaff, or Peer Gynt, on the stage, and let him develop his character in mere conversation, or even monologue, \without ever moving from his chair. But it is a truism that deeds, not v/ords, are the demonstration and test of character; wherefore, from time immemorial, **it** has been the recognized business of the theatre to exhibit character in action. Historically, too, v/e find that drama has everywhere originated in the portrayal of an action—some exploit or some calamity in the career of some demigod or hero. Thus story or plot is by definition, tradition, and practical reason, the fundamental element in drama; but does it therefore follow that it is the noblest element, or that by which its value should be measured? Assuredly not. The skeleton is, in a sense, the fundamental element in the human organism. It can exist, and, v/ith a little assistance, retain its form, when stripped of muscle and blood and nerve; whereas a boneless man v/ould be an amorphous heap, more helpless than a jelly fish. But do we therefore account the skeleton man's noblest part? Scarcely. It is by his blood and nerve that he lives, not by his bones; and it is because his bones are, comparatively speaking, dead matter that they continue to exist v/hen the flesh has fallen avcy from them. It is, therefore, . . . a perversion of reason.

to maintain that drama lives by action, rather than by character. Action ought to exist for the sake of character: when the relation is reversed, the play may be an ingenious toy, but scarcely a vital work of art.⁹

In melodrama exactly such a perversion of reason occurs.

"The characters have been fashioned to fit the action."¹⁰

Motivation, "the sum total of all the forces that cause a human to respond," has been reduced to an

accumulation of thrills which jolt the characters on their merry way through a loose, episodic structure¹²

of an inordinate number of overdramatic crises and

climaxes,¹³ in direct opposition to the more substantial

forms of drama which are "rich in causes, each cause

carefully built into the play by more minute causes,

and the whole rooted in the most intimate life and desire

of the characters."¹⁴

A form so gutted of the ethos which breathes life into great drama will of necessity rely on shallow theatrical devices. The types of devices employed by melodrama are extremely numerous and varied, but the following seven characteristics are particularly prominent in melodramatic action:

1. A loose, episodic structure is employed, with the scenes and acts less interdependent upon one another.¹⁵

2. Numerous scenes of physical action are included in the action.

3. A number of thrills are interjected into the action.¹⁷ Included here would be situations where there is physical danger and jeopardy and thrills induced by emotionally loaded devices.¹⁸

4. The action consists of a series of exaggerated crises and climaxes.

5. Outrageous coincidence augments the action.¹⁹

6. The arbitrary scene of poetic justice²⁰ and the reassuring ending²¹ are included.

7. Heightened language²² and the theatrical devices of the aside and the soliloquy²³ are employed. A discussion of these characteristics of melodramatic action and their significance, accompanied by a study of their employment in the model drama. The Silver King, will provide an appropriate starting point for this investigation of nineteenth-century melodrama.

Loose, Episodic Structure

The unities attributed to Aristotle have long been debated and certainly often violated in the history of English theatre.²⁴ However, it is generally agreed among theorists that that unity most easily traced to Aristotle, the unity of action, should not be seriously violated. "/The action of the drama/ should have a beginning, a middle and an end, with a causal relationship in the different parts of the play. Inevitability

and concentration result from adherence to the unity of action." The loose, episodic structure of melodrama tends to weaken the action by lending a certain diffuse, shallow effect. Too many and too diverse incidents occur within too short a period of time. Furthermore, the action of the melodrama often contains a large time gap, leading to what William Archer calls "broken-backed action."²⁷

The basic structure of The Silver King is determined by such a time gap. Three years and six months elapse between Acts II and III. Because this is three years longer than any other time gap in the melodrama and because these three years involve the protagonist Denver's transformation in America from an impoverished fugitive into the wealthy "Silver King," the play is virtually broken into two dramas, concerning Denver before and after he becomes the Silver King. Running throughout these two "plays" are three major plots: the vindication of Denver for his imagined crime, Nelly's and Jaikes' struggle to keep the Denver family alive, and Skinner's success in crime and eventual downfall. These plots are kept running simultaneously, occasionally coinciding, with each plot often developing by itself on its own dramatic potential. Besides the three major plots, two sub-plots are evident, Corkett's blackmailing

Skinner and Tabitha's chasing Jaikes. That the play is episodic is attested to by the fact that it is divided into five acts which are sub-divided into fifteen scenes taking place in no less than thirteen different settings.

Physical Action

John Dietrich is correct in his assertion that drama needs overt action.²⁸ However, this overt action should be expressive of something beyond itself. In his discussion of Aristotle's Poetics, Francis Fergusson states, "One must be clear, first of all, that action (praxis) does not mean deeds, events, or physical activity: it means, rather, the motivation from which all deeds spring. . . . It may be described metaphorically as the focus or movement of the psyche toward what seems good to it at the moment—a 'movement of spirit,' Dante calls it. When we try to define the actions of people we know, or of characters in plays, we usually do so in terms of motive."²⁹

The physical action of melodrama, if it can be logically seen to spring from motive at all, derives from the motive of the moment, that which is imposed upon it by the immediate situation. More often, physical action can be seen simply as a device to augment the overall melodramatic action or to induce thrills.

The abundance of physical action in The Silver King is evident from either a c[ui]ck perusal of the plot or an acknowledgement of the numerous stage directions in the play. As is often the case with melodrama, the physical action in the scene often takes equal or greater importance in relation to the dialogue or character development. To demonstrate this importance of physical action to an individual scene, nothing but the stage directions for Act II, Scene I are given here. The characters in the scene are Denver, the hero; Nelly, his wife; Jaikes, the family retainer; and Baxter, the detective.

Scene I. Interior of Denver's house. Window at back. Doors right and left. Small table centre of stage. Chairs right and left. The clock strikes six.

Nelly discovered at window, looking anxiously off.

. . .

(Enter Jaikes.)

. . .

(Exit Jaikes.)

. . .

(Enter Denver.)

. . .

(/Denver/ picturing the scene)

. . .

(/Denver/ pointing to the floor)

. . .

(/iNelly/ goes to him and covers his face vrith her hands.)

. . .

(/Nelly/ puts her arms round his neck.)

. . .

(/iNelly/ puts her arms round Denver's neck.)

. . .

(Denver feels in his pocket, takes out revolver.)

. . .

(Nelly takes it from him.)

(/Nelly/ puts revolver on table.)
 . . .
 (Jaikes has entered during the last speech.)
 . . .
 (Exit Jaikes. Nelly goes to Denver and puts her arms around his neck.)
 . . .
 (/Nelly/ Bursts into tears.)
 . . .
 (Enter Jaikes v/ith overcoat, hat, portmanteau and purse.
 . . .
 (Nelly helps Denver on with his overcoat.)
 . . .
 (/Nelly/ throwing her arms round Denver.)
 . . .
 (Loud knock at door.)
 . . .
 (/Jaikes/ goes to window and looks off.)
 . . .
 (Nelly hurries Denver off, then turns to Jaikes.)
 . . .
 (/Nelly/ hurries Jaikes off. Sinks exhausted into chair.)
 . . .
 (Baxter enters through window. Nelly hears him and turns with a shriek.)
 . . .
 (ITelly making a desperate effort to appear calm.)
 . . .
 (Baxter looking at her keenly.)
 . . .
 (Second detective rushes in.)
 . . .
 (Exit /second detective/.)
 . . .
 (ITelly throws up her arms in despair. Baxter is going, sees revolver on table, picks it up.)
 . . .
 (/iTelly/ at door, clinging to Baxter.)
 . . .
 (Exit Baxter, Nelly clinging to him and trying to stop him.)^^

It is deduced fairly easily from the stage directions that Denver has become involved in some miscellaneous involving gunplay and now, v;ith the aid of ITelly and Jaikes, is escaping cquestioning by the police.

Climaxes in the play almost always express themselves in physical action. A good illustration of this point may be found in the climax of the play in Act IV, Scene IV, in which Denver discovers that Skinner is the real murderer of Geoffrey V7are. Denver has disguised himself as Deaf Dicky, a deaf idiot vagrant, and wormed his way into the criminals' lair on the wharf. Denver sneaks on stage as the criminals squabble over the whereabouts of some jewels they have stolen.

(Denver creeps on and hides behind bales and listens with great interest.)

Skinner. Those jewels are v/orth six thousand pounds, and once more, for the last time, where are they?

Coombe. Don't get into a temper. Spider! I tell you I may have a customer for 'em next week—we'll settle for 'em then!

Skinner. No, we won't settle for them then, we'll settle for them now!

Cripps. Yes, we'll settle for 'em now!

Corkett. (joining in). Yes, we'll settle for 'em now!

Skinner. (turning sharply on Corkett). You infernal jackanapes, what business is it of yours?

Corkett. Every business of mine, Mr. Spider; look there! (Turns out his pockets, shows they are empty.) That's what business it is of mine! I mean to have fifty quid out of this!

Skinner. Oh, you do, do you?

Corkett (promptly). If you don't give it me I'll let on about Hatton Gardens four years ago.

(Denver starts violently and shows great interest.)

Skinner (with deadly rage). If you say half a word more—

Corkett (promptly). Half a word more!

(Skinner seizes him by the throat; Coombe seizes Skinner.)

Coombe (alarmed). Come, come, my dear boys, this v/on' t do!

Cripps (holding Corkett) . Stov; it. Spider,
 stow it!
 Skinner. I've given you rope enough, Mr. Corkett.
 Corkett (still held by Cripps). Don't you talk
 about rope. Spider! If it comes to hanging,
 it won't be me, it'll be you!
 (Denver shows great interest. Skinner tries
 to get at Corkett. Coombe interposes.)
 Skinner. Curse you, v/ill you never give me
 peace till I kill you?
 Corkett. Yes, as you killed Geoffrey v/arel
 (Denver, no longer able to restrain himself,
 leaps up with a terrific scream of joy.)
 Denver. Ah! innocent! Innocent! Thank God!
 All (turn and see Denver) . Who is it? Who is it?
 Denver. Wilfred Denver I (To Cripps and Corkett,
 who are in front of door.) Stand from that door!
 (They do not move. Denver flourishes cov.^ar-
 Cripps and Corkett retreat dovnm stage.)
 All (overcome, helpless). Stop him! Stop him!
 Denver. Stop me! The whole world shall not stop
 me now!
 (Gets through door and bangs it to.)
 (King, pp. 94-96)

In the scene just quoted, action becomes a language of its own, communicating perhaps more powerfully than the v7ords of the scene. This action-language is not merely used by the men of action. Nelly, the most delicate character in the play, uses it in the profuse throwing of her arms round Denver's neck during the escape scene. However, as has been noted earlier, always this action "speaks" on a very superficial level: it is motivated by the situation of the immediate scene. This fact is made painfully obvious by a comparison of Denver's banging the door to in The Silver King and Thorpe's slamming the door shut in Ibsen's A Doll's House. In the former, immediate circumstances

and emotions provoke the act. In the latter, a lifetime of frustrations culminates in this symbolic act.

Thrills

The "thrill" is a theatrical experience so peculiar to the melodramatic form and so related to it that any play with numerous thrills is liable to the label of "melodrama." The reason for this lies in the definition of the thrill: the experience of a sudden sharp feeling of excitement. In rational, well-motivated action, the likelihood of there being many sudden sharp experiences of excitement is decreased by the motivational "hints" in the plot development and the causal structure of the action. Only in a form where the action is arbitrarily contrived to provide sudden jolts of pity and fear to the spectator is there apt to be a plethora of thrills.

Thrills in melodrama are of two kinds, each deriving from a rather shallow interpretation of Aristotle's injunction that the emotions produced by tragedy should be pity and fear."^-^ The latter emotion is induced in melodrama by the thrill involving physical danger and jeopardy. A man is held at gunpoint, or the beautiful heroine is kidnaped. The other thrill involves what Theodore Hatlan calls "emotionally loaded devices." He states, "Melodrama has strong sentimental appeals. . .

The writer makes use of such emotionally loaded devices as a suffering heroine, a sick child, a wounded horse or dog, a tortured hero, a heartless and brutal villain, and love of motherhood, of country, and of babies. Melodrama purges the softer emotions."³² This use of emotionally loaded devices to induce what Eric Bentley calls a "poor man's catharsis"³³ is particularly related to the tendency of the Victorian towards "sentimentality and the enjoyment of the tender emotions for their *own* sake." As Houghton observes in this passage, the sentimentality was often an escape mechanism, especially for the Victorian businessman:

"A business society dedicated to the principle of laissez-faire and the economic principle that there must be no interference with the iron laws of supply and demand needed to feel that in spite of appearances its heart was tender. If it was doing little to relieve the suffering of the poor, at any rate it was feeling very sympathetic. To the needling of the conscience it received from many of the Victorian prophets . . . -to such an attack there was a ready answer. The heart was not closed up; why, it even burst into tears at the sight of suffering and death. But they were not tears of genuine pity. They were tears of purgation. And thus 'purified,' one could return next day to business as usual. "*^

But whether the thrills are achieved at gunpoint or by the interpolation of a simpering infant into the script, their contribution to the anti-rational nature of melodrama cannot be overestimated, for the effect of a play overcrowded with thrills is not unlike that

of a ride on a very high roller coaster. The emotions of the participant (or spectator) are so keyed up that he is too excited to even notice all the details of the ride, much less analyze or evaluate them.

Thrills fly fast and furious in The Silver King. Thrills involving physical danger or jeopardy include Denver's suicide threat (KING, p. 8), the chloroforming of Denver (KING, p. 22), Denver's finding himself by the dead body of Ware (KING, p. 25), Denver's escape (KING, pp. 30-31), the chase after Denver (KING, p. 35), Baxter's recognition of Denver (KING, p. 72), and Denver's sneaking into the thieves' lair and escaping from it. (KING, pp. 94-96) Thrills involving emotionally loaded devices play upon two particularly Victorian attitudes, guilt arising out of a Puritanical anxiety over possible imperfection³⁶ and love of hearth and home.³⁷ Although the audience is aware that Denver did not actually murder Geoffrey Ware from the onset of the melodrama, Denver believes he has done the foul deed up to the climax of the play. His guilt is constantly exploited. The exchange of dialogue between Nelly and himself before he escapes points up his guilt at having disgraced her and the children.

Nelly (with a great cry of pity, goes to him
and covers his face with her hands). Oh,
my poor Willi
Denver. Don't touch me, I say! There's blood

upon my hands. Oh, my poor girl! Have I brought you to this?
 Nelly. Don't think of me—think of yourself—you must hide!
 Denver. Hide! No! let them come and take me; you will be well rid of me. (She puts her arms around his neck.) Don't pity me. If there is a spark of love left in your breast **for me, crush it out.**

(KING, p. 29)

Emotionally loaded devices involving hearth and home include the sickness of Ned, Denver's son (KING, pp. 50-51), the threat of eviction for Nelly and the children (KING, pp. 50-51), Denver's reunion with Cissy, his daughter (KING, p. 58), and Denver's injunction to his family to kneel down and give thanks for hearth and home. (KING, p. 109) Worth special attention is the series of thrills played from Nelly's gradual realization that Denver is still alive. This series illustrates the tendency of melodrama to overwork a highly emotional situation. Nelly's first thrill of realization occurs when Cissy is describing their unknown benefactor to her.

Cissy. Oh, he was a very nice old gentleman!
 Nelly. Old.
 Cissy. Oh, yes, his hair was nearly white, and he was crying so much.
 Nelly. Crying? Why should he cry? (with sudden joy, aside.) Can it be? Oh, if it were he, if it could be, if it might be, if it were possible! (Eagerly snatches locket from neck, opens it, shows it to Cissy very eagerly.)
 Cissy, was he like this?
 Cissy. Why, that's my father's likeness, mammal!
 Nelly. Yes, was he like that?
 Cissy (after looking at it for a moment or two).
 Oh, no, mammal! The Silver King's hair is nearly white.

Nelly. But the face. Cissy, the face?

Cissy (looking again). No, my father's face is quite young and happy, and the Silver King's is so sad and old. No, the Silver King isn't a bit like that.

(Kneels by Nelly.)

Nelly (shutting locket). Of course not; I knew; it was impossible! I was mad to dream of such a thing.

(KING, p. 83)

Immediately afterwards, Jaikes is caught in a deception and Nelly interrogates him as to who the Silver King is,

Nelly. Jaikes, I will take no more money from you, no more food, no more shelter till I know where it comes from. As bare and helpless as we come into the Grange, I and my children will leave it this very day and go out again to starve unless I know who it is that is loading me with all this wealth and kindness. Who is he, Jaikes? Who is he? Who is he, I say?

Jaikes. Oh, missus, can't you guess?

Nelly (frantically). Ah, I know it, I knew it! He is alive! Take me to him! Make haste! I cannot wait a moment! (Catching Cissy and Ned in her arms.) Tell Cissy! My darlings, kiss me—kiss me—your father is alive!

(Kissing them eagerly, crying with joy.)

(KING, p. 84)

In the interests of credibility and dramatic economy, it would seem that Nelly's thrill at realizing Denver is alive has by now been played to the hilt. However, this same thrill is used once more in the scene of reunion between Denver and Nelly.

Denver (to Jaikes, as they enter). Go round to the front and bring her to me.

(Exit Jaikes.) (At gate, sees Nelly. Aloud.)

Ah, there she is.

(Nelly, turning, sees him, but does not recognize him for a minute. He holds out his arms and she drops gradually into them*.)

Nelly. Is it—my Will? My Will—this face—
 this white hair—my Will alive?
 Denver (clasping her). Nell
 (Kisses her hungrily—a long embrace.)
 Nelly (hysterically). Oh, Will—don't speak.
 Don't say a word. Only let me look at you.
 Oh, let me cry or else my heart will break.
 Don't stop me. Will. Ha he hal
 (Sobbing and laughing in Denver's arms.)
 (KING, p. 104)

What keeps a scene like the one just quoted from being effective, of course, is that thrill is heaped upon thrill, so that no one thrill has either time for adequate development or enough isolation to provoke any serious contemplation on it by members of the audience. Following the reunion of Nelly and Denver, at the rate of a thrill per page of script, come Denver's reunion with the children (KING, p. 105), the appearance of the villain (KING, p. 106), the blackmail attempt by the villain (KING, p. 107), Denver's message to Scotland Yard (KING, pp. 107-108), the arrest of the villain (KING, p. 108), and the family thanksgiving. (KING, p. 109) As in the case of physical action, the thrill, a potentially sound theatrical device when employed sparingly and meaningfully, is overused to achieve a very superficial effect.

Exaggerated Crises and Climaxes

The accomplished writer of melodrama has been described as "a skilled craftsman with a shrewd sense

of pace, rhythm, and a feeling for climactic action. However, the effect of climactic action achieved by the melodramatist falls somewhat short of the demands of conventional dramatic theory, which require that the plot be organic and consist of crises springing from or relating to an accumulation of motives and that the climax be logically justifiable.³⁹ "Melodrama aims at startling, not at convincing, and is little concerned with causes so long as it attains effects." An attempt is made to reconcile the outlandish and the plausible. "The tragic dramatist asks himself, 'What is the one thing these people would do in these circumstances?' The writer of melodrama asks himself, 'What is the most exciting thing these people might do?' and then, 'How can I make it appear that they might actually have done such an improbable thing?'"⁴¹ The resultant structure of the play is "a series of peaks of action rather than a well-knit steady progression of logically related units."

There is no dearth of exaggerated crises and climaxes in The Silver King. In the first two acts alone, the hero faces a baker's dozen of major and minor crises. Several of the minor crises throughout the play provide excellent revelations of how the crisis is isolated and exaggerated in melodrama. The first example occurs during the first scene of the first act.

Denver, recently ruined and currently drunk, is joined at the bar by Baxter, the detective.

Denver (takes out revolver). There's always one way out of it. And if it wasn't such a coward's trick I'd do it.

Baxter (in a low voice to Denver). If you don't know what to do with that, I'll take care of it for you.

Denver (putting revolver in pocket again). Thank you, I do know v/hat to do with it, much obliged for your advice. (Aside.) I may want it, tonight.

(KING, p. 8)

Certainly Denver seems to be entertaining rather suicidal thoughts. However, although Denver's situation worsens progressively throughout this act and the next, never once does the thought of suicide return to the hero. The best example of the exaggerated crisis takes place in the last act of the melodrama, when Skinner attempts to blackmail Denver. He proposes, "vmy not make a mutual concession, silence for silence—you keep quiet on my affairs, I Vwill keep quiet on yours—you allow: me to pursue my business, I allow you to pursue yours." (KING, p. 107) Denver's refusal to be blackmailed, even though he has no evidence of his innocence and Skinner's guilt, is perhaps justifiable on the grounds that this is what the hero must do. However, instead of giving Skinner a simple "no" ans\\^r, Denver calls Nell out. He says to her, "Nelll . . . There stands the murderer of Geoffrey Warel He wants to bargain with me:

shall I hide myself or shall I tell the truth to the world? Shall I make peace with him or shall I fight him? Give him his answer, Nell!" (KING, p. 107)

Once more the crisis is embellished with a melodramatic flourish, superficially dramatic but completely theatrical and unrealistic.

None of the climaxes in the play are organically achieved. The murder of Ware and subsequent implication of Denver rest upon a series of coincidences. Denver's escape into anonymity at the end of Act II is granted him by an occurrence so completely coincidental as to bring into mind the ancient device of deus ex machina. (KING, p. 43) The Act III climax is so emotionally charged that it almost overshadows the Act IV climax. (KING, pp. 67-68) However, the Act IV climax avoids the melodramatic disaster of being anticlimactic by becoming the epitome of exaggeration. Why does Denver leap up from behind the bales in the presence of three professional criminals, shout out that he is their enemy, and make his escape from the warehouse, armed only with a crowbar, when he could as easily have remained concealed or continued his masquerade as Deaf Dicky, and either gathered some tangible evidence or discreetly informed the police? Indeed, how can three professional and presumably dangerous criminals allow one man armed only with a

crowbar to escape? (KING, pp. 95-96) In the light of what has been said heretofore, these questions need only be answered by the maxim that melodrama does not have to make good sense, only good (or thrilling) theatre.

Outrageous Coincidence

If melodramatic action does not spring from character and does sacrifice causes to effects, it still must derive coherence from some aesthetic principle or vaguely rational frame of reference. The melodrama's loosely-structured, ill-related segments of action are held together by "that notorious device: outrageous coincidence." An outrageous coincidence may be defined as a group of concurrent events or circumstances remarkable for lack of apparent causal connection. An example of outrageous coincidence might be a man swerving his car to avoid hitting an elderly woman who is crossing the street against the light and finding that the woman is his long-lost aunt. It is indisputable that such an occurrence is possible; however it is not probable. The man's swerving is in no way related to the fact that the woman is his aunt, nor is the woman's decision to cross against the light related to her nephew being the oncoming motorist.

Countless examples of outrageous coincidence are to be found in The Silver King; only the most important will be noted here. Five coincidences are involved in the inciting action of the play, the shooting of Geoffrey Ware. First, the robbery of Denver's foe. Ware, is planned on the night that Denver is ruined. (KING, p. 11) Second, Denver threatens to kill Ware on the same night Ware is eventually shot. (KING, p. 14) Third, Baxter, the detective, happens to be in the same saloon that Ware, the criminals, and Denver are frequenting. (KING, p. 8) Fourth, Denver arrives at Ware's house just after Ware has left and the criminals have arrived, only minutes before Ware returns and is shot. (KING, pp. 20-23) Fifth, Ware forgets something and has to return to his house while the burglary is still in progress. (KING, p. 23) Denver's freedom from pursuit by the police is granted him by a coincidence. He has jumped from the train he has been escaping on while it was still moving. Before detectives have a chance to check the passengers on the train, it is involved in a calamitous accident which destroys three of the cars, upon one of which Denver was supposedly riding. (KING, pp. 41-43)

Structurally, The Silver King divides into two parts, a three-year time gap occurring between Acts II and III. Therefore all the coincidence discussed

above is virtually useless for the second part of the play. However, the realm of the improbable has one overriding advantage over the realm of the probable—it is virtually inexhaustible. Skinner, the mastermind of the robbery and the murderer of Ware, is undone by two female tools of coincidence in the last three acts of the play. Nelly, who thinks herself Denver's widow, is now coincidentally a tenant of Skinner's. Olive, Skinner's wife, remorseful over her husband's misdeeds, happens to hint to Nelly that Denver may not have done the foul deed to Ware, coincidentally while Denver is concealed within listening distance. (KIITG, pp. 53-66) These two coincidences propel Denver into his dangerous mission of infiltrating into Skinner's gang and learning of Skinner's guilt and his innocence.

In addition to its use in controlling the main action, two other functions of outrageous coincidence are noteworthy. Coincidence may be used to facilitate the action of the moment. At the end of Act III, Denver is concealed from Nelly and Coombes, neither of whom he wishes to confront at the moment. However, if Denver cannot get some money to Nelly immediately, she and her children, one of whom is critically ill/ will be driven from their home in the dead of winter. Just as Denver is preparing to go through the door and reveal himself prematurely. Cissy, who does not know who Denver

is but has accepted a purseful of money from him, providentially runs on stage to Denver. Denver pushes her through the door to Nelly, who, by the third act of the melodrama, has learned not to look a gift coincidence in the mouth. The heroine seizes the money "eagerly," credits it to "an angel from heaven," and throws it on the table before Coombes. (KING, p. 68)

Another instance of coincidence facilitating action occurs in the final act of the play when Denver expresses his desire to see the children. Nelly tells him, "I was v,^iting for you to ask that; I've been watching them all night. Come, we'll go and V7ake them."

(KING, p. 105) Immediately following her line is this stage direction: "(Enter Jaikes, with the two children, one on each side, dragging him by each hand.)"

(KING, p. 105) It is almost possible to detect in this theatrical coincidence ritual, but ritual devoid of the depth inherent in classic drama, bringing to mind T. R. Henn's definition of melodrama as "that type of play which attempts to produce the emotions appropriate to tragedy on insufficient emotional pretexts: through inorganic conceptions of character and plot."⁴⁴

The final function of coincidence is to produce the ever-needed thrill. An excellent example of this sort of coincidence is found in the final scene of the third act when Denver wanders on just as the children

are leaving school. They are singing the very sort of hymn which will evoke the greatest emotional response from Denver.

What though my sins as mountains rise
 And reach and swell to Heaven,
 Yet Mercy is above the skies;
 I may be still forgiven.

Then let me stay in doubt no more
 Since there is sure release;
 For ever open stands the door
 Repentance, Pardon, Peace.

(KING, p. 57)

Denver responds, "Repentance, Pardon, Peace! The old, old message! The sweet old message! That must be for me—yes, even for me." (KING, p. 58) Denver's last line here might be considered his unwitting pronouncement on the nature of his character. Indeed, the hymn is for him, as were the robbery, the murder, the train wreck, Nelly's choice of lodgings, and little Ned's sickness. In all this welter of coincidences, Denver becomes more agent of chance than agent of his own destiny, and it becomes increasingly uncertain where the device ends and Denver begins.

Arbitrary Poetic Justice and the Reassuring Ending

As much as outrageous coincidence contributes to the incredibility of the form, it must take second place to the rigged consequences⁴⁵ of arbitrary poetic justice and the reassuring ending at the conclusion of the

melodrama for the ultimate derationalization of the form. Certainly this characteristic blasts to pieces any hope of authenticity within the play, for with it no enlightenment is possible, either for the characters or for the audience. "The world of melodrama is a just and lucky world where all things fall out fitly. We are granted from the outset an assurance that in the end the guilty will be punished and the virtuous attain their due reward." "

The last scene of The Silver King provides some very interesting material for this discussion. The reunion of Nelly and Denver at the opening of the scene is certainly no more than a crude use of physical displays of love and hysteria to portray a potentially serious moment. Skinner's appearance and the blackmail scene have dramatic power, but reveal no new insight gained by any of the characters in the play. Then, in a moment which promises some authenticity for the drama, Denver writes a telegram to Scotland Yard, offering to put himself on trial for the murder of Geoffrey Ward. This indicates new courage and resolution on the part of the protagonist. If so much as the period of a scene or two could have elapsed here, in which time Denver could be seen to realize what he has done, some amount of enlightenment could be credited to the play. However, no sooner does Denver give the telegram to his servant

than Baxter appears at the gate, arrests Skinner, and announces that Denver has been completely exonerated.

(KING, pp. 103-108) Baxter ironically delivers a pronouncement on Denver as a dramatic character when he says to him, "You've had a very narrow escape, sir."

(KING, p. 109) Five acts containing countless crises and climaxes and three years which have changed Denver's appearance from that of a young man to that of an old man have netted for him nothing more than a "very narrow escape." Denver has taken the inevitable melodramatic roller coaster ride of thrills, rather than the more profound journey toward significant self-realization.

Heightened Language, the Aside,
and the Soliloquy

In a form whose mainstay is strong, often crude physical action, dialogue of the calm naturalistic variety will obviously be unable to compete seriously for the attention of the audience. Hence the melodrama is generally generously larded with heightened language, particularly including the emotionally loaded dialogue devices, the aside and the soliloquy. Alexander Dean defines the two devices thusly:

"The aside is a short speech delivered at a time when other characters are on the stage. It usually expresses audibly what the character is thinking or what he knows

that the other characters do not know and what the playwright wants the audience, but not the other characters, to hear. . . . The soliloquy is a long speech delivered when the actor is alone on the stage. The contents may be direct exposition, planning, plotting, explanation of situation, or, in the highest form, thoughts and mental predicament."'^^

In melodrama, asides and soliloquies may be used for two purposes. On the superficial level, the aside particularly may be used to help a character keep a secret with the audience. Thus Spider reveals with the aside, "Coombe's money comes in handy," (KING, p. 100) that he is paying Corkett with Coombe's money. When the Spider's audacity at double-crossing his especially treacherous colleagues is considered, it is apparent that an aside such as this might also produce a minor thrill of jeopardy. The second purpose of the aside and soliloquy is to drag the spectator into the mind of the character. An aside used for this purpose is the one uttered by Nelly as she shows Cissy the locket picture of Denver. "(With sudden joy, aside.) Can it be? Oh, if it were he, if it could be, if it might be, if it were possible!" (KING, p. 83) A much more finely-developed example of the psychological pulling in of the spectator is Denver's soliloquy, given when he awakens and finds himself by the body of Vtare.

Attempts are made to imitate the associative characteristic of thought and to recreate the emotion of mounting panic.

Denver. (sits up and stares round him, tries to collect himself.) What's up? What's the matter" (Shakes himself.) What am I doing here? This won't do! Go home! Get home, you drunken scoundrel! Aren't you ashamed of yourself. Will Denver? Keeping your poor wife sitting up half the night for you—get home, d'you hear, get home. (Raises himself with difficulty and stares round and staggers.) What's the matter with my head? I can't recollect! What place is this? (With a sudden flash of recollection.) Ah, Geoffrey Ware's room, I remember—yes, yes, I said I'd kill him and—Oh, my head, I'd better get home. Where's my hat? (Gets up, takes candle, staggers, steadies himself, comes round table, sees Ware.) ^-That's that? It's Geoffrey Ware! What's he doing here? Get up, will you? (Kneels down.) Ah, what's this? Blood! He's shot! My God, I've murdered him. No! No! Let me think. \^hat happened? Ah yes, I remember now—I came in at that door, he sprang at me, and then we struggled. (Looking at revolver.) My revolver. One barrel fired—I've murdered him. No, he's not dead. Geoffrey Ware! Is he dead? (Eagerly feeling Ware's pulse.) No, it doesn't beat. (Tears o\^n Ware's waistcoat and shirt, puts his ear over Ware's heart.) No, no, quite still, quite still. He's dead! Dead! Dead! Oh, I've killed him—I've killed him. (Rising frantically, takes up revolver and puts it in his pocket.) What can I do? (With a great cry.) Don't stare at me like that! (Snatching off table cover and throwing it over body, his eyes fixed and staring at it, unable to take off his glance.) Close those eyes, Geoffrey, close them. Ah, yes, I murdered him—I've done it—I've done it—murdered him! I've done it! I've done it: I've done it! I've done it! I've done it! (Exit, his lips mechanically jabbering.

(KING, p. 25-26)

This soliloquy of Denver may seem to hint at some psychological depth of character denied by the earlier definition of melodrama. However, in the next chapter, melodramatic character will be shown to be stereotyped, inconsistent, and shallow in the light of principles of rational drama which attempts to imitate real life.

Only on the assumption that the characters are following a rationality, or anti-rationality, of their own and based on an orientation to life particular to the Victorian Age may the characters be found somewhat defensible.

CHAPTER III

MELODRAMATIC CHARACTER

Melodramatic Character Defined

Although an analysis of melodramatic action is necessarily a key to understanding the basic failure of melodrama as drama, it is melodramatic character which reveals the anti-rational nature of the form. As with melodramatic action, melodramatic character can be fully understood only when it is established what is meant by the term "character" in drama.

From the Aristotelian standpoint, "Character is defined as 'habitual action,' and it is formed by parents and other environmental influences out of the comparatively formless pathos (appetites, fears, and the like) which move the very young. As the growing person acquires habitual motives, he begins to understand them rationally, and so becomes ethically responsible. . . ."¹ This definition has withstood the test of time, for in the twentieth century Archer is found defining character as "a complex of intellectual, emotional, and nervous habits. Some of these habits are innate and temperamental. . . . But this distinction does not here concern us. Temperamental bias is a habit, like another, only somewhat older, and, therefore, harder to

deflect or eradicate." ² Archer goes on to discuss **two** dramatic methods of portraying character, "character drawing . . . the presentment of human nature in its commonly-recognized, understood, and accepted aspects," and "psychology . . . the exploration of character, the bringing of hitherto unsurveyed tracts within the circle of our knowledge and comprehension." He calls

3

character-drawing "synthetic" and psychology "analytic." What Archer is driving at is a psychological dichotomy of the character. Character-drawing deals with only one part, the outer self, roughly equivalent to the conscious. Psychology deals with both this outer self and an inner self, roughly equivalent to the subconscious, also close to Aristotle's pathos. In character drawing, this outer person, the person that is seen by the world, is presented. In psychology, the outer person is again shown, but now his actions reveal the inner person, the "person" unseen by the world at large and often unseen by the character himself. That the inner person is only revealed through the actions of the outer person must be stressed, for action is the traditional means of expressing character in drama. ⁴

The body of criticism concerning melodramatic character is divided into two opinions, each of which is partially true and partially false. The first, held by the larger number of critics, judges melodramatic

character by the dictum that drama concern itself with the actions of the outer person. In this light, the characters of melodrama are found to be plot-dominated types who fall into two categories, the good and the bad. The group of critics holding this opinion would find two major deficiencies manifest in melodramatic character. First, as has been previously discussed, the characters are motivated by the action rather than motivating the action by the force of their wills.⁷ Second, the characters are two-dimensional, generalized stereotypes" rather than specific persons. This is a violation of what critics call the concrete universal. "Ultimately every successful character represents a fusion of the universal and the particular and becomes an example of the concrete universal. It is in this dramatic particularization of the typical and universal that one of the essences of the dramatic and of characterization is to be found."⁹ A dramatic character that is not particular is not potentially memorable. Clara F. McIntyre, in fact, attributes to this lack of memorable characters the inferior nature of melodrama. She states, "The progress from melodrama toward tragedy, from farce toward comedy is marked by the degree of reality which the author has succeeded in giving to his characters. And melodrama and farce are inferior to tragedy and comedy mainly because in them character

interest is reduced to a minimum. After all, has any representation of life which has not given us at least one memorable character been ranked permanently with great literature?"

However, if nineteenth-century melodrama provided no memorable characters in its extensive action, it did so for a particular reason, a theatrical effect. This effect was the "maximum identification" of the spectators with the characters. The characters were left generalized and unspecific so that spectators could identify more easily with them. Precisely because of this, the second group of critics would argue that melodrama does not fail because it fails by realistic standards, for the simple reason that it should not be judged by realistic standards. Calling melodrama the "naturalism of the dream life," Eric Bentley asserts in this arresting passage that the spectator of nineteenth-century melodrama found a satisfaction which is necessary for the mental health of the human animal:

If you have dismissed tears and loud lamentations from your daily life, you might check whether they are equally absent from your dreams at night. You may be no more sentimental than the next man, and yet find you have many dreams in which you weep profusely and at the same time disport yourself like an actor in the old melodrama: throwing yourself on your knees, raising your arms plaintively to heaven, and so forth. For you, in that case, grandiose

self-pity is a fact of life. As it can only be copied by the use of grandiose style, the grandiosity of melodrama would seem to be a necessity.

Bentley goes on to describe the emotions involved in melodrama as "irrational"¹³ and the characters as types who cannot distinguish between wish and fulfillment. He states that the spectators enjoy melodrama as "children and dreamers--one might melodramatically add: as neurotics and savages too." He concludes his argument by denying that melodrama, in this context, actually exaggerates. "Exaggeration of what? of the facts as seen by the sophisticated, scientific, adult mind. The primitive, neurotic, childish mind does not exaggerate its o\m impressions."¹⁵

Bentley's interpretation of melodrama, though strikingly presented, must be translated into more conventional terms before its relationship to this study of the form is clear. What he is saying is that the inner person, rather than the outer person or a combination of the two, is presented in melodramatic character. This accounts for the wish-fulfillment action pattern, the seeming inconsistencies of character, and the simplicity, or lack of sophistication, of the characters. Melodrama, then, becomes a forerunner of expressionism, "the willing yielding up of the realistic and naturalistic methods, of verisimilitude, in order to use objects in art not as representational but as

transmitters of the impressions and moods of a character or of the author or artist." Expressionism attempts "to objectify inner experience." Strongest in the nineteen-twenties, expressionistic drama was marked by "unreal atmosphere, a nightmarish quality of action, distortion and over-simplification, the de-emphasis of the individual (characters were likely to be called the 'Father' or the 'Bank Clerk'), antirealistic stage settings, and staccato, telegraphic dialogue--^^ If melodrama is expressionistic rather than realistic, it cannot be judged by the standards of realism imposed by the first group of critics.

Melodrama, however, is not completely expressionistic, not merely an honest setting forth of the inner persons of characters, for there is an attempt at surface realism and characters do exhibit "a certain verisimilitude."¹⁷ There is an effort made to justify the extremely unlikely action upon and choices made by the characters.^{1ft} In effect, melodrama is the dream life attempting or pretending to be real life. Melodramatic character is the presentation of the inner person a^ the outer person. The judgement of the form, then, is appropriately given to neither the realistic vie\7point nor the expressionistic one. In order to fully discuss melodramatic character, it will be necessary to study it from a viewpoint of realistic

drama which may be called the rational viewpoint. From this viewpoint, melodramatic character will be seen to be essentially anti-rational.

A discussion may now be in order concerning what is meant by the "rational view/point" of drama. Many modern critics, including certainly the existentialists, may mock the contention that there is a rational viewpoint inherent in drama. Allardyce Nicoll, for one, argues that this "rationality" is synonymous with the movement of realism and has nothing to do with the "Poetry" of Sophocles and Shakespeare.¹⁹ The disciples of Brecht see all drama which is essentially Aristotelian as too dependent on empathy to be really rational. They say the extreme identification involved in empathy precludes any sort of rational view/point on the part of members of the audience.²⁰

However, contrary to the railings of the New Critics, when an analysis of the effect of drama is undertaken, the investigation must go further than a discussion of the relationship of the audience to characters on the stage, for dramatic characters can no more explain reality to real people than Caliban could carry wood for King James. This basic non-reality is vital to the existence of dramatic characters, to their "poetry." However, the very fact of this non-reality points out the need to seek out the real

people concerned with drama, the audience and the playwright, for an explanation of the relationship of drama to reality. Francis Fergusson says of Oedipus Rex and Hamlet, "Mysterious they are and will remain; but we can see that they mirror human life and action, both with extraordinary directness, and from many angles at once, catching the creature in the very act of inventing those partial rationalizations which make the whole substance of lesser dramas."²¹ The member of the audience may, then, identify with the character Hamlet very strongly, but he will at the same time see Hamlet's faults, his "partial rationalizations." Further, the playwright creates his dramas with the knowledge that the spectator will do just this, with faith, in other words, in the ability of the spectator to retain his rationality in spite of extreme emotional involvement in the drama. If it were otherwise, a character of an extremely irrational but emotionally loaded nature, such as Lady Macbeth, might dominate the action of the drama. Such is not so in the great drama of Europe. To the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere, the spectator responds emotionally, but with emotions informed by his rationality. It is, therefore, legitimate to examine a dramatic form from the rational viewpoint.

From the rational viewpoint, melodrama is seen to be a totally distorted form. Empathy, emotional

involvement which should be informed by rationality, is perverted into identification with characters who are so absolutized with respect to morality as to be totally incredible. Shaw said of the characters of melodrama, "The persons are the same—if one may be allowed to apply such a misleading word as persons to these conventional abstractions of gentility, virtue, innocence, vice, patriotism, and manliness."^^

What appealed to the Victorian playgoer about these stereotypes? Put another way, what deprived him of that rationally-informed capacity for empathy which the playwright usually expects of his audience? John Morley sheds some light on this problem in this passage concerning the effect of Puritanism on the Victorian intelligence.

Nowhere has Puritanism done us more harm than in . . . leading us to take all breadth, and colour, and diversity, and fine discrimination out of our judgments of men, reducing them to thin, narrow, and superficial pronouncements upon the letter of their morality, or the precise conformity of their opinions to accepted standards of truth, religious or other. Among other evils which it has inflicted, this inability to conceive of conduct except as either right or wrong, and, correspondingly in the intellectual order, or teaching as either true or false, is at the bottom of that fatal spirit of parti-pris which has led to the rooting of so much injustice, disorder, 23
immobility, and darkness in English intelligence.

The Victorian playgoer wished to generalize and dull his judgment; the melodramatist acceded to his wishes. As will be shown in the discussion of the two basic

stereotypes, the Victorian melodramatist also constructed a universe in which morality is strongly associated with anti-rationality and immorality associated with all that the anti-rational imagination abhorred. The **spectator is invited** to participate in a struggle in which the less intelligent of the two opponents, the anti-rational hero stereotype, overcomes the more intelligent because of his reliance on intuition and superficial virtue. Actually, as has been shown in the discussion of melodramatic action, the hero does not accomplish the victory himself; it is accomplished for him by the melodramatic device of poetic justice. However, the melodramatic reassuring ending is thus achieved, the anti-rational hero's foe is vanquished, and the world is shown to operate on a logic peculiarly satisfying to the anti-rational imagination. Now that this anti-rational interpretation of melodramatic character has been established, a consideration may be attempted of the two basic character types, the hero and the villain, and their manifestations in The Silver King.

The Melodramatic Hero

The Victorian melodramatic hero is a sharply limited figure. He is not a leader-hero, one of the "the geniuses of Romantic theory, more demigods than

men, possessed of supreme wisdom and extraordinary powers of action"^^ that commanded the awe of the Victorian. Because maximum identification was desired, the playwright usually used "characters from ordinary walks of life."^^ Although the hero of Victorian melodrama is indeed a man of action, he is not a thinking man. "/Melodramatic heroes/ do not think, they act, and as a result of their thoughtlessness, they become involved in all sorts of absurd entanglements such as being caught on a train trestle at midnight without a lantern or match, lost in the snow barefoot, or trapped in the villain's net because they misjudge the character of their adversary." The hero obeys intuition rather than logic. This anti-rational characteristic of the form's hero may be explained in terms of the age by this remark of a character in Disraeli's Tancred, or the 7th Crusade: "No one has confidence in himself; on the contrary, everyone has a mean idea of his own strength and has no reliance on his own judgment. Men obey a general impulse, they bow before an external necessity, whether for resistance or for action. Individuality is dead; there is a want of inward and personal energy in man; and that is what people feel and mean when they go about complaining there is no faith." ^ Walter Houghton says of this widespread feeling of impotence, "whatever its

origin, the mood of weakness found the antiself in the image of **the** hero, strong in both decisive force and

28

mastery of circumstance." This last-named characteristic is superficially achieved in the melodramatic hero, for the device of poetic Justice insures that, thoughtless as his actions are, he will in the end master his circumstances. The moral strength of the melodramatic hero is superficial. Although he is "upright, manly, brave and noble, . . . /reveres/ womanhood and country, and /stands/ steadfastly for justice and honor,"³⁰ he does not have the strength of will associated with dramatic heroism, for melodramatic chance pre-empts dramatic will. "[^]/hereas the characters in melodrama are drifted to disaster in spite of themselves, the characters in tragedy go down to destruction because of themselves."³⁰ Thus, no matter how laudable his motives and actions might seem, the melodramatic hero does not have that "enduring sense that man seems to have of the tragic nature of his existence and of the grandeur of the human spirit in facing it."³¹

Although Will Denver, "the Silver King," upon first consideration, may not seem to fulfill the requirement that the melodramatic hero come from an ordinary walk of life, actually he does so quite admirably, When he is first presented, he is a squire, but he is bankrupt, thus on an equal with the poorest drinkers

in the bar in which he is carousing. (KING, p. 5)

Then, when he escapes to America, he takes up the proletarian profession of silver mining to make his second fortune. (KING, p. 63) Thus, although Denver again has money, he has regained it in quite an ordinary profession. The mining profession is an ideal one for Denver in another way; it involves taking gambles. Denver's gambling is his passion, what might be called his "melodramatic flaw." In the first scene of the play, Denver, having gambled most of his fortune away at horse races, gambles again and loses the rest to Corkett in the bar. (KING, pp. 6-12) However, this passion of Denver's for gambling is merely an expression of his reliance on intuition rather than logic.

Denver's jump from the train (KING, p. 41), his implied suspicion that he is not the murderer of Ware (KING, p. 64), and revelation of himself in the criminals' hideout (KING, p. 94) are three of many actions based entirely upon his intuitive impulses.

Great care is taken by the authors to provide a portrait of an irrational character. Jaikes, the loyal family retainer, calls Denver "wild" at the beginning of the play (KING, p. 7); Denver says of his supposed murder of Ware, "I was mad-dazed" (KING, p. 28); and as late as the climax of the fourth act, Denver leaps out of his hiding place because he is "no longer able to restrain himself." (KING, p. 94)

Superficial morality is also evidenced sufficiently by Denver. Although Denver ruins himself financially and then involves himself in a murder because of drunkenness and stupidity, his retainer Jaikes repeats over and over again during this troublesome period that there is "no harm in him." (KING, p. 7) Denver himself has the moral consciousness of a minister at the very moments of his real and imagined offenses against God and man. In the first scene, when Jaikes tries to persuade him to come home, Denver replies, "Home! What should I go home for? To show my poor wife what a drunken brute she's got for a husband? To show my innocent children what an object they've got for a father? No, I won't go home, I've got no home. I've drunk it up." (KING, p. 8) His speech upon finding Ware's body is completely dominated by a mood of self-accusation. (KING, pp. 25-26) Besides his moral consciousness, Denver displays reverence for womanhood (KING, pp. 16-17), philanthropic generosity (KING, p. 69), forgiveness of the faults of others (KING, pp. 11-12, p. 109), sense of justice (KING, pp. 80-81), faith in God (KING, p. 41), love of hearth and home (KING, p. 109), and bravery. (KING, pp. 41, 94, and 107-108) However, these moral qualities manifest themselves in rather superficial acts. To take the quality of bravery as an example, jumping off a moving train and revealing

himself in a den of criminals show Denver to be so audaciously brave as to be foolhardy. Also, his bravery about giving himself up to the police at the end of the play (KING, pp. 107-108) seems rather ironic, for Denver is v/illing to give himself up only when he knows he is innocent. Earlier in the play, while Denver thinks he is guilty, he says about giving himself up, "I've started a hundred times to give myself up, but I have always been held back by the thought that I was not myself that night; but it will come, Jaikes." (KING, p. 64) Indeed the time does come, and it has been noted when.

If moral strength in a dramatic character may be said to consist of completing some major action, Denver's character must be judged as an abysmal failure. The only major action completed by Denver is the achievement of the happy ending, and that action is given him by the device of poetic justice. Each of Denver's four major actions of will are aborted by chance. Denver's first action of will, as predicted by his behavior in the early scenes of Act I, is to kill Ware. Denver has the justification; Ware has purposely ruined him and insulted his and his wife's honor. (KING, p. 16) This action is circumvented by the criminals' execution of the crime. (KING, p. 23) Denver's next major action is to escape; his ultimate escape is granted him by a coincidental train wreck. (KING, p. 43) His third action

is to make enough money to finance returning to England and clearing his name. This action is obscured in the play; it occurs in the interval between Acts II and III. However, apparently Denver's fortune has come to him through some single lucky mining strike, for Baxter says of his success, "Went to bed one night a common miner, and the next a millionaire." (KING, p. 69) Denver's last and vital action is to clear his name. Although he incites this action by revealing himself alive, the action is completed by Baxter and Skinner's double-crossing accomplices. (KING, p. 108) Each of these aborted actions of Denver is of course camouflaged by a number of smaller actions on his part. For example, to compensate for not completing the last action, Denver does some minor detection after overhearing Olive's remark (KING, p. 66), sneaks into the thieves' lair (KING, p. 91), flourishes a crowbar and escapes (KING, p. 96), and, at play's end, writes a telegram which is completely superfluous to the outcome of the play. (KING, pp. 107-108)

Certainly this inability to complete a major action weakens the character of Denver. However, what makes Denver completely incomprehensible to the rational observer is his typical melodramatic inconsistency. In Act I, Denver threatens to kill Geoffrey Ware, then comes to Ware's house with a loaded revolver. As he

enters the **room he** thinks Ware is in, the hero says, "Now, you hound, come out and settle accounts with me." (KING, p. 22) Upon awaking from being chloroformed and finding himself beside Ware's body, he says, "Ah, what's this? Blood! He's shot! My God, I've murdered him. Nol Nol" (KING, p. 25) After expressing shock at having done what he'd said he'd do, Denver leaves the house, being careful to take the revolver with him, indicating he intends to try to avoid identification as the murderer. (KING, p. 26) In the next scene, however, when Nell proposes he hide, he says, "Hide! Nol let them come and take me; you will be well rid of me." However, this resolution proves to be short-lived, and he begins his escape just as the detectives arrive. (KING, p. 31)

The most severe inconsistency involves the entire last three acts. The play, as has been stated before, divides into two parts, dealing with Denver before and after he becomes the Silver King. The first stage direction describing Denver after he returns from America explains, "He has changed very much, his hair is almost white, and his face vx>rn, his manner grave and subdued." (KING, p. 57) For the most part, Denver's manipulation of Nelly's affairs throughout the third act points to a more conservative bearing on his part. However, even during this act he betrays the old

impulsive Denver when he, though not saying he is her father, both "takes Cissy in his arms and kisses her hungrily" and "clasps her in his arms eagerly and kisses her again and again." (KING, p. 61) These actions during Act III merely presage Denver's return to the impulsive, irrational character he was at the beginning of the play. During Act IV, Denver alternates his cagy impersonation of an idiot at the thieves' lair with some rather loud, incautious asides—"Shut out! Shut out!" (KING, p. 87), "At last! At last! At last!" (KING, p. 88), and "How long? How long?" (KING, p. 90) Then, immediately upon hearing Skinner has killed Ware, Denver is "no longer able to restrain himself" and "leaps up with a terrific scream of joy." (KING, p. 95) Act V reveals Denver in a veritable flurry of irrational activity, calling his wife out to advise him on being blackmailed and writing a telegram of confession to Scotland Yard before he has any tangible evidence. (KING, pp. 107-108) Certainly this inconsistency in the latter part of the play is due to the rather impossible idea that a change can be effected in the hero's character—particularly a change from impulsive anti-rationality to cautious rationality. If one writes by the rules of Victorian melodrama, it simply cannot be done. As Nell says to Will when he asks if she thinks he is changed, "Yes, and no—

changed and **not changed**—you are always the same to me—
you are always my **Willi** **You are** not changed **a** bit."
 (KING, p. 104)

The Melodramatic Villain

There is **a** troubling ambiguity about the melodramatic villain. He is at once clearer and more obscure than the melodramatic hero. Superficially he certainly is often more unredeemably evil and conscientiously destructive than the hero is either virtuous or constructive. Stephenson Smith, reminiscing on the old melodramas, notes, "The villains were . . . unredeemed in their villainy. Not for the melodramatist any soft-hearted theories on the sociological explanation for criminal types, 'more to be pitied than censured.' A villain was a villain, to be shot down at the end by a just avenger; or if no human agency would suffice, an act of God would do the trick."^^^ Indeed, the villain is so unredeemably evil that Bentley speaks of his 'diabolical' nature, asserting that the villains in literature stem from

33

the archvillain Lucifer. However, although the melodramatic villain is more theatrically striking,³⁴ he is ultimately even less convincing than the hero. This lack of authenticity is directly related to the "evil" nature of the villain. Thompson rightly dichotomizes the dramatic antagonist into the

unsympathetic side in tragic and realistic plays and the villainous side in melodrama.³⁵ The spectator is out of sympathy with, or experiences a certain lack of understanding or approval for, the first type of antagonist; however, he does not necessarily personally dislike or totally condemn this type of antagonist. He realizes that there may be perfectly defensible motives for the antagonist's actions. In the case of the villain of melodrama, a judgment is made virtually before the onset of the play and, what is more, because of the spectator's identification with the agent the villain is persecuting, he experiences negative emotions, such as fear, hatred, desire for vengeance against the antagonist of the form. Even considering this difference, the condemnation of the villain would be valid, were one to say that a totally evil character was believable. George Bernard Shaw admirably attacks that viewpoint in this passage from his preface to Saint Joan.

There are no villains in the piece. Crime, like disease, is not interesting: it is something to be done av/ay with by general consent, and that is all about it. It is v.hat men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and v.^omen find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us. . . .A villain in a^ play can never be anything more than a diabolus ex machina, possibly a more exciting expedient than a deus ex machina, but both equally mechanical, and therefore interesting only as mechanism. It is, I repeat, what normally innocent people do that concerns us; and if

Joan had not been burnt by normally innocent people in the energy of their righteousness her death at their hands would have no more significance than the Tokyo earthquake, v/hich burnt a great many maidens.-^^

The villain, then, is just too bad to be true.

Since the melodrama's aim is a surface realism, its "diabolus ex machina" must be particularized to some extent. The villain is often associated with, if not a member of, the leisured wealthy class.^ Like the hero, the villain is a man of action, but, since the structure of melodrama dictates that the villain will hold the upper plot hand until the end of the play, the villain seems more logical and purposeful in his course of action. He invariably has a quicker wit than the hero³⁸ and often has a greater amount of force at his disposal.

(All of this is to no avail, of course, in the face of omnipresent poetic justice.) The evil of the villain, like the virtue of the hero, is manifested rather superficially. The villain is often made an outlaw; he

39

is invariably a "moral or social dissenter."^^ Thus his downfall becomes not only a matter of interest for the hero, but for the sake of the safety of society. Ludwig Lewisonn provides an interesting description of the relationship of society to the villain. "Society sees itself righteous and erect, and the object of its pursuit, the quarry, discomfited and dead. For the great aim of melodrama is the killing of the villain. . . .

He is permitted small successes, shadowy evasions, brief exultations. But these are known to be momentary, and felt as rudely ironic. The net tightens, its cords cut closer into the victim's flesh until the magnificent instant of the clicking handcuff or the whirring bullet IS ripe."⁴⁰ If the hero, as the agent of empathic identification, represents all that the anti-rational imagination admires, the villain, with his greater theatricality, more logically reinforced actions, and potential threat to society, proves an admirable opponent. Also, because stereotyped virtue can only affirm itself in the face of stereotyped vice, the villain is central to the melodramatic experience.

There are two villains in The Silver King, Geoffrey Ware and Captain Herbert Skinner. Although this is not unusual in melodrama, it is perhaps strange that Ware, the villain who is first disposed of, is in some ways a stronger figure than Skinner, the major villain of the play. Ware is stronger in that he is more determinedly and explicitly the malicious persecutor. He exhibits the singularity which characterizes the strongest villain stereotypes in literature, perhaps too strong a singularity for melodrama. One event, Nelly Hathaway's rejection of him (KING, p. 6), is all that is revealed of Ware's past, but it is this one event alone which motivates all of his subsequent villainy. With a

complete singleness of will. Ware ruins Will Denver and then mocks the hero and his wife. There is nothing good which can be said of Ware. He is considered inhuman, sub-human, by the hero; Denver calls him a hound, a cur, and a dog. (KING, pp. 16-17) Whatever Denver may call him, however. Ware shows himself to be shrewder than the hero. He manipulates Denver's affairs without Denver knowing of or struggling against the manipulation.

It is when Ware dies that he completely takes on the aspect of diabolus ex machina, for, dead, he presents a much more powerful and superhuman threat to the hero than he did when alive. Ware alive threatened to bring Denver down to the workhouse (KING, p. 13), but Ware dead causes all the wrath of the British legal system to descend unjustly upon the hero. Hence, the death of Ware has a far more important function than the most obvious one of fulfilling the requirement for poetic justice. It supplies a corpse that is a nemesis to Denver nearly to the end of the play. In the scene when Denver first finds the body of Ware, Denver believes Ware to be staring at him and exclaims, "Don't stare at me like that! . . . Close those eyes, Geoffrey—close them." (KING, p. 26) Again, when he first describes the murder scene to Nelly, Denver has an hallucination in which Ware is staring at him. "Look! Look! he's staring at me. Look! Look! He'll stare at me for e-er.

There! Don't you see him? (Pointing to the floor.)
 Hide him—hide him from me!" (KING, p. 29) Even after
 Denver has gained the cloak of anonymity through the train
 accident and made his fortune in America, he cannot
 escape Ware. He explains this to Jaikes as he describes
 a dream he has had.

. . . I fell asleep last night, and I dreamed
 that we were over in Nevada and we were seated
 on a throne, she and I; and it was in a great
 hall of Justice, and a man was brought before me
 charged with a crime; and just as I opened my
 mouth to pronounce sentence upon him, Geoffrey
 Ware came up out of his grave, with his eyes
 staring, staring, staring, as they stared at me
 on that night, and as they will stare at me
 till I die, and he said, "Come down! Come down!
 You whited sepulchre! How dare you sit in
 that place to judge men?" And he leapt up
 in his grave—close to the throne where I
 was—and seized me by the throat and dragged
 me down, and we struggled and fought like wild
 beasts—we seemed to be fighting for years—
 and at last I mastered him, and held him down
 and wouldn't let him stir. And then I saw a
 hand coming out of the sky, a long, bony hand
 with no flesh on it, and nails like eagle's
 claws, and it came slowly—out of the sky,
 reaching for miles it seemed, slowly, slowly
 it reached down to the very place where I was,
 and it fastened on my heart, and it took me and
 set me in the justice hall in the prisoner's
 dock, and when I looked at my judge, it was
 Geoffrey Ware! And I cried out for mercy, but
 there was none! And the hand gripped me again
 as a hawk grips a vixen, and set me on the
 gallows, and I felt the plank fall from my feet,
 and I dropped, dropped, dropped—and I
 awoke. . . . Then I knew that the dream was
 sent for a message to tell me that, though I
 should fly to the uttermost ends of the earth—
 as high as the stars are above, or as deep as the
 deepest sea bed is below—there is no hiding-
 place for me, no rest, no hope, no shelter,
 no escape.

(KING, pp. 80-81)

In the above passage. Ware is shown in his fullest and most sinister strength. For the anti-rational hero Ware has become a peculiar threat: an agent for the established authority. Through an outrageous coincidence, his murder by thieves on the night Denver has threatened him, the unjust persecutor of the hero seemingly becomes his just persecutor; a villain of the basest sort seems to have divine reinforcement. It is not until the fourth act climax that Denver, discovering he is innocent, is able to dissipate the dead villain's power. (KING, p. 95)

If Ware's evil singularity comes closer to traditional villainy. Skinner can be said to be the more distinctively Victorian of the two melodramatic antagonists. Skinner's unredeemed evil springs not from any personal hatred, but from the rather prosaic roots of the profit motive and the instinct for survival. Skinner's principal crime against Denver is committed simply because Ware's staying alive presents the threat of arrest for burglary. Even as he is escaping the murder scene. Skinner is regretful over his crime. He says, "I've gone a step too far this time. The fool Why wouldn't he let me pass!" (KING, p. 24) However, the regret is strictly rational, a self-evaluation of an act performed in the line of duty. This is the key to the villainy of Skinner: he is the ultra-efficient professional criminal, completely

engrossed in his job and the material rewards it brings. Not only has he no time for any of the emotions of compassion or hate; he cannot afford them. W. E. H. Lecky noted this tendency during the Victorian period, pointing to "a marked decline in the spirit of self-sacrifice" and noting that many had become "mercenary, venal, and unheroic." Skinner reveals himself to be a very different diabolus ex machina from Ware; he is a machine of rationality and materialism, an antithetical reflection of the needs of the age.

The anti-rational prejudice that intuition should be preferred to logic is strengthened by Skinner's cruel use of that logic. He wisely refrains from revealing that he is the murderer of Ware, knowing full well that he is ruining Denver and his family. When confronted with the suffering Nelly and her sick child, he provides a very rational basis for his evicting them: "My good woman, you'll be much better off in the work-house. You will be provided with food and your child will be attended by a doctor." However, when Nelly appeals to his compassion, saying the child may die if he is moved. Skinner merely counters with a different but equally logical argument. He warns her, "Now please don't make a scene. I've made up my mind to pull down that cottage. It isn't fit for a dog to live in." (KING, p. 51) Skinner's rationality is geared then to

his survival, just as Denver's irrationality is so morally oriented that it almost brings about the hero's destruction. This complete self-interest of Skinner's originates from that characteristic of his that is his greatest affront against Victorian sensibility: his universe is a completely materialistic one in which God either does not exist or is of no consequence. His description of life to Olive, his wife, seems a crude travesty on Darwin. He proposes, "My dear Olive, all living creatures prey upon one another. The duck gobbles up the worm, the man gobbles up the duck, and then the worm gobbles up the man again. It's the great law of nature." (KING, pp. 45-46) Whereas Denver constantly turns to God for guidance of his actions. Skinner's only reference to him is in reply to Nelly's fervent "God bless you! God bless you!" He answers, "Yes, we know all about that. Now go away and don't make any more fuss." (KING, p. 52)

However, this basic sin of Skinner's is ultimately a weakness rather than a strength in melodrama, where the outcome depends on providential, if seemingly coincidental, turns of fortune. Skinner's symptoms, his complete ruthlessness and machine-like efficiency, provide the more immediate threat. Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the machine-like nature of such a villain, for in a mechanistic universe, the machine is

merely set running, with no provisions for those who get in the way. Occasionally the machine breaks down in *The Silver King*, but, especially in the early part of the play, this breakdown is short-lived. Adding to the machine effect is the efficiency of Skinner's gang. The only weak cog in the gang-machine is Corkett, whom Skinner refuses to recognize as a member of the gang and who finally leads to the undoing of the gang and Skinner. Until this undoing, Denver's situation is that of the anti-rational hero confronted with a driverless tank. If he gets in the way, there is no one at the controls to stop the tank from running him down. This is assuming that the hero is subject to the mechanistic rules of the game. Of course he is not, in the Victorian melodrama. At the last moment a hand from Heaven will not only avert the hero's destruction, but overturn the tank as well. However, up to the moment of poetic justice, the Victorian playgoer, identifying with the hero, could surely experience sincere terror at this embodiment of a major nemesis of the age.

Because the authors reverse the situation mid-way in *The Silver King* and set Denver tracking down the villain. Skinner and his gang lose some of this terrifying edge. In fact. Skinner particularly seems to become progressively more stupid and impotent in the fourth and fifth acts. In the first three acts, he has been completely in control of himself and his environment.

foiled only by the outrageous coincidence of Denver's supplying Nelly the money to pay the rent. In the fourth act climax, however. Skinner, who has never been at a loss for verbal or mental resources, does nothing except to participate in a unison "overcome, helpless" chant of "Stop him! Stop him!" as Denver escapes. (KING, p. 96)

Surely this is the weakest bit of writing in the entire play. Melodramatic expediency or not, the fact remains that Skinner would not have reacted in an identical fashion with those people he is so far superior to in resourcefulness. Further, from his past actions, it is almost inevitable that he could have stopped Denver, if not inside the warehouse, then at least outside.

At the beginning of the fifth act. Skinner is again in complete control during his getaway scene with Olive and the criminals, even though he is playing a dangerous game in double-crossing his colleagues. However, from the time he enters in the second scene of the act, the scene which he shares with Denver, he is a changed man. He enters "looking anxiously round. His face is livid and his whole appearance betokens intense anxiety."

(KING, p. 106) Not much later in the scene. Skinner's self-confidence is "shaken by Denver's coolness."

(KING, p. 106) Considering the established coolness of Skinner throughout the play and the near-hysterical volatility of Denver, this stage direction is scarcely

believable. It is as if rationality (Skinner) is meant to appear as ultimately the least controllable, and anti-rationality (Denver) is meant to appear the cool, "logical" one. However, Denver's "coolness," when confronted even with a less confident Skinner, soon reassuringly explodes into the anti-rational heroism more natural to his character. It is left to Baxter, the play's symbol of law and thus ultimate authority, to dispense to Skinner poetic justice in a manner at least plausibly strong enough to subdue him. For a few brief moments at the end of the play. Skinner does show some of his old spirit in a rather cool interchange with Baxter, but he has actually become a villain denatured, a character whose confused conception equals the confusion of the form.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

Victorian melodrama, despite its popular and critical success in the nineteenth century, has failed to withstand the critical test of time. Although theatrical conditions were not ideal during this period, the actual failure of Victorian melodrama may be attributed to the distinctive dramatic and intellectual features of the literary form itself. These features, to a great extent, derive directly from various attitudes of the Victorian age. Most influential upon the form is that attitude which may be called "anti-rational." Anti-rationality may be defined as an attitude which, contrary to rationality, relies upon authority or intuition rather than upon logical reason. The Silver King, by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, one of the most successful melodramas of the time, exemplifies those features of Victorian melodrama which have contributed to the failure of the form in the face of posterity.

Melodrama contains two basic elements: a loose, episodic structure of thrilling action and an aggregate of stereotyped plot-dominated characters. The Victorian love of action finds expression in an action-dominated form. However, the action of melodrama does not derive its strength from human conduct, as dramatic

theory prescribes, but instead achieves its strength rather shallowly by utilizing a variety of theatrical devices. Seven characteristics are prominent in melodramatic action: a loose, episodic structure; an abundance of physical action; numerous thrills; a series of crises and climaxes; outrageous coincidence; poetic justice and the reassuring ending; and the employment of heightened language, particularly the devices of the aside and the soliloquy.

In the model drama, The Silver King, the action is so episodic that dramatic concentration is impossible. Physical action not only is present in abundance, but often seems to dominate the action of the play. An "action language" manifests itself. However, the physical action is invariably related only to the immediate situation. There are so many thrills in the play that no one thrill is isolated enough to be meaningful in itself. The crises of the play are exaggerated; the climaxes are not organically achieved. The effect is that of many peaks of intensity which are not particularly related to each other or to a central meaning or experience. Three functions of outrageous coincidence are discernible in The Silver King. First, it controls and gives coherence to the main action. Second, it facilitates the action of the moment. Third, it provides thrills. As in the case of melodrama in general, it is

the poetic justice which does the model drama the greatest disservice, for it negates the chance of enlightenment for the protagonist, Denver. The aside and the soliloquy are both utilized in The Silver King, with the soliloquy of psychological effect particularly displayed to advantage. The total effect of the action is somewhat like a prolonged look into a kaleidoscope filled with particularly dazzling bits of colored glass which will form no recognizable designs. At first the beholder finds the view exciting, but finally he realizes there is nothing within his realm of understanding which is being communicated to him.

Melodramatic character is a controversial subject. The most dominant viewpoint concerning this element of the form is the realistic viewpoint which bases its judgment on the overt actions of the character. From this viewpoint, melodramatic character is seen to violate rules of character by being action-dominated and generalized. The expressionistic viewpoint, basing its judgment on an overt portrayal of the inner person, contends that melodrama should be considered a forerunner of expressionism. Both viewpoints are partially correct. Melodramatic character portrays the inner person as a particularized overt character; therefore, it is neither completely realistic nor expressionistic.

This study posits a third viewpoint, the rational viewpoint, based on the idea of drama as a form which depends upon a rational view of life shared by the playwright and spectator. Seen from this viewpoint, melodrama reveals itself to be a basically distorted dramatic form. The spectator is urged to abandon the concept of empathy informed with rationality, to identify completely with the melodramatic hero, and to fear and dislike with great intensity the melodramatic villain. An analysis of the melodramatic hero and the melodramatic villain shows the two stereotypes to be respectively oriented to the likes and dislikes of the anti-rational imagination.

Because maximum identification is desired, the melodramatic hero usually comes from an ordinary walk of life. The hero possesses to a strong degree the anti-rational characteristic of obeying intuition rather than logic, a characteristic which usually involves him in a number of absurd predicaments. This reliance upon intuition satisfied the Victorian need for men with "inward and personal energy." However, the strength of the melodramatic hero is only superficially achieved in a blatant surface display of morality. The hero has no real strength of will, for it is poetic justice which ultimately masters his impossible situation for him.

The hero of The Silver King, Will Denver, achieves his status as an ordinary type by losing his fortune in the first act and gaining another in the lowly profession of silver mining. Denver's taste runs to taking fiscal and intuitive gambles. Great care is taken by the authors to portray a man in no way encumbered by rationality. The hero of the model drama is a monument of superficial morality, but is in fact unable to complete one major action through the strength of his own will. This inability is camouflaged by a wealth of inconsequential actions completed by the hero. Denver's behavior during the first two acts is completely impulsive and anti-rational. Then, at the beginning of the third act, it is hinted that the hero has gained a maturer and more rational outlook on his circumstances. This effect is only sustained long enough to reveal the glaring inconsistency of its inclusion, however. Denver is soon acting and reacting as anti-rationally as he did in the earlier part of the play. As Nelly puts it in the play's conclusion, he is "changed and not changed."

Although the melodramatic villain is characterized by a greater strength of will, he is ultimately even less convincing than the melodramatic hero. The spectator condemns the villain from the onset of the melodrama because he is totally evil. This total

malevolence on the part of the melodramatic villain negates his reality as a person within the play. He becomes a theatrical device, what Shaw called a diabolus ex machina. This diabolus ex machina is a machine of great logic and strength which usually poses a threat not only to the hero but to society and established authority as well. The complete and arbitrary force of poetic justice is required to defeat so formidable a menace.

Geoffrey Ware, the secondary villain in The Silver King, possesses a strong singularity of will while living. After Ware dies, however, his character poses an even more powerful and peculiar threat to the hero. The ghost of Ware becomes an evil agent of the established authority, an institution which the anti-rational hero is obligated to respect. Not until Denver discovers that he did not actually murder Ware is the hero able to dissipate the dead villain's power.

Captain Herbert Skinner, the primary villain of the model drama, is the more distinctively Victorian of the two melodramatic antagonists. He is a machine of rationality and materialism, using logic and force cruelly to insure his own self-preservation. The basis for Skinner's cruel nature is his faith in a Godless mechanistic universe. However, this ultimate

atheism of Skinner's only renders him more vulnerable to the inexorable and providential poetic justice of melodrama. More terrifying for the hero and the spectator is the symptom of this atheism, the machine-like nature of Skinner. Skinner's character is marred by an inconsistency which renders the entire conclusion of the melodrama incredible. The strength and brilliance demonstrated by him in the first three acts of the play are inexplicably and suddenly changed to stupidity and impotence in the fourth and fifth acts. Briefly during the fifth act, the quintessence of the anti-rational illusion is achieved; Skinner is seen as the impulsive emotional character and Denver is seen as the cool, logical one. However, it is finally the representative of authority and poetic justice, the detective Baxter, who completes the overthrow of Skinner, the arch-foe of anti-rationality.

The Silver King, an outstanding example of its form, Victorian melodrama, was popularly and critically successful during the Victorian period. Less than a century later, it is merely another title in the annals of Victorian melodrama, a body of literature which is almost completely dismissed by dramatic critics and the artists and patrons of the theatre. From the dramatic and the rational viewpoints, Victorian melodrama is seen to be a failure. From the dramatic viewpoint, it is seen

to be diffuse and superficial, ludicrous in its crude, inorganic, and unconvincing presentation of actions. From the rational viewpoint, it is seen to be a deliberate distortion of real life, pretending that people are stereotypes and that the affairs of life hinge upon a logic which awards victory to the stereotyped foes of logic. As clearly as one sees this twofold failure now, however, the fact remains that Victorian melodrama did not fail to please the public of its day. It was the vital and popular form of drama during the Victorian period. The anti-rational nature of the form satisfied the anti-rational imagination of the Victorian playgoer.

NOTES

CHAPTER I

George Sampson, The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, Great Britain, 1957), p. 751.

²George Rowell, ed. Nineteenth Century Plays, The World's Classics Series (London, 1965), p. vi.

³Harold Clurman, "Theatre: The Laggard Art," The Nation, September 20, 1965, p. 221.

⁴Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven, 1964), p. 54.

⁵Fred B. Millett and Gerald Fades Bentley, The Art of the Drama (New York, 1935), pp. 117-120.

Theodore W. Hatlen, Orientation to the Theatre (New York, 1962), p. 91.

^Millett, Art, pp. 118-120.

o
Houghton, Frame, p. 110 (in a footnote).

⁹Sampson, History, p. 751.

Quoted by Clayton Hamilton in "Introduction," Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, I (London, 1926), xxx.

•^-^Quoted by Brander Matthews in The Principles of Playmaking (New York, 1919), p. 281.

^^Hamilton, "Introduction," Representative Plays by Jones, 1/ xxxii.

CHAPTER II

Houghton, Frame, p. 111.

^John Stuart Mill, "Professor Sedgwick's Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge," Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical, and Historical, I (London, 1875), 98-99.

³ See Houghton's discussion of work in Frame, pp. 242-262.

⁴ Clayton Hamilton, The Theory of the Theatre (New York, 1939), p. 93.

⁵ Brander Matthews, Playwrights on Playmaking (New York, 1923), pp. 62-63.

⁶ William Archer, Play-Making, A Manual of Craftsmanship (New York, 1960), p. 15.

⁷ John E. Dietrich, Play Direction (New York, 1953), p. 9.

⁹ Archer, Play-Making, pp. 15-16.

⁹ Hamilton, Theory, p. 73.

Dietrich, Direction, p. 10.

"Slillett, Art, p. 117.

•[^]Viillett, Art, pp. 118-120.

¹³

Hatlen, Orientation, p. 91.

-*-'*[^]Marion Callaway, Constructing a Play (New York, 1950), pp. 278-279.

•[^]^Millett, Art, pp. 118-120.

¹⁶

Allardyce Nicoll, The Theatre and Dramatic Theor[^] (New York, 1962), p. 86.

•[^]Vxillet, Art, p. 117.

•[^]^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 90.

\ Hatlen, Orientation, p. 91.

X[^]^Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (New York, 1965), p. 202.

[^]^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 94.

; 1 MA? Matthews, Playwrights, p. 63.

[^]^Bentley, Life, p. 207.

[^]^"Hatlen, Orientation, p. 96.

25

William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, rev. and enl. C. Hugh Holman (New York, 1961), p. 499.

^^Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, p. 493.

27

Archer, Play-Making, p. 80.

28

Dietrich, Direction, p. 8.

Francis Fergusson, "Introduction," Aristotle's Poetics, tr. S. H. Butcher (New York, 1961), p. 8.

30

Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman, The Silver King, in Representative Plays by Henry Arthur Jones, ed. Clayton Hamilton, I (London, 1926), 27-33, hereafter identified in the text as KING.

•^Aristotle, Aristotle's Poetics (New York, 1961), p. 78.

^^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 90.

^^Bentley, Life, p. 198.

34

Houghton, Frame, p. 276.

35

Houghton, Frame, pp. 277-278.

36

Houghton, Frame, p. 62.

37

Houghton, Frame, p. 341.

38

Hatlen, Orientation, p. 92.

•"y\39p^ R. Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy (London, 1956), p. 278.

^^William Archer, quoted in The Anatomy of Drama by Alan Reynolds Thompson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942), pp. 256-257.

'^^illett. Art, pp. 119-120.

^^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 91.

•^Bentley, Life, p. 202.

Henn, Harvest, p. 278.

'^^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 86.

46 ,
Edward A. Wright, A Primer for Playgoers (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1958), p. 71.

47

Hamilton, Theory, pp. 90-91.

48

Bentley, Life, p. 207.

^^^Alexander Dean, The Fundamentals of Play Direction (New York, 1959), pp. 68-69.

CHAPTER III

1
Fergusson, "Introduction," Poetics by Aristotle (New York, 1961), p. 22.

'Archer, Play-Making, p. 245.

3
Archer, Play-Making, p. 248.

4
Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, p. 80

^Millett, Art, pp. 118-120.

^Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, pp. 280-281.

7

Hamilton, Theory, p. 72.

p
Hatlen, Orientation, pp. 93-94.

9

Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, p. 81.

Clara F. McIntyre, "The Word 'Universality' as Applied to Drama," PMLA, September, 1929, p. 928.

Hatlen, Orientation, p. 94-

•^^Bentley, Life, p. 199.

•^^Bentley, Life, p. 201.

^"^^Bentley, Life, p. 217.

•^^Bentley, Life, p. 204.

^^Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, pp. 194-195.

•"^^Frank Hurburt O'Kara and Marguerite Harmon Bro, Invitation to the Theatre (New York, 1951), p. 31.

•^^illett. Art, pp. 119-120.

19

Nicoll, Theory, pp. 63-79.

20

Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Playwrights on Playwriting, ed. Toby Cole (New York, 1963), pp. 75-77.

•^Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (Garden City, New York, 1953), p." 16.

22

Bernard Shaw, Our Theatres of the Nineties, I (London, 1932), 205-206.

^^John Morley, "Carlyle," Critical Miscellanies, I (London, 1886), 182.

24

Houghton, Frame, p. 306.

25

Hatlen, Orientation, p. 94.

2^Ibid.

Benjamin Disraeli, Tancred, or the New Crusade (1847), in Works, ed. Edmund Goose and Robert Arnot, XV (London and New York, 1904), p. 190.

Houghton, Frame, p. 333.

^^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 95.

•^^Hamilton, Theory, p. 72.

•^Thrall and Hibbard, Handbook, p. 489.

^^Stephenson Smith, The Craft of the Critic (New York, 1931), p. 361.

-•^Bentley, Life, p. 201.

-^^Harlowe R. Hoyt, Town Hall Tonight (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1955), pp. 88-89.

35

Thompson, Anatomy, p. 149.

^Sernard Shaw, Seven Plays (New York, 1951), pp. 794-795.

•'^Hatlen, Orientation, p. 94.

"^^?Ioyt, Town Hall, p. 89.

39

Ludwig Lewisohn, The Drama and the Stage (New York, 1922), p. 33.

^Olbid.

w. E. H. Lecky, History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism in Europe (1865), II (New York, 1903), 353-354.



- Lewisohn, Ludwig. The Drama and the Stage. New York, 1922.
- Matthews, Brander. Playwrights on Playmaking. New York, 1923.
- _____ • The Principles of Playmaking. New York, 1919.
- McIntyre, Clara F. "The Word 'Universality' as applied to Drama," PMLA, XLIV (September 1929), 927-929.
- Mill, John Stuart. Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical, and Historical. 4 vols. London, 1875.
- Millett, Fred B., and Gerald Fades Bentley. The Art of the Drama. New York, 1935.
- Morley, John, Viscount Morley. Critical Miscellanies. 4 vols. London, 1886 (for Vols. 1-3), and New York, 1908 (for Vol. 4).
- Nicoll, Allardyce. The Theatre and Dramatic Theory. New York, 1962.
- O, Hara, Frank Hurburt, and Marguerite Bro. Invitation to the Theatre. New York, 1951.
- Rowell, George, ed. Nineteenth Century Plays. The World's Classics Series. London, 1965.
- Sampson, George. The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature. Cambridge, Great Britain, 1957.
- Shaw, Bernard. Our Theatres of the Nineties. 3 vols. London, 1932.
- Shaw, Bernard. Seven Plays. New York, 1951.
- Smith, Stephenson. The Craft of the Critic. New York, 1931.
- Thompson, Alan Reynolds. The Anatomy of Drama. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942.
- Thrall, William Flint, and Addison Hibbard. A Handbook to Literature, rev. and enl. C. Hugh Holman. New York, 1961.
- Wright, Edward A. A Primer for Playgoers. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1958.

