



Chapter Ten

Harry Potter, the War against Evil, and the Melodramatization of Public Culture



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Voilà! In view, a humble vaudevillian veteran, cast vicariously as both victim and villain by the vicissitudes of Fate. This visage, no mere veneer of vanity, is a vestige of the vox populi, now vacant, vanished. However, this valorous visitation of a by-gone vexation, stands vivified, and has vowed to vanquish these venal and virulent vermin vanguarding vice and vouchsafing the violently vicious and voracious violation of volition. The only verdict is vengeance; a vendetta, held as a votive, not in vain, for the value and veracity of such shall one day vindicate the vigilant and the virtuous.

(V for Vendetta)

Detective Martin Prendergast: “Let’s go meet some nice policemen. They’re good guys. Let’s go.”

Bill Foster. “I’m the bad guy? How did that happen? I did everything they told me to. Did you know I build missiles? I help to protect America. You should be rewarded for that.”

(Falling Down)

This chapter explores the Harry Potter series in the context of the Reagan–Bush–Thatcher–Blair “war against evil” and an intensifying reliance on melodrama in political culture. The core observation that I make is twofold. First, melodrama can be an extraordinarily effective organizer of public opinion in service of imperial, dominative ambition, whether employed by the black shirts of the Third Reich or by recent occupants of the White House. The powerful appeal of simple, binary melodramatic ethics

(pure good versus unmitigated evil) and its core subjectivity—the victimized, misunderstood hero, who often appears paranoid or delusional to others—is a significant component of the success of the Harry Potter series. That same powerful appeal, when employed by state power and corporate media, helps to organize feelings of national victimization (by the Jews! by radical Islam! by the “haters of freedom” and “our way of life”!) in support of domination. The totalizing ethics of melodrama tend toward justification of violence—i.e., torture can be “good” when employed against “evil” people. In this way, by organizing nationalist—even imperial—feelings in support of the violent exercise of state power against persons, people, cultures, and other states, melodrama justifiably raises enormous concerns for critical observers of the United States as a political and cultural agent on the world stage.

One way of reading the Harry Potter series, therefore, is in the mode of cultural pathology: i.e., as a potentially harmful cultural artifact that disseminates a melodramatic worldview and therefore prepares the way for the abuse of state power. There is of course substantial support for such a reading. Over the course of the series, there is also substantial support for a complementary reading that would show Rowling—like many others working in a melodramatic mode—employing the melodramatic grammar of white hats versus black hats to introduce many fine shades of gray. This second reading would be compatible with numerous associated lines of thought, especially those springing from prevailing tendencies in Birmingham-school cultural studies. For these readers, the question is not how Rowling intended the series, or whether there was some firm allegorical meaning “in” the text that was itself dangerous to young readers’ moral, ethical, or political sensibility. Rather, these critics would explore the complex, ambiguous—and often liberatory—ways that readers employ texts, even the politically distasteful elements of very regressive texts, often against the author’s intentions.

The second core observation that I make is more difficult than the first, and leads to much edgier, but perhaps more subtle and fruitful, readings of Harry Potter as a cultural artifact than those suggested above.

The key thought is that melodrama’s broad appeal has much to do with its origins in the revolutionary working-class insurrections that saw the establishment of democratic states between 1798 and 1848. With that in mind, I point out that both historically and at present melodrama has never been only a rhetoric of state power, of false victimhood assumed by imperial storm troopers in service of domination. It has been and remains also a rhetoric of liberation. The appeal of melodrama as a liberatory rhetoric may in part explain its success when hijacked by the state. Of particular interest is the striking example of the film *V for Vendetta*, which—astonishingly in the current climate of repression—represents the political violence of its victim hero in extraordinarily sympathetic terms in his campaign against state repression. It is a powerful, disturbing, exhilarating film that (re)captures the

revolutionary, democratic sensibility of the melodrama. It explicitly calls up the language, iconography, and subjectivity of victimization established in the democratic revolutionary theater in an explicit attempt to once again build popular insurrectionary feeling and name democracy's common enemy—in those who have hijacked the democratic state and the public sphere.

Since there are numerous parallels in the way the later installments of the Potter series handle the abuse of state power, we must ask the difficult question: how, then, shall we respond to the melodramatic sensibility in Harry Potter, especially as it unfolds over the course of the series, with Rowling visibly struggling with the established melodramatic grammar of the novels in the aftermath of the intensified adoption of melodramatic rhetoric to justify broad extensions of state power in both Britain and the United States after September 11, 2001?

Taking the series as a whole, can we dismiss its deployment of melodrama simplistically as social-psychological bad medicine for young minds? Or are there ways in which the series is like *V for Vendetta*? While noxious as a rhetoric of domination, is melodrama perhaps still a viable and necessary rhetoric from below? We may not wish, in other words, to throw out the revolutionary baby with the right-wing bathwater.

Finally: are we so sure that that we know what the “correct” alternatives to melodrama might be?

Melodrama, History and Form

Melodrama (black hats vs. white hats, pure good vs. pure evil, as in Sergio Leone westerns, *Rocky* and *Bulwinkle*, etc.) originates in the eighteenth century working-class theater and its emerging iconography of the French revolution. The villains wore black, the dark evening clothes, and top hats of the aristocracy. The heroes wore the homespun, often undyed clothing of the working class and peasantry. Melodrama placed villains in black top hats with specific rhetorical consequences. It functioned to “name the enemy” for working-class audiences, fostering a sense of class solidarity against the aristocratic oppressor. As a victim, the hero's character generally doesn't develop, but is always, simply, “good.” Consequently, much of the dramatic action has to do with being misunderstood or victimized. The character doesn't change, but his circumstances change or his true identity is revealed.

Peter Brooks analyzes the core feature of melodrama as this moment of enlightenment or clarification, the climactic revelation of truth. It is therefore a drama of knowledge. The action ends when the mystery is dispelled and/or the misunderstood hero's always-extant goodness is at last recognized. Brooks' analysis in this regard is particularly helpful because the “good versus evil” iconography of melodrama has, of course, a much longer history.¹

The special contribution of the melodrama is the creation of a victim hero, misunderstood and misrecognized, in a plot that drives relentlessly toward

clarification and recognition. The story is over when the victim hero's virtue is known. This means that one of the genre's most common plot engines is misrecognition by a figure in authority—a parent, employer, spouse, police officer, politician, cleric, headmaster, or teacher. Sometimes the mistaken authority in melodrama is “the public” itself, or a figure for the public sphere, such as a journalist or sports audience. Typically the ultimate recognition of the hero's goodness is accompanied by other revelations: the identity or true character of the villain, clarification of plot lines, and so forth. As Brooks points out, the melodramatic aesthetic introduces ambiguity and complexity only to drive it from the scene, emphasizing that “the *reward* of virtue is only a secondary manifestation of the *recognition* of virtue” (27).

Overwhelmingly the dominant form of the nineteenth-century stage and the twentieth-century film industry, melodrama incorporates Enlightenment/Encyclopedic ideology about the relationship between knowledge, education, and social change. In melodrama, when the problem is fully understood, the problem is resolved. This faith that the exposure of wrongs leads inevitably to their redress is widespread among educators and cultural actors throughout the West. Sustained by melodramatic cultural forms, including journalism, political speech, and educator practice, the belief in the transformative power of knowledge, speech, and publicity emerged in the eighteenth century, rose to dominance in the nineteenth century, and remains dominant today.

Accordingly, melodrama did not long remain revolutionary working-class propaganda. It was incorporated into the project of political modernism more broadly. Promptly appropriated by the elites, professionals, and managers who controlled the theaters, it was adapted to literary purposes and influenced political discourse, political iconography, and political thought from the early nineteenth century through the present. Little studied or discussed in academic circles today, melodrama has far from waned. If it has become more difficult to grasp critically, it is only because it saturates the political and cultural atmosphere. It is the single most influential mass-media form today. It is nearly omnipresent in big-budget Hollywood films—many of whose video-store “genres” of western, thriller, action, horror, etc. are best understood as subgenres of classic melodrama. (Many of them have two centuries of antecedents in working-class theater.) Ditto for almost all video games, especially the “first person shooter” variety. Melodrama structures bestselling fiction and television narrative. It shapes tabloid and television journalism. It provides a powerful set of tropes to political speech, especially in wartime, or in struggles analogized to war (as in the “war on drugs”). In political discourse, including partisan speech and television news reporting, melodrama's capacity to “name the enemy” and consolidate a collective antagonist to the “evil” Other is most effectively deployed by those whose interests are shared by corporate media interests.

Ever present in modern political discourse, melodrama is not however

always dominant. For instance, the wartime melodramatic register established in the struggle against fascism continued unabated in the subsequent McCarthyism. Subsequently, however, the melodramatic policy complex of anticommunist geopolitics through the 1960s and 1970s steadily gave ground. Even in the midst of the Reagan–Bush–Thatcher reaction, Reagan’s “evil empire” remark was therefore received as startling and regressive, one which caused bitter divisions even within the ranks of his strongest supporters and closest advisors.

Today, however, melodramatic conventions are once again policy and the manufactured consensus of political culture, including the conviction that evildoers are less than human. George W. Bush’s rhetoric of a “war against evil” frames and sustains a broader public commitment regarding “evildoers.” This rhetoric casts the United States in the role of blameless victim, a virgin tied to the tracks while top-hatted dictators of oil wealth gleefully twirl their mustaches.

The fact that Saddam Hussein had no connection to the events of September 11th only intensifies the melodramatic register, because the United States is now not only blameless, but misunderstood on the world stage. The Bush administration experiences its crisis of legitimacy in relation to the Iraq war in the manner of the heroes of most Schwarzenegger, Stallone, or Willis star vehicles. From Rambo and the Terminator to Willis’s John McLane, these violent avengers are all compulsively and repetitively misunderstood by employers, politicians, spouses, and the public. The action of the plot moves in installments toward clarification—a clarification powered by authority’s long-awaited recognition of the hero’s essential, unvarying, misunderstood goodness. As the misunderstood hero of J. S. Jones’ 1838 classic, *The People’s Lawyer*, has it: “You shall one day know who I am and be sorry for this injustice!” (398). Invoking the language, iconography, and psychology of melodrama, the Bush administration appears to have the same desire—to be recognized by last-minute intervention (the confession of an evildoer, the discovery of a missing document or witness, etc.). The Bush administration compulsively repeats its need to be acknowledged as having been wholly good and blameless from the beginning. At the end of the mayhem, the hero’s reward is an acknowledgement that he was right all along, however paranoid, irrational, and antisocial he seemed throughout the plot.

Educators, Critics and Literary “Realism”

By contrast, many commentators and critics cast the Bush administration within the narrative of bildungsroman or bourgeois realism. These narratives go a bit like this: facing a test of character and growth, the Bush administration fails to change, reflect, or develop. This conserves the traditional reference point of literary realism: the “realistic” representation of the psychological development of bourgeois subjects.

Those of us working in the academic wing of the culture industries typically value these “realist” and classically liberal-bourgeois narratives of character growth—of overcoming internal obstacles and changes of attitude by the hero—more highly than we value melodramatic narratives of overcoming external obstacles and consequent changes of attitude by persons other than the hero. We tend to view bourgeois realism and melodrama as very different from each other. We further believe bourgeois realism to have tremendous merits—literary, ethical, psychological, educational—that melodrama all but completely lacks. To a strong extent, our academic rejection of melodramatic cultural forms reflects our strong commitment to classically liberal values, including those of liberal education. Bourgeois-realist forms of narrative ascribe enormous merit to all activities associated with character development (including, broadly, education). Bourgeois, or psychological, realism resolves plots happily with personal growth, and unhappily with failure to grow.

The discomfort of liberal educators with melodrama is understandable. Liberal educators commonly conceive of liberal education as in part encouraging students to “develop” in relation to melodramatic forms. The presumption is one of a trajectory: away from melodramatic forms associated with the unschooled juvenile (first-person shooter video games, cartoons, comics) toward the bourgeois-realist forms generally prized in close proportion to schooling. These preferred texts include, for instance, novels dealing with contemporary social themes such as race, gender, and cultural difference. Significantly, however, these preferred texts rarely address the theme of social class (except through highly ideological mediations such as race).

In addition to positive and prosocial messages regarding the importance of character-building against racism and gender bias, these novels typically require a grasp of such new-critical values as ambiguity, complexity, and irony. With more of these things, more internal navigation of ambiguity and complexity, and less melodramatic binarizing and simplification, we believe, perhaps the Bush administration would have urged us to saddle up to Saddam’s hanging party in vain.

In short, liberal educators view melodrama through a melodramatic lens. We view melodrama, purely, and simply, as “bad.” In the academic imagination, melodrama is bad literature, bad culture, bad politics, bad education. It stands in opposition to “good” literature, politics, and education.

This leads those of us with educator’s tin stars pinned to our vests to a clear, simple, straightforward conclusion: We need more schooling to stamp out the juvenile attachment to melodrama. Melodrama is the enemy.

But is it?

The Unexpected Ambiguities of Melodrama

Thinking about melodrama requires us to go a little further, to explore some unexpected ambiguities of the melodramatic structure of feeling. One com-

plexity to consider is that bourgeois realism and melodrama have a lot in common—especially the shared tradition of romantic, heroic, individualism. Pursuing the growth of bourgeois character in bildungsroman, literary realism developed in close relationship to the social psychology of a professional, managerial fraction of the working class: persons for whom an extended apprenticeship of schooling and prosocial character development ends with the reward of a good income and status recognition, a rough analogue of the character-building adventures of the bourgeois son in bildungsroman, not yet ready to direct his father's wealth-building enterprise. From the latter half of the nineteenth century through the present, professionals and managers have consumed a literature valorizing the overcoming of internal obstacles, of psychological growth associated with external rewards. In a way, literary realism is simply the flexible form of the melodrama, with the obstacles to recognition moved inward. Melodramatic heroes are misunderstood by authority; realist heroes misunderstand themselves or others. Realism also depends on a series of recognitions; it, too, is an epistemological drama. But in realism the liberal subjectivity—Rorty's liberal ironist, Anderson's imperial self—becomes both the object and subject of recognition. Both as a matter of cultural history and emotional content, the liberal conviction of the educator and administrator that the virtues of schooling will be rewarded is not so very far from the convictions of the melodramatic hero. Both progress toward the ultimate recognition of virtue.

Another consideration is that melodrama functions more like grammar than a prescription or formula. It shapes what can be said, but is not fully determining. Even in its most industrialized and commodified form, Hollywood film, artists working with the grammar of melodrama have found a way to navigate complexity, ambiguity, and irony. This is the intention of Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down*, based on an Edgar-award winning original screenplay by Ebbe Roe Smith. In many ways a classically modernist film with the auteurist ambition of featuring *Everyman on the edge*, the film thematizes the inadequacy of the melodramatic register of contemporary subjectivity—"I'm the bad guy? But I build missiles to protect America!"—while relying entirely on dominant, melodramatic film grammar to make the point. This is the core observation of Birmingham-school cultural studies approaches to commodified mass culture: ideology critique of mass culture in the Frankfurt school tradition, while valuable, is not enough. Even the most ideologically narrow cultural artifacts bear contradictory meanings and can be put to use against the grain of the intended significance. Pursuing Bourdieu's dictum regarding mass culture—"There is another production called consumption"—the Birmingham school traces the ways that ordinary citizens constantly pry ideologemes from their intended meanings and creatively re-deploy them to liberatory purpose.

In short, both producers and consumers of melodrama are in the habit of making the language of black and white signify in every shade of gray.

This contradictory deployment of melodrama as both the object of critique and the grammar of the critique itself, is also true of mainstream responses to the Bush administration's "war against evil" rhetoric. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, for instance, constantly skewer the Bush administration's melodramatic worldview. But Stewart's own trope for the vice-president and president are iconically melodramatic villains. For him, Cheney is Darth Vader, the aristocrat-villain caped in black. He correspondingly casts Bush in the role of pure evil's comic sidekick with an imitation ("heh-heh-heh") redolent of such familiar second villains as Muttley, Dick Dastardly's dog in the Hanna-Barbera series. Colbert's performance is even more interesting: as a liberal ironist, he nightly performs the role of someone who, as he says, "sees the world in black and white," with the apparent intention of inviting his audience to consider the distance between the worldview of the egotistical simpleton he portrays and their own. Yet it's never clear that the gap is as large as he would like.

The best critique of the melodramatic worldview is that it simplifies reality and can be used to overwhelm dissenting speech and critical thought. The Bush administration's assignation of white hats and black hats makes it much harder, for instance, to speak or even imagine parallels between the historical tactics of American rebel-patriots (roadside sniping by nonuniformed combatants) and those of contemporary Iraqi resistance to American occupying forces. There is little to defend in the worldview of an imperial nuclear superpower that grasps international relations in the cartoonish and paranoid mode of an "axis of evil." Deploying melodramatic epistemology well in advance of its brigades, the Bush administration seeks—just as Elisabeth Anker contends—to place state power beyond the realm of democratic politics and the possibility of debate: "Thoughtfulness was replaced by the imperative toward retributive action" (33). The administration's binarization into camps of "for" and "against" is, of course, a form of totalization, an intellectual reign of terror. Anker is right to name melodrama as the mode through which Bush and the corporate media "took power away from citizens by encouraging them to assume that state power was an unquestionable moral imperative in fighting the eternal battle between good and evil" (36). By way of melodrama, the Bush administration and corporate media framed a national consensus that a) all those dubbed evildoers by the administration can and should be tortured to clarify the plot; b) that there can be no relief to good until the evil other is destroyed; and c) because "you're either with us [good] or against us [evil]," anyone disturbing these clarities is potentially an enemy of the state.

On the other hand, Anker probably misses out on something by describing melodrama as having primarily "dangerous ramifications" for democratic citizenship (22). As we've seen with Colbert and Stewart, even liberal ironists are drawn to melodrama's power to name the enemy, creating a solidarity of

antagonism. Any full consideration of melodramatic utterance has to acknowledge, for instance, the breathtaking challenge to liberal orthodoxy posed by a courageous film like the Wachowski brothers' *V for Vendetta*, which attempts to recapture the revolutionary melodramatic worldview, wresting the language, iconography, and yearning for justice of melodrama away from state propaganda and back to its roots in popular insurrectionary feeling.

Is it only a question of the Bush administration using the wrong cultural mode? Or is it a question of the cultural mode being deployed to name the wrong enemy? *V for Vendetta* makes a compelling case for the latter. One has to wonder whether it can be accidental that a major film so fully capturing the democratic revolutionary feeling emerges after three decades of a reactionary class war from above, producing globally unprecedented extremes of inequality and a security state far closer to the totalitarian imaginings of Orwell's 1984 than most U.S. observers ever thought possible.

Furthermore: clarification remains a liberatory aim in many circumstances. As I was finishing up this piece, journalist John Cloud published his piece on Dumbledore's sexuality in *Time* magazine, igniting a variety of reactions, many akin to this letter to the editor, anxiously trying to contain its meaning: "The Harry Potter story is about Harry and his best friends working together to fight evil. It is not a p.c. statement about sexuality. It is not Harry and the Angry Inch. J. K. Rowling's story started as a children's book and evolved into teenage reading material. That is it." (Van den Herik) As liberal educators, our typical reaction to this anxious demand for clarity is a rueful smile. Of course, we say, the story is really about Dumbledore's sexuality. That good and evil stuff is for children and the unsophisticated.

Notwithstanding our sense of superiority for mastering the arts of subtextuality, if we push even a bit at the liberal valorization of ambiguity, complexity, and irony, we can't be so sure that these modes are automatically preferable in all circumstances. Anyone remotely familiar with U.S. labor law understands that the Reagan–Bush reaction has not proceeded by cartoonish references to "evil empires" alone. It has also proceeded by the canny work of battalions of lawyers and bureaucrats dedicated to producing regulatory complexity and ambiguity around such terms as "work" and "worker." These masters of subtext all trained in classes like ours. They too chuckled at the letter-writer who insisted that the story was really about a bunch of kids "working together to fight evil." We taught them to do that.

The consequence of these regulatory ambiguities—crafted by our best students—has been profound for tens of millions of workers. Persons working as "independent contractors" aren't workers. Undocumented immigrants can work, but cannot claim the rights of labor. Persons employed "part-time" don't enjoy many worker protections, so now work more than full-time—just at multiple part-time jobs. At the height of the faculty unionization

movement, faculty in private colleges were dubbed “supervisory” personnel, and can be legally retaliated against for attempting to unionize. Following the same legal ambiguity, even nurses who have no subordinates have been legally construed as supervisory personnel, and denied labor protections.

If there is a mode that characterizes the class war from above, it turns out not to be melodrama after all. Instead, class war from above relies on new-critical textual manipulation: regulatory ambiguity, the million-dollar-a-year lawyer’s production of interpretive complexity, and the ironic mode, which allows our liberally-educated “best students” to live with themselves while they service capital.

The same points about nuance, complexity, and ambiguity might be made with respect to the law and discourse surrounding torture, or the Supreme Court’s endorsement of Bush’s electoral “victory” over Gore in a state governed by his brother.

Harry Potter, Victim Hero

Over the course of the series, Rowling’s ambitions for her central character change and grow. He begins a classically melodramatic victim hero, and becomes, with the longer novels (four to seven), more of a bourgeois-realist hero, with *bildungsroman*-style challenges that establish the growth and evolution of his character. Perhaps the most dramatic challenge Harry faces is the evolution in his feelings toward the situation of the house-elves, a growth that takes place so slowly that for several installments of the series it is hard to credit Rowling with what appears to have been her ultimate intention, for Harry to move toward the greater sympathy with their situation evidenced by Hermione and, eventually, Dumbledore. The melodramatic grammar established in the first novels remains firmly in place throughout the saga, and the more ambitious novels have as one of their core challenges the expression of moral ambiguities—albeit with a vocabulary designed to eliminate them.

As we first meet him, Potter is described in the classic melodramatic posture of the victim hero, whose true identity is obscured even from himself: “he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 18). Throughout the subsequent decade, Harry yearns to be known, and we are presented with a montage foreshadowing the satisfaction of this desire, showing a parade of strangers over the years inexplicably waving at him, bowing to him, shaking his hand, and so forth (27). During this period, and really throughout this novel, Harry’s character doesn’t struggle to develop, so much as it struggles simply to emerge—to pass into the limelight, pressing past obstacles into vision and recognition. The Dursleys function to cloak his virtue, actively concealing evidence of his good qualities, his past, his identity—his very existence. Relegated to a closet under the stairs, he is absent from the family photographic record, and misinformed about his parents and culture. Above all, the Dursleys are repeatedly underscored as

persons who couldn't appreciate Potter's virtues even if they were inclined to do so. This sets up the drama of unveiling that the first novel, and the entire series, compulsively repeats: Harry's essential virtues are misunderstood by figures in power and authority, then recognized, then misunderstood once more.

The world of school initiates the first definitive revelation of Potter's character with the traditional melodramatic device of the waylaid document. The protracted struggle over the admissions letter is the first direct confrontation that the boy initiates: for the first time, he makes demands and outright refuses the authority of the Dursleys: "Harry didn't move. 'I WANT MY LETTER!' he shouted" (31). This is entirely a struggle over knowing: the Dursleys seek at all costs to prevent revelation while Harry and his eventual sidekick Hagrid struggle to bring it about.

That moment of enlightenment is partly the revealed memory of trauma (the moment of his parents' murder), troped on limelight: "As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before" (46).

On the melodramatic stage, this revelation scene would have been accompanied by a flash of light revealing the characters frozen in place in a carefully composed picture, or tableau, as well as by a sharp sound effect, such as thunder, an organ chord (ta-da!) or, as when Sweeney Todd lifts his razor high and pauses, a steam whistle. Frequently the tableau is accompanied by the echoing laugh of the villain, which is what accompanies Harry's revelation: "and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life, a high, cold, cruel, laugh" (46).

This first achievement by our hero is an achievement of self-assertion, of insisting on being known in his proper character—in this case, as a potential master of the arts of traditional, liberal, college-preparatory schooling, here troped as magic. One of the great weaknesses of the melodrama as a vehicle for working-class solidarity was its early, pronounced tendency to reveal the identity of the hero as someone who doesn't belong to the working class at all, typically an aristocrat in disguise or blocked from his inheritance and title by accident or conspiracy. In some cases of Jacksonian-era melodrama, the hero's working-class roots and rough manners are celebrated in the form of a "nature's aristocrat," a version that survives today in, for instance, Bruce Willis vehicles or television police/legal procedurals, in which sexist or rough-talking police officers nonetheless reveal themselves as having "hearts of gold." More commonly, however, as in the 1839 J. S. Jones classic, "The People's Lawyer," the hero proves to have been not nature's nobleman but, more simply, an actual aristocrat in disguise. In these cases, the recognition of the hero's identity is accompanied by a pot of money, status, and, typically, the power to resolve any remaining conflicts in the plot.

This tendency captures the desire of the working-class audience to escape

its condition, albeit in a way unlikely to advance working-class revolution. This device has particular social-psychological appeal for the emergent professional-managerial fraction of the working class, for whom schooling and liberal bourgeois ideology represented the possibility of a concrete, personal satisfaction of their individual desire to escape the working-class condition—without incurring the personal risks and cost of transforming underlying social relations.

The experience of schooling is surprisingly consistent with melodramatic ideology for the professional-managerial class: sentenced, like other members of the working class, to a lifetime of labor, of working in order to live, schooling is the experience that reveals their meritoriousness, validates their claim to an income some fraction or multiple of the income of others who work in order to live. Through schooling, the professional-managerial class supplants the “nature’s nobleman” artisan hero of some Jacksonian melodrama with the lords of the grade-point average, the seigneurs of standardized testing, and so on. Potter, Hermione Granger, and Dumbledore are all variants of this version of heroism, which includes a fairly conventional dismissal of the (rest of) the working class (the dullard Hufflepuffs), accompanied by an equally typical lionization (“griffin”-dor) of the hard-working but modestly leisured bourgeois “good” members of the ruling class comprising entrepreneurs, professionals, managers, and venture capitalists by distinction from the leisured, aristocratic “bad” members of the ruling class in Slytherin. One of the reasons the scholarly Ravenclaw house is largely absent from the plot through the series is because the heroism of Gryffindor is functionally reliant on schooling. The text fails to distinguish Gryffindor from Ravenclaw to the extent it distinguishes it from the other two houses because Gryffindor is schooling plus bourgeois virtue (and sometimes schooling *as* bourgeois virtue), together with the habits of rule. Gryffindor represents the professional-managerial contradiction—of striving to prove merit “democratically” through schooling, but which turns out to be an opportunity to display a plausibly bourgeois meritoriousness that associates social power with belonging to the ruling class, or at least conformity with its interests. Which may explain in part why the biggest-selling of the books about Potter may well turn out to be the one that offers “leadership wisdom from the world of wizards,” Tom Morris’ *If Harry Potter Ran General Electric*, a compendium of platitudes purporting to explain how to be a “great man” in the world of capitalist exploitation.

The revelation of Potter’s identity follows this pattern of schooling-as-revealed-bourgeois-merit closely. The recognition of his virtue is accompanied in short order by the revelation that he is, in fact, an aristocrat in the world of schooling, and a splendidly rich celebrity to boot: “It’s an outrage! . . . not knowin’ his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 44). With considerable dramatic economy, Rowling makes Potter’s first working-class sidekick the agent of this revelation

(“Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes” (47)), so that the hero’s new aristocratic status is properly set off by the freely given deference of the working class, as well as by the (harder-won) new deference of the professional-managerial suburbanite Dursleys. As an aristocrat in the world of schooling, he is summoned away from the destiny arranged for him by these false parents (“He’s going to Stonewall High and he’ll be grateful for it.”) into the boarding-school destiny arranged by his true parents and their surrogates, such as Dumbledore—“His name’s been down ever since he was born” (47).

The nature of Potter’s belonging to a ruling class is the source of considerable plot consideration over the course of the series. The continuous recycling of the revelation plot over the course of the series—Potter misunderstood, Potter recognized—retains some vitality by using these repeated scenes of misrecognition to parse more and more finely the hero’s relationship to other heroes and villains, often on the basis of socioeconomic class and class fractions. What one observer has convincingly described as “Rowling’s close detail of a late capitalist, global consumer culture” therefore at least to an extent navigates some of the “social inequities and injustices that masquerade behind the draperies of democracy” (Westman 306–307). In this way, Potter’s aristocracy of the boarding school is quickly distinguished from the aristocracy of the Malfoys (who retain their ancient association, like all of the series’ villains, with the iconic clothing, manner, grammar, and plot function of the landed class enemy of the revolutionary melodrama). Potter’s qualifications for the ruling class are also quickly distinguished from the professional-managerial scholasticism of Hermione, and the lower-middle-class institutional loyalties of the civil-servant Weasleys, as well as the commercial interests of the Dursleys (though Potter himself later dabbles in venture capitalism, supporting the Weasley twins’ desire to rise from their background by enterprise). Later episodes deal with the more difficult parsings represented by Tom Riddle/Voldemort, Snape, and Dumbledore, as different dimensions of Potter’s character are revealed.

The series derives tremendous energy from continuously recycling the revelation plot. The series reveals over and over again that Harry is, indeed, good, right, and virtuous after being mistaken by family, friends, the wizarding public, the Muggle public, and even parental surrogate Dumbledore: at a few points Potter is even mistaken about himself, and the plot functions to reveal Harry’s goodness to himself. The revelation plot works for Harry’s various doppelgangers as well, both those who are eventually revealed as standing with good, and those who are eventually revealed as standing with evil. Indeed, nearly every significant character in the book takes a turn in the revelation plot.

The corollary to the revelation of the hero’s identity is the revelation of the villain, as in the climactic chapter 17 of the first novel, “The Man With Two

Faces.” As in the melodrama and nineteenth-century serial fiction emulating it, Rowling has brought down the curtain in chapter 16 with the villain revealed in a tableau of shadows: “There was already someone there—but it wasn’t Snape. It wasn’t even Voldemort” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 208). After the cinematic beat of the chapter break, chapter 17 begins on the next page as if with the snap of a floodlight:

It was Quirrell.

“*You!*” gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn’t twitching at all.

“Me,” he said calmly. “I wondered whether I’d be meeting you here, Potter.”

“But I thought—Snape—”

“Severus?” Quirrell laughed and it wasn’t his usual quivering treble either, but cold and sharp. “Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn’t he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?”

Harry couldn’t take it in. This couldn’t be true, it couldn’t.

“But Snape tried to kill me!”

“No, no, no. *I* tried to kill you.”

(209)

The first three volumes, the shortest in the series, turn almost entirely around revelation plots: Quirrell and Snape in the first, Tom Riddle in the second, and Sirius Black in the third (“YOU’VE GOT THE WRONG MAN!” Harry shouts into the face of the befuddled minister Fudge (*Azkaban* 285)).

Whenever the dramatic tension is not about Harry’s mistaken identity, the tension remains epistemological—will the character be revealed as good or revealed as evil? Sometimes this truth is concealed from the reader, and known to characters in the fiction; in other cases, the reader knows, and the plot action is an effectively an epistemological car chase, a frenetic struggle to rectify the mistaken identity. In some cases, the revelation plot is used to rehabilitate characters—the Malfoys—previously revealed as evil. Even minor characters are continuously subject to revelation scenes, as when the second volume’s Gilderoy Lockhart, a version of the classic melodramatic hero, *à la* Dudley Do-Right, is revealed as a coward. Lockhart functions to position Harry within the melodramatic tradition—as a Clark Kent professional-managerial hero, modestly seeking to escape his celebrity.

The longer novels, fourth through seventh in the series, increasingly incorporate plots featuring the development of Harry’s character. But this doesn’t reduce their reliance on the melodramatic economy of revelation, of tension regarding the misunderstanding of character, rather than its development. The fourth volume derives significant tension from the traditional device of

establishing the allegiance of Lupin, for instance. More interestingly, the fifth volume—the first published after the assault on the World Trade Center—broadens the field on which Harry and his allies, doubles, and mentors are misunderstood. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry, Dumbledore, and Weasley senior—as well as their entire cadre—become the object of state terror and misinformation, with Harry subjected to relentless public scorn and “a full criminal trial” signifying the willingness of the state to abuse its power.

The fifth and sixth volumes display the most complex engagement with the melodramatic structure of feeling. The fifth volume highlights what happens when agents of state power appropriate melodramatic rhetoric with the eager collaboration of the corporate media. This inaugurates both an intensification of melodramatic plot drivers and a distinct effort to distance or bracket the series’ reliance on melodramatic logic. As the object of state terror in the fifth volume, Harry’s sense of being misunderstood reaches its peak. His interior monologue captures the reader’s own fatigue with the much-repeated misrecognition plot, “How many more people were going to suspect that he was lying or unhinged?” (*Order* 198). Cast in the government-scripted melodrama as public enemy number one, Harry experiences kinship with the falsely accused and eventual fugitive Dumbledore and, especially, the wrongly imprisoned Sirius Black: “Harry thought Sirius was probably the only person who could really understand how he felt at the moment, because Sirius was in the same situation” (269). This drives Harry into the prototypical defiance of the melodramatic hero: “They’ll know we’re right in the end,” but, he wonders, how many more assaults would “he have to endure before that time came” (199).

Simultaneously, however, this theme of the misunderstood victim hero is for the first time in the series—after literally dozens of repetitions—rendered problematic by Rowling. In the context of Hermione Granger’s sustained campaign to raise awareness regarding structural exploitation in the wizarding world, and the complicity of wizards and their institutions, including schools, in that exploitation, Harry’s sense of perpetual victimization at last grows thin. “Oh, stop feeling all misunderstood,” Granger finally snaps (*Order* 441). Together with Dumbledore, Hermione in the final three novels becomes increasingly visible as a tutelary agent moving Potter from self-absorption to an actual interest in others. In this novel, the privileged Harry’s perennial “feeling of ill-usage” (152) is handled as a character problem that he must struggle to overcome—i.e., an element in a *bildungsroman* or literary-realist plot—and no longer functions uncomplicatedly as a melodramatic plot driver. This is accompanied by a formal rejection of melodramatic logic by father-surrogate Sirius Black, “‘Yes, but the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters,’ said Sirius with a wry smile.” (271). Now a “wry” liberal ironist, Rowling attempts to wrench Black from the misrecognition plot—

innocence mistaken for evil—that gives him his name (“serious black”). Similarly, at the conclusion of the sixth volume, while Harry is still dubbing Snape a villain, Hermione backs him off: “‘Evil’s a strong word,’ Hermione said quietly” (*Half-Blood* 595).

This more psychological handling of Harry—the effort to treat him with the devices of literary realism—doesn’t imply a repudiation of the melodramatic, but rather an effort to make the melodramatic signify in psychologically complex ways, as in Harry’s intensifying self-reflection throughout the final three novels. Utilizing almost exclusively the Romantic trope of the *doppelgänger*, this self-reflection constructs moral ambiguity in the language of good and evil: Harry struggles to understand how he can be both “good” and intimately, profoundly, inescapably tied to “evil,” as he increasingly involuntarily experiences manifestations of his own consciousness as a “kind of aerial that was tuned in to tiny fluctuations in Voldemort’s mood” (*Order* 489). This psychological handling is accompanied by the classic psychological plot—the overcoming of the father. Whereas melodramatic psychology yearns for recognition by the father or patriarchal authority (the gaze of the magistrate, teacher, detective, etc.), literary-realist psychology commonly problematizes the father: after yearning to be like his father, Potter in the fifth novel discovers that his father was a bully, and at last wonders, “But did he want to be like his father any more?” (*Order* 588). To a substantial extent, this literary-realist ambition shares space with melodrama in the final three volumes. The series’ climax is therefore dual. In the last pages of the final volume, we have both a melodramatic climax—in chapter 34, which opens “Finally, the truth.” (*Deathly Hallows* 554) and closes with the traditional “flash of green light”—as well as a literary-realist climax, in chapter 35. Like “Incident at Owl Creek Bridge,” the story by Ambrose Bierce most often described as the prototypical literary-realist text, chapter 35 is essentially a dream sequence that takes place in psychological reality. Bierce’s story takes place during the execution by hanging of a Confederate prisoner, recording his imagined escape and reunion with his family during the instant in time it takes to plummet to the end of his rope: at the conclusion of Harry’s similar psychological adventure, Dumbledore plays English professor: “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?” (579).

These literary-realist ambitions in the final three volumes are accompanied by what might be called a profound “melodrama fatigue.” On the one hand, the effort to draw plot energy from the established economy of the series leads to increasingly tired efforts to breathe life into the struggle between good and evil. As even the first film based on the series makes clear, it is already a dramatic and semiotic challenge for Alan Rickman to perform Snape’s evil in the mode of a black-clad lisping aristocrat when there are at least three other black-clad villains with sibilant speech patterns in the same episode alone!

Unsurprisingly, by the sixth volume, for Voldemort even to be legible as a villain in the melodramatic register, he has to be described in magnificently amplified terms, in a very long exposition by Dumbledore as having traveled “beyond the realm of what we might call usual evil” (*Half-Blood* 464). In the same exposition, Harry is once more recast as the hero “pure of heart” originating with melodrama—drawing strength from “the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole” (478).

On the other hand, at the same height of fatigue with melodrama, the series in this sequence revives the Hegelianism current at the rise of revolutionary melodramatic popular logic—the claim that ruling-class evil gives rise to its own gravediggers, best formulated by Marx in the Communist manifesto, and here paraphrased by Rowling in Dumbledore’s explanation to Potter: “Don’t you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress?” (*Half-Blood* 477). While this is hardly the stuff of the children’s literature produced by the actual, vital culture of Western Marxism (see Mickenberg, especially “The Commies Go After the Kids,” 136ff), it does represent at least the possibility of pushing back at a tyrannical ruling class.

In assessing the meaning of the melodramatic logic animating this series of more than 3000 pages, we have to acknowledge that Rowling’s work engages the strengths of melodramatic mode as well as its weaknesses. Even to the extent that it participates in the hidden melodrama of professional-managerial heroism—merit at last revealed by education institutions—the series finds time to raise questions about that complicity, giving us Dumbledore’s flirtation with fascism. And just where it confirms our educators’ bias in favor of safe fictions with “positive messages” of character development, it moves onto the terrain of *V for Vendetta* and asks us whether we professionals and managers do need to join with the house-elves and goblins and start naming the enemy who turns out to be Tom Riddle, a double of our own successes through schooling. And finally, it asks us whether our heroism through schooling, however essential, can ever be enough.

It isn’t easy for educators to “name the enemy.” They’re often quite literally forbidden to do so, with intensifying ruling-class control of curriculum and teacher speech. It is, in any event, an act generally outside of normative pedagogy. By contrast, Anker’s call for “more complex and nuanced ways of understanding contemporary national life,” is perfectly conventional and sensible within the frame of liberal orthodoxy in contemporary electoral politics. Her call for nuance exactly captures such authoritative positions as that advanced by the authors of the recent Carnegie text, *Educating for Democracy*, which associates educating for “responsible political engagement” with fostering the disposition toward critical thinking defined in classic new-critical terms as the disposition to “appreciate complexity and ambiguity” (55). In that book, the 60-year-old orthodoxies of the post-war literary “new

criticism,” emerging in part as a mode of delegitimizing the militant and class-conscious fiction of American proletarian writers, now functions not just as a literary but as a political orthodoxy within the education establishment. Even knowing the specific political content framing this neutral orthodoxy doesn’t make it easy to challenge.

But perhaps the difficulty of arguing with these conventional beliefs and normative pedagogy is the point. Is “responsible political engagement” always best served by nuance? Was the political sophistication of the American population improved by banishing texts addressing class, class struggle, and the class war from above from curricula and even postsecondary literary history (albeit by the soft banishment of being judged insufficiently tinged with ambiguity, complexity, and irony)? Are there not moments when incivility, finger-pointing, and naming the enemy (“demonization”) is the most responsible political act? It is easy to lionize civility when one is not being tortured, exploited, unfairly terminated from employment, evicted, educated in a rat-infested schoolhouse, or discriminated against. It is easy to appreciate ambiguity and complexity when it is the economic well-being, nutrition, and health care of others at stake.

Full, fair, informed consideration of any utterance in the melodramatic mode—including Rowling’s—cannot come from the narrow, cold-war standpoint of a long-outmoded branch of literary criticism. Ultimately, thoughtful consideration of the continuing appeal of melodramatic utterance in political democracy has to at least consider the extent to which the revolutionary social promise of political democracy remains incompletely fulfilled.

Notes

1. As many commentators on Harry Potter have noted, including some that focus on the political culture and international relations, e.g., Neumann 160.
2. This is a fairly contested point, with the traditional readers of melodrama, such as Dan Gerould, associating it primarily with revolutionary feeling, and more recent readers, such as Bruce McConachie, emphasizing the evolution of the genre’s audience and ideological import. See their tart exchange in TDR, sparked by Gerould’s review of McConachie’s influential *Melodramatic Formations*. Similarly, Elaine Hadley reads melodrama as a “contestatory mode” while Jeffrey Mason reads it in relation to “the myth of America.”
3. For more on the “violent avenger” and the emergence of heroic individualism and its relationship to liberal hegemony, see McConachie, Mason, and Bousquet.
4. This is precisely the standpoint of the most interesting analysis of melodrama as a “pervasive cultural mode” after 9/11, Elisabeth Anker’s UC Berkeley dissertation and forthcoming book, which convincingly reads Bush administration rhetoric and media coverage to describe how the U.S. “became signified as a morally powerful victim ensnared in a position that required it to transform victimization into heroic retributive action” (22). I think this is a very important line of analysis, but that it is limited by demonizing the melodramatic mode (as I did in my own dissertation, which also positioned melodrama as the undesirable other of democratic culture).
5. This is a point made eloquently with reference to the melodramatic “technoculture” surrounding the Potter phenomenon by Peter Appelbaum in the first edition of this volume:
 One thing I have learned from cultural studies is that textual analysis is not enough....It is especially important to learn from people how they “use”

popular culture resources to make sense of their lives, their culture, and their fears and fantasies, and through such mediation, to construct new modes of meaning.

(26)

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