

# Miss Clara's Classroom Calamity, Or, The Worm in the Teacher's Apple

A Melodrama in one Act

by

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## Characters

Miss Clara Belle - An idealistic young schoolmarm who is determined to bring education to the rough and ready frontier of Kansas.

Sheriff Hale Fellow - The law south of the Arkansas and west of Arkansas. He seeks Truth, Justice and a clean pair of socks.

Lawyer Noah Count esq. - More slippery than a bucket of eels. He knows a priceless secret lies beneath the abandoned schoolhouse and will stop at nothing to acquire the land on which it lies.

Everyone else - This tireless performer must essay the roles of Narrator; Little Suzy a young pupil; Lily Mae, a saloon girl; Mayor Windbag.

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All the action takes place in a little run-down school-house in Nevermind, Kansas sometime in the 1870's. Miss Clara is the local schoolmarm and is desirous of improving the decrepit school house, (once a livery stable) and especially building a school library.

Unbeknownst to her there is a fortune in stolen government gold hidden beneath the schoolhouse floor. Lawyer Noah Count heard from a deceased former client about the hidden gold and secretly prowls the night searching for it. He is underhandedly blocking Miss Clara's efforts in funding the School Improvements for fear the gold will be uncovered by the construction.

Sheriff Hale Fellow is pining after Miss Clara and jealous of the attention that Lawyer Noah pays to her. Will his dull wits sharpen enough to see the sinister reason for the sly Shyster's interest in the school? Will Miss Clara sign away the rights to the valuable school house to the slippery legal eel? Will villainy triumph over virtue? Say it isn't so!

# PRESHOW HANDOUT FOR STUDENTS SEEING MISS CLARA'S CLASSROOM CALAMITY

## WHAT IS MELODRAMA?

Scholars and critics disagree over this question, but in general we use the word to mean a style of theater that reached its peak in the late 19th century. They were popular plays intended to appeal to a broad audience. In those days everyone went to the theater; rich and poor, educated and illiterate and everyone in between.

An evening at the theater in that era meant an entire evening with a varied bill of attractions. It might start with a concert followed by a serious drama and wind up with a short light-hearted comedy. In between these larger scale attractions there could be songs, jugglers, ballet or anything else a creative theater manager could book to attract an audience.

The melodramatic play itself usually featured obvious heroes and villains. Virtue would almost always triumph in the end. Along the way there were likely to be spectacular costumes, scenery and special effects.

At the same time as the popular melodramas were at their height of success, they were also a subject for humor. Comic performers often made parodies of popular dramas a part of their own productions. Sometimes these burlesques became more popular than the works they lampooned. Our modern comedy melodramas are the descendent of these parodic imitations.

In melodrama slang the collection of unrelated variety acts in a melodrama program were called the 'olio'. Olio was originally the name for a spicy stew made up of various tasty odds and ends. Most modern comedy melodramas present the olio as a rousing finale to their production.

# MISS CLARA'S CLASSROOM CALAMITY

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Melodrama never went away; it became the basic style for many movie and television shows. Discuss some recent movie and TV programs that may or may not fit the melodrama pattern. Some perfect melodrama types you can start with include Titanic, Spiderman and Star Wars. What others can you think of?
2. Melodramas had a number of 'stock characters', that is to say standard character types. For instance, the virtuous hero, the pure heroine, the noble but simple-minded comic character and the evil-hearted villain. Find such character types in literature, plays and mass-media. Discuss how lifelike such characters are and compare them with more complex characters in non-melodramatic stories.
3. Create your own melodrama script. You could adapt a movie or novel you already know or come up with something original. First block out the plot. You have to start with introducing the characters and the basic situation. This is called the exposition. Then comes what is called the rising action. Conflicts are introduced and developed. Next is the climax, where the conflicts come to a head. Finally is the denouement, or falling action, where the story's conflicts are resolved and loose ends tied up
4. Actually produce your script. Form committees to gather props and costumes. Design and draw or paint backdrops. Provide mood music and rehearse the actors. This activity can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. Perform the play for the class or even for other classes. Perhaps you could have a melodrama festival.
5. As a part of the classroom play (or for a stand alone project), make some sound effect devices. For instance, the sound of rain can be made by rolling dried peas in a box. Thunder can be made by shaking a piece of metal sheeting. Research and build other simple devices.
6. Our production is a 'comic' or 'burlesque' melodrama. Take some of your examples of modern melodramatic movies or TV shows and make comic parodies of them. All you have to do is exaggerate the characters and situations and mix in jokes and puns. It helps to give the characters funny names that indicate their character traits.
7. Find old movies or television episodes that present versions of the old melodrama style. W.C. Fields' "The Old-Fashioned Way" presents scenes from the genuine melodrama play, "The Drunkard". Dudley Do-Right cartoons on the old Rocky and Bullwinkle show were based on melodrama conventions. See if you can find others.
8. Extra reading. Many scripts of the old melodramas have been collected in anthologies. Find one of the famous scripts, read it and write a paper on it. Some things worth writing about would be; compare the old script with modern entertainment stories of similar themes. Is the script intended to explore and/or propose the solution of a social problem, or is it merely an exploitation of sensational material? How are the stereotypical melodrama characters represented and do they vary in any way from the stereotypical such as having a sympathetic villain?

# MISS CLARA'S CLASSROOM CALAMITY

## GLOSSARY

Nefarious - Extremely wicked.

Bounder - An ill-bred, unscrupulous man.

Salutary - Providing improvement, wholesome.

Gothic - Derived from the name of a Germanic tribe that invaded the Roman Empire in antiquity, the word is used here to refer to a literary movement that admired medieval culture and dwelt on the grotesque and mysterious.

Romantic Movement - Actually there were several different movements called romantic, but they were all characterized by a rejection of classicism and an emphasis on feeling and emotion over rationalism.

Drame serieux - French phrase (serious drama) applied to a style of play which focused on the problems of middle or working class people rather than on the kings and warlords of classical tragedy.

Pastoral - A literary or other artistic work that evokes or portrays the rural life, usually in an idealized way.

Mimed - Acted out without words

Stock Character - A standard character type such as stalwart hero, doting mother, wicked villain, etc...

Divertissement - A short performance, typically a ballet that is presented as an interlude in an opera or play

Humanitarian - Devoted to the promotion of human welfare and social reform.

Burlesque - A dramatic work that ridicules a subject either by presenting a solemn subject in an undignified style or an inconsequential subject in a dignified style.

Genre - A type or class, especially of literature. For instance; mystery story, science fiction, western and so on.

Parody - A literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or style for comic effect or ridicule.

Faubourgs, East Ends and Boweries - Poor, working class suburbs of France, London and New York respectively.

Tirade - A long, angry or violent speech usually of condemnation.

Franchise - An official right or privilege, especially the right to vote.

Repertory - A repertoire, a collection of plays of a particular type or which are prepared for production by a particular theatre troupe.

Slavey - A household servant, especially an overworked one.

Pinchbeck - Originally cheap, synthetic silver. Later the word was applied to any cheap substitute.

Porter - A strong beer, designed to appeal to workingmen.

Jacques and Pierre - The French equivalent of Tom, Dick and Harry.

# "For Useful Mirth and Salutary Woe": An Introduction to 19th Century Melodrama Theatre

by  
Zoe Bell Hurst

A Study Guide to Accompany "Miss Clara's Classroom Calamity"

(Please see the accompanying glossary for explanation of some of the archaic, foreign or technical words and phrases used in this essay and the play.)

Literally meaning "musical drama", melodrama refers to a style of theatre which reached its peak in the late 19th century. This rich and vigorous chapter in the history of theater began in the late 1770s, with its roots in society's reaction to the industrial revolution. Heavily influenced by the English gothic novel and the German Romantic Movement, it first emerged in France. Melodrama soon crossed over to England and then made its way to America. It spread to the rest of European theatre as well, but France, England and America remained its most active practitioners.

Melodrama drew its vitality from many sources, both in and out of theatre. Its backbone was composed of situation, action and spectacle, elements which could cross national and linguistic barriers with ease. However, other sources also contributed to melodrama: the heroic pantomime of the minor theatre of the people; the homiletic (moralizing) *drame serieux* of Diderot and his school in France; the popular musical drama; and contemporary pastoral and romantic fiction, as well as gothic and horror novels.

Despite this mix of ingredients, melodrama soon developed a consistency of theatrical conventions, enough for it to create its own genre. The following definition, from *THE WORLD OF MELODRAMA* by Frank Rahill, describes the basic characteristics.

"Melodrama is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and vice punished. Characteristically, it offers elaborate scenic accessories and miscellaneous *divertissements* and introduces music freely, typically to underscore dramatic effect."

In its heyday, the melodrama was only one part of an evening's entertainment. It shared the playbill with other theatrical attractions, such as wild animals, specialty acts, entertainers, singers of comic songs, ballet performances, freaks, child prodigies, scenes taken from Shakespeare or the opera, and 'children of nature', i.e. Native Americans. Basically, whatever would bring in a crowd was put on the stage. The audience helped out as well, often cavorting in the galleries, boxes and pit. The reviewer for a St. Louis newspaper in 1844 paid special tribute to "a new performer called Peg-leg" who "showed off in the gallery with great applause". Among the biggest draws were celebrities of the time. George Washington attending a play drew better than any of the plays written about him. A manager in Nashville complained that none of his stars drew so large a house as did a visit by President Martin Van Buren, whom he would have liked to engage "on his own terms, for the season".

When Henry Clay attended a performance by William Charles Macready, the American senator was given equal billing with the English tragedian.

Going to the theatre was a long evening and often a rowdy one. As the previous paragraph indicates, the audience was usually noisy and active. Normally, audience behavior did not prevent the stage entertainment from being heard, but perfect order usually provoked perfect surprise from the local media. It could be difficult to see the stage action, because theatres at the time were only lit by candlelight. Patrons frequently ended up with wax dripped on their clothes, and fire was an ever present and dangerous threat. Most theatres had a lifespan of twenty five years due to fire.

Despite the chaotic atmosphere, people were often moved by the stories presented on stage. Members of the audience would occasionally interrupt a play, so involved by the action that they felt compelled to influence the characters. Many stories about audience response were circulated-about a sailor's jumping on stage to give aid and money to the dying Jane Shore, of a Worcester woman's pleading with the gamester to stop his criminal behavior, of a Baltimore man's objecting to an assault on Coriolanus because "three on one" was not a fair fight. Expressions of political opinion particularly drew audience response. When the hero of Marmion, during an 1812 performance, asked his fellow Scotsmen if they would entrust their rights to English justice, an elderly Philadelphian stood up in his box, waved his cane and shouted, "No sir, no; we'll nail them to the mast and sink with the stars and stripes before we'll yield." The audience responded with prolonged applause.

People also went to the theatre because they were fascinated with the stage machinery and scenic effects. In addition to the usual elements of set scenery, costumes and properties, melodramas began to include more sensational action sequences in their plays. Unfortunately, the reach of the theatres often exceeded their grasp in such matters, particularly because few were equipped to support elaborate stage wizardry. Even so, particularly towards the end of the 19th century, realistic train crashes, boat races, racing horses, avalanches, escapes from prison and battles were all recreated in the theatre. More forgiving than we are today in such matters, the audience of the time went partly to see if it could be done and how it would be done. For such willingness to suspend disbelief, they were treated to such spectacles as that in *The Octoroon*, when the villain sets a riverboat alight which later explodes.

Melodrama began to fade from the live stage at the beginning of the twentieth century, finally disappearing completely around the 1920s-1930s. Part of its demise was brought about by the split between it, vaudeville, ballet and opera. These four branches of theatre had their own adherents, formed across class lines. Tired of sharing the same bill with the popular attractions aimed at the uneducated, the immigrants and the poor, the people who favored ballet and opera built their own theatres to house their chosen entertainments. This splitting of the audience diluted the pool of patrons for all the theatres, perhaps fatally as judged by the struggles of today's theatre to maintain an audience of any kind.

Another reason for the demise of live melodrama was the length of its existence in the first place. By the 1890s, melodrama had exhausted all the possibilities of its conventions. It began to introduce subtleties of character and plot. Although these flashes of modernism were brief, they were enough to point the way to the more naturalistic theatre of the 20th century (*A Doll's House* by Ibsen is one example). By doing this, melodrama helped to bring about its own obsolescence. However, the most fatal blow was the cost. Melodrama became too expensive to produce on the stage. When the movies developed, the melodrama genre migrated west, becoming a vigorous staple in the movie adventure serials until the advent of sound. By then, melodrama as a genre was gone from the live theatre.

The most astonishing thing about melodrama's demise is how thoroughly it vanished from public thought. None of the actors are remembered outside of textbooks and some tantalizing photographs taken of them in their stage outfits and makeup. Out of thousands of plays, not one made it into the lexicon of classics. Even the most famous, such as *The Octoroon*, *The Colleen Bawn*, *The Poor of New York*, *London by Night*, and *Under the Gaslight* sound familiar only to students of theatre history. The sole entertainment left from this stage tradition is the comic melodrama. This play was a burlesque of the real thing, and many melodramas of the time had their own accompanying parodies.

However, this is not to say that melodrama itself is dead. It has been forced to become more subtle, yet it continues, one of our strongest forms of storytelling. It now exists in disguised form, its conventions hidden by special effects and superficial sophistication, since the present day audience considers itself too worldly-wise for such blatant manipulation. It can be argued that most movies and television shows are melodramas, and this includes the new reality show genre.

Looking at the old photographs of the actors and scenes taken from plays, and studying the posters from the era, it's easy to admire the vitality and warmth of the melodrama stage. One feels some envy of having an audience which could be become as involved as one New Orleans boatman did during *Othello*. His suggestion to the Moor as he grieved over the loss of the handkerchief was "Why don't you blow your nose with your fingers and let the play go on."

But there's another reason to remember the era of melodrama, even if the genre produced nothing of lasting artistic value. Again from *THE WORLD OF MELODRAMA*.

"Whether in the form of the propaganda play or the play intended solely to entertain, melodrama gives us a fresh perspective on nineteenth-century life and affords an insight into popular feeling which cannot be had from any of the familiar source materials of history. These forgotten plays are especially valuable for revealing the tastes and opinions of the inarticulate faubourgs (French suburbs), East Ends, and Boweries of the Western world in the period when our capitalist-industrial society was in the throes of adolescence.

These were people who, for the most part, could not read and were not permitted to vote and whom the laws of the time prevented even from associating together in organizations like trade unions for orderly and democratic action to improve their lot. Cut off thus from participation in the determination of their destinies and denied normal avenues for self-expression, they seem to have turned to the theatre and adopted it as a sort of substitute franchise and a vehicle for the criticism of life. Through their attendance at one play or another and their patronage of this cheap theatre or that, the uprooted and disinherited poor of the typical nineteenth-century city have left us a kind of composite self-portrait. In the plots of melodrama, its choice of heroes and villains, and its resounding tirades can be read resentment at the insolence of authority and the heartlessness of greedy wealth, a mistrust of lawyers, a sneaking admiration for a bold and hearty rogue, and a persistent taste for blood - and along with this a staunch fidelity to orthodox morality and an optimism which can only be described as incorrigible. With the changing repertory of melodrama as a clue, it is possible to put a finger on specific emotions which swept the people of this nation or that during the century: the enthusiasm of the great masses of Frenchmen for the Napoleonic legend, the special affection of Britons for the sea and rural America's mistrust of the growing cities. Melodrama, springing as it did from the people, speaks with their voice and is impressed with their image.

Even if it were intrinsically sterile and worthless, melodrama would yet have claims on our consideration for

having provided the masses of the people with diversion they could get in no other way. The bill of the despised theatres of melodrama were frequently all that made life tolerable for uncounted thousands, especially in the great cities, during the era which two of its historians in England, the Hammonds, have called "the bleak age". To the whipped apprentice, the dockside drudge, the factory serf, the domestic slavey, the work-worn wife, these shows brought precious moments of release and fulfillment. At the playhouse of his choice, in the quickening fellowship of his kind, the poor man, warmed with his pint of porter and his dish of fish and chips, could taste life at its carnival peak, forgetting for a while the heavy burden of his wretched existence in rapt contemplation of a magic world of pinchbeck splendor unfolded spectacularly on the stage before him.

These plays diverted him, and they did something more. Justice triumphs in the essentially identical plots; men of good will come into their own. The little people, harried and hunted, despised and cast out, rise in their might and crush their oppressors to the earth. The villain of melodrama was frequently designated generically as the tyrant (tyrant) in the French theatre early in the century. Imbedded in that convention are the social implications of the genre, forged in the fires of revolution: Jacques and Pierre, Tom, Dick and Harry, as they poured into the streets at the final curtain of the melodrama of the evening, could say to themselves that a man, after all, might throw off his tormentors and be free."

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