



# Melodrama and the Psychology of Tears

Jonathan Frome

**Abstract:** Melodramas are sometimes called “tearjerkers” because of their ability to make viewers cry, but there is currently no detailed account of how they succeed at this task. Psychological research suggests that crying occurs when people feel helpless in the face of intense emotion. The emotion felt most intensely when watching melodramas is sadness, and sadness has a structure and specific features that determine its intensity. I describe the ways the conventions of melodrama fulfill the criteria for intense sadness and perceived helplessness that underlie these films’ ability to make viewers cry. I illustrate this model with a detailed analysis of *Stella Dallas* (1937).

**Keywords:** crying, emotion, melodrama, narrative structure, sadness, *Stella Dallas*

Melodramas are known for their ability to generate strong emotions—often strong enough to make us cry. Intuitively, we may think this effect can be explained by obvious narrative features: Melodramas make us cry because they are sad. They are sad because they show bad things happening to characters about whom we care. But like other aspects of viewer response (e.g., narrative comprehension; Bordwell 1985), the ostensibly obvious becomes less obvious on closer examination. We sometimes cry at films not out of sadness, but due to positive emotions, such as those we might feel when characters are victorious despite seemingly insurmountable odds. Further, the intuitive explanation for crying—that we feel sympathy for characters in bad situations—is overly inclusive. Horror movies regularly show characters we care about in dangerous situations, but we feel scared rather than sad. Action films show heroes suffering from painful injuries, and we often sympathize with these characters and feel concern, but not sadness. We might wonder, therefore, what specific features of melodramas encourage us to be sad and even to cry as we watch them.

Research on film and emotion has addressed this question only tangentially. In this research area, specific melodramas are usually studied not as melodramas per se but as examples of a more general category: films that make us feel sadness or other negative emotions. The primary question asked about these films is why we would voluntarily watch films that seem to gen-



erate unpleasant feelings. In philosophy, this question is known as the “paradox of tragedy” or the “paradox of horror.” Numerous solutions to this paradox have been proposed, including: films provide pleasures that outweigh their pains, viewers find their emotional responses to these films demonstrate something positive about their own personalities, or viewers get therapeutic value in seeing others worse off than themselves (Oliver and Woolley 2010; Smuts 2009). This type of research is valuable in proposing explanations for why we might see sad films, but does not explore what makes them sad.

Some broad explanations of why we cry at films are provided by existing theories of film emotion that address viewer response, but in almost every

***Sadness and crying  
are distinct responses,  
but the literature on  
melodrama usually  
conflates them or  
discusses only one  
of the two.***

case the discussions address the responses to these films in a general way that fails to make important distinctions. Specifically, there has been no detailed discussion of the relationship between two aspects of our responses to melodramas: first, the intense sadness that melodramas aim to create; and second, melodramas’ ability to bring viewers to tears. Sadness and crying are distinct responses, but the literature on melodrama usually conflates them or discusses only one of the two. Upon reflection, this fact reveals a disconnect in our commonsense notions about these topics: we understand that crying can

be caused by many types of emotions (e.g., frustration, anger, or “tears of joy”), yet we associate crying with sadness much more frequently than with other emotions. This disconnect can be explained, but to do so we must begin with the assumption that sadness and crying have a contingent relationship rather than a necessary one.

One exception to the typical conflation of emotions and crying is Tan and Frijda’s “Sentiment in Film Viewing” (1999), which presents an important psychological model of viewer emotions based on witnessing film events that we cannot affect. The authors define “sentiment” as an emotion that is characterized by an urge to cry that is disproportionate to the situation, based on the fate of others rather than ourselves, and often seen as gratuitous or insincere. They discuss sentiment broadly, stating that it can be a positive or negative emotion, and note that it can be connected not just to Hollywood melodrama, but also action films, screwball comedies, and musicals. Their work thus acts as a useful foundation for me to construct a more specific discussion of film melodrama and the sadness that it generates in film viewers (although I avoid using the highly problematic term “sentiment”).

A detailed account of crying that takes advantage of current psychological research allows us to learn more about the methods through which melodramas elicit emotional responses. I argue that film melodramas make us cry because their prototypical features parallel the psychological characteristics of both sadness and crying. I aim to demonstrate my claims through an analysis of the melodrama *Stella Dallas* (1937). Why choose this film, one of the most

---

frequently discussed melodramas in film studies? I do so as a deliberate challenge for my theory's significance. It would be relatively easy to show something interesting about a new film. However, because it might seem that everything worth mentioning about *Stella Dallas* has already been said, if I am able to genuinely add to our understanding of this film's emotional power, then the analysis will demonstrate the usefulness of my approach.

What do I mean by "melodrama"? Many scholars writing about film melodrama have noted the difficulty of defining the genre (e.g., Cook 1983; Gledhill 1985). The term was used long before the film era to describe novels and theatrical plays. Early silent film drew from theatrical melodrama by borrowing the expressive acting gestures and thrilling stories of those stage productions (Brooks 1976), and the term "melodrama" came to be applied to films with sensational action sequences and a clear polarization between good heroes and evil villains (Singer 1990). This conception of melodrama, employed for decades by the film industry and trade press, is almost the opposite of the modern understanding. Ben Singer (1990, 2001) and Steve Neale (1993) have documented the radical difference in the ways the term was used in the pre-1960s film trade press and the way it has been used in film studies since the 1970s. In *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), Neale describes the transformation in the meaning of melodrama as the term was introduced into film studies. After the publication of Thomas Elsaesser's influential article "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" (1972) and director Douglas Sirk's interviews with John Halliday (1972), film scholars began to use the term melodrama to refer not to action, physical spectacle, or sensationalistic subject matter, but to a film's emotional and expressive aesthetic qualities. Elsaesser used Sirk's 1950s films and similar films as examples, and the centrality of domesticity to their plots began an association between domesticity and melodrama as a genre. In the mid- to late-1970s, interest in gender studies led to articles (e.g., Mulvey 1987) connecting melodrama, the woman's film, and patriarchal ideology (Higson and Vincendeau 1986).

Ultimately, film scholars came to understand the genre of melodrama in a wholly different manner from its original conception. In modern usage, melodramas typically focus on domestic issues, including family and romantic relationships; characters who suffer tragic circumstances; a lack of clear-cut villains; and social or class concerns lurking in the background of the characters' traumatic circumstances (Mercer and Shingler 2004). These features do not define melodrama, but characterize it as a cluster concept. They are the most common aspects of the genre, and specific melodramas are more or less central examples of the genre to the extent that they have more or fewer of these prototypical features.

Melodramas have one more feature, not mentioned above: they aim to create overwrought emotions and, ideally, bring their viewers to tears. It is this

---

last feature that causes audiences to sometimes refer to melodramas as “tearjerkers,” and it is this crying response that I aim to explain.

### Crying

There are many types and causes of crying, but only a few are relevant to crying at melodramas. Although we have no trouble using the term “crying” in everyday life, crying is actually an ambiguous concept. When we say that a film has made us cry, we are usually referring to the act of shedding tears. Yet when we say a baby is crying, we are usually referring to its vocalizations (in fact, babies do not shed tears when crying until they are 3–4 months old [Rottenberg and Vingerhoets 2012]). In most psychological research, crying is measured by having subjects fill out surveys; these survey questions typically use the term “crying” in a way that accommodates the ambiguity it has in common usage.

Despite this ambiguity, most people consider emission of tears to be the activity most central to adult crying. There are actually three types of human tears (Murube 2009). Basal tears are a thin film continuously covering the eye to help maintain its basic functions of vision. Reflex tears are produced in response to external physical or chemical irritation, such as a fleck of dust or onion fumes. Emotional tears are those caused by cognitive and emotional brain activity (i.e., they are a physiological emotional response) and, despite anecdotes to the contrary, are unique to the human species. Emotional tears are the only type of tears relevant to a discussion of how melodramas make us cry.

Although sad situations are those most commonly associated with crying, a situation need not be sad to produce emotional tears. People might cry when confronted with harsh criticism, public humiliation, or extreme frustration. Children frequently cry when scared. Positive emotions are also cited as a cause of crying, as reflected in the common phrase “tears of joy.” People often report crying tears of joy at their children’s weddings or graduations. Similarly, beauty pageant winners and Olympic medalists often cry when they win their respective competitions. Crying may result from a wide variety of emotions or a mixture of different emotions. Perhaps we describe artworks that make us cry with vague terms such as “emotional” or “moving” because it can be difficult to identify which specific emotions or combination of emotions caused us to cry.

One situation that may lead us to cry is the experience of a beautiful work of art, such as a masterfully composed symphony. Miceli and Castelfranchi (2003) call this “aesthetic” crying. Following Kant ([1790] 2007), they attribute this reaction to a listener’s sense that they are perceiving exceptional beauty, but are incapable of fully appreciating and expressing the emotions they feel in its presence. The contrast between the power of the artwork and the lis-

---

tener's inadequate response, they propose, causes the listener to feel overwhelmed and cry. Typically, however, it is not overwhelming beauty that causes us to cry at melodramas. To the contrary, melodramas are often criticized as aesthetically excessive, sappy, and emotionally manipulative. When we watch melodramas, we are not crying aesthetic tears at the films' beauty, but emotional tears of another sort.

Looking at the functions, conditions, and causes of real-life crying can shed light on why we cry at films. One reason is that our understanding of a character's emotions is initially based on our assumptions about the emotions of real people (Ryan 1980). Thus, in some ways, we respond to film characters as we would to watching similar events in real life (Tan 1995). In addition, the viewing situation itself includes contextual features that contribute to us crying at films.

Crying has both social and individual functions and effects. Socially, crying acts as a signal to others that can motivate them to comfort or aid the crier (Hendriks et al. 2008). Crying is given particular weight among emotional responses because it is seen as an honest signal of the crier's emotions; it is difficult for most people to voluntarily generate emotional tears without feeling the corresponding emotion. Viewers seeing characters cry will understand them to be in need of help or comfort.

The individual effects of crying are less well understood. Although it is widely believed that a "good" cry can make the crier feel better, this has been unconfirmed by experimental research (Cornelius 1997). Survey research suggests that the effect of crying on mood is determined primarily by contextual factors, such as whether the crier is comforted by others, whether the crier feels shame from crying, or whether the situation causing the crying has been resolved (Bylsma et al. 2008). The typical setting for watching films may encourage viewers to cry, as the dark room, forward-facing seats, and discouragement of audience interaction undermines social inhibition that can reduce crying.

Although it is rare to be able to fully control our crying, it is common for us to make efforts to regulate it. This regulation can be most fully understood using several conceptual dichotomies. First, regulation efforts can target either the situation that motivates us to cry (the input stage of our emotion) or our expression of the consequent emotion (the output stage) (Vingerhoets et al. 2000). Second, we might regulate crying either by aiming to not cry (down-regulation) or to cry more intensely (up-regulation). Last, regulation efforts may reflect both interpersonal (social) and intrapersonal (individual) concerns.

Crying can be most directly regulated at the input stage by taking action to change the external situation itself in ways that alter our emotional response to it; for example, if we are accused of a crime, we may try to change

***Looking at  
the functions,  
conditions,  
and causes  
of real-life  
crying can  
shed light on  
why we cry  
at films.***

the undesirable situation by arguing for our innocence. Because it is often not possible to change an undesirable situation to a desirable one, a more common way to affect input to our emotional response is consciously attempting to reappraise an emotion-eliciting situation (Gross 1998). For example, when crying due to a film's tragic events, we might aim to reduce our urge to cry by consciously reminding ourselves that the film is fictional and no one is actually suffering the events portrayed. This strategy is sometimes known as cognitively reframing a situation (Ochsner and Gross 2007). Similarly, one might regulate crying at the input stage by focusing attention on particular aspects of a current or prior situation. Some people, for example, can make themselves cry in situations that would not normally cause them to do so by reflecting on painful memories. Regulation of crying at the output stage involves attempts to prevent crying itself rather than the emotion behind it, perhaps by blinking, swallowing, or rubbing one's eyes.

Simons et al. (2013) describe a wide variety of motives for up- or down-regulating crying. Motives for up-regulating a crying response include the need to cry when acting in a film, the belief that crying and "letting it all out" causes a person to feel better, or the desire to manipulate other people. Down-regulation of crying is most commonly due to social factors, especially the avoidance of negative social judgments, such as the impression that one is weak or unprofessional. People also make efforts not to cry as a signal to others that they are competent to deal with a situation; parents sometimes suppress crying in an emotional situation to avoid upsetting their children.

Despite the varied contexts and numerous aspects of crying, situations that cause crying invariably have two characteristics. First, crying requires intense emotional arousal, regardless of the initiating emotion (Frijda 1986). This claim is intuitively true, but it is also supported by the experimental finding that people are more likely to cry as their stress level rises (Labott and Martin 1988). Second, crying occurs in situations where the crier perceives themselves to be helpless; crying indicates surrender to the situation causing emotional arousal and the cessation of actions aiming to change it (Borquist 1906; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2003). This characteristic explains why crying is predominately associated with negative emotions. We are most likely to feel helpless when we would like to change a situation but cannot; it is much less common to cry due to perceived helplessness in an overwhelmingly positive situation. When we cry due to positive emotions, the perception of helplessness is caused by the intensity of emotion itself (e.g., a beauty pageant contestant who cries after being announced the winner does so because she is unable to cognitively process the intense emotions she feels and is overwhelmed by them). Perceived helplessness is less common in positive situations than in negative ones, which explains why we are more likely to cry due to the latter.

---

Although perceived helplessness is not a common part of our folk psychology about crying, some examples can intuitively demonstrate its role. When we are faced with an undesirable situation, our first instinct is to cope by taking action to improve it. If you are typing and hit the wrong key, for example, you cope through the simple action of deleting the wrong letter and typing the right one. You would only take action, however, if you believed that you at least potentially had the ability to change the situation; otherwise, the coping action would be pointless. Now, consider a situation in which you cannot find a beloved memento given to you by your dying grandmother. The loss of this memento is distressing, and you immediate take coping action by searching for it. During this search, you might feel negative emotions such as self-directed anger or guilt. But these emotions would not stop your coping actions; in fact, they may further motivate your search. Your searching is a coping action that indicates that you do not feel helpless. You are taking action precisely because you think it might help locate the memento. You do not cry until you conclude that you are helpless to reverse the situation, which is when you give up your search and accept that the memento is lost. We can find similar examples for other negative emotions, such as fear. Someone who is being chased by a mugger may run in fear as a way of coping with a threatening situation, but when they are cornered in an alley and can no longer run, they might burst into tears. Someone who is failing to accomplish a difficult task might get increasingly frustrated until he gives up and begins to cry.

Melodramas, more than other genres, encourage the perceived helplessness and intense emotion required to make viewers cry. Film viewers are obviously helpless to affect the undesirable situations portrayed in melodramas, which is a key factor in their ability to elicit tears. One might wonder why viewers do not cry at every film, since they are always in a similar helpless state. The reason is that even though film viewers cannot change the narrative events in any film, they feel helpless only if they want the narrative to head in a different direction. We do not feel helpless if things are going well for characters we like. When obstacles arise, we know from our viewing experience that protagonists are typically capable of overcoming them, whether at the moment or further along in the story. However, unlike most popular genres, which have active protagonists, melodramas have passive or ineffectual protagonists (Nowell-Smith 1977). These characters are blocked from taking coping action by aspects of the film's fictional world (Grodal 2001), and thus viewers cannot trust that the characters can deal with their problems themselves. Crying's social functions bolster this effect. Melodramas often use close-ups of a character's crying face, which not only elicit viewer emotions directly through emotional contagion (Plantinga 1999), but also communicate to the viewer that the character perceives themselves as

***Melodramas, more than other genres, encourage the perceived helplessness and intense emotion required to make viewers cry.***

helpless to cope with a situation. The character's tears thus increase the viewer's sense that the situation cannot be improved without someone else's intervention—and because the viewer cannot intervene, his feeling of helplessness intensifies. We are more likely to feel helpless when watching melodramas than other genres due to these typical features of the genre.

In sum, melodramas make us feel helpless by portraying sympathetic characters in undesirable situations, thus encouraging us to hope that the situation will change. In many other genres, characters have or develop the capability to overcome such obstacles, lessening our worry that the characters will suffer bad outcomes. Melodramas, in contrast, emphasize their characters' inability to change their unfortunate situations. Because we do not like what is happening to the characters, but cannot intervene to improve things, we feel helpless, making us more likely to cry.

### Sadness

The second half of the recipe for crying is intense emotion. In the case of melodramas, that emotion is primarily sadness, although other emotions may play secondary roles. To understand how melodramas successfully create not just sadness, but intense sadness, we must look at this emotion's psychological components. Sadness is one of the "basic" emotions that are universal across cultures and have characteristic facial expressions (Ekman 1992). Although sadness is sometimes conflated with grief or depression, it is distinct from these concepts. Sadness is an emotion, and thus relatively short-lived, while grief and depression are long-term emotional structures (Bonanno et al. 2000). Characteristically, sadness results from a loss of something we value, such as an object, a relationship, or an opportunity.

Sadness is associated with a reduction in coping actions. This is another reason that crying is associated with sadness more than with other emotions. Sadness reduces coping action, and crying marks the abandonment of coping action. Although the tendency for sadness to encourage withdrawal from interaction makes it less likely that a sad person will change her situation for the better, withdrawal also encourages self-reflection, and thus sadness can potentially facilitate emotional coping through reflection that leads to acceptance of an undesirable, unchangeable situation.

Sadness is a response to loss, and the intensity of sadness is determined by three aspects of loss: significance, expectedness, and cause. The significance of a loss is the most influential factor in determining the intensity of the consequent sadness. Its significance is based primarily on its magnitude (i.e., the extent to which we were attached to the thing lost), but also on its perceived permanence or irrevocability. You would be sad to have your dog run away, even if there were a chance he would return. You would be sadder, however, if your dog died, because there would be no chance the loss could be reversed.

---

Expectations are also important in generating sadness. Sadness is most intense when the loss is neither surprising nor inevitable. A negative surprise can potentially cause shock and create emotional arousal that readies the body for action, which is counter to sadness's tendency to cause withdrawal. Note that if someone receives bad news that they are completely unprepared for, such as a report that a loved one has died in a car accident, the initial reaction is usually not sadness, but shock and denial. If the negative outcome is inevitable, however, sadness can resolve into resignation as one aims to emotionally cope with the situation before it actually occurs (Ellsworth and Smith 1988). Sadness is maximized when we anticipate the possibility of a significant loss, but still retain hope that the loss will not actually occur. In this way, sadness is similar to suspense, which also relies on uncertainty about future bad events. These emotions differ with regard to uncertainty in that we feel suspense during the period of uncertainty before an undesired event might happen, whereas sadness is a response to the actual occurrence of an undesired event. Also, when feeling suspense, we are conscious of our uncertainty about the future event, while with sadness we often do not consciously consider whether it is likely to happen (Frome and Smuts 2004).

Finally, sadness is most intense when the loss is perceived to have an impersonal causes, such as disease, nature, or fate (Ellsworth and Smith 1988). Situations appraised as having human causes are more likely to generate anger, contempt, or disgust than those with impersonal causes. If someone else can be blamed for the unwanted situation, we tend to be angry or contemptuous. If we blame ourselves, then we may feel guilty or ashamed. If no one is to blame, then we are most likely to feel sad. Sadness is often mixed with these other emotions, but if we feel multiple or mixed emotions in response to a situation, each of the emotions can only act as one part of our overall emotional response. When several emotions combine to create a certain level of emotional intensity, each of them must be individually less intense than an emotion that creates the same level of intensity by itself. A situation of loss that involves blame, and thus emotions such as anger or guilt, may also inhibit crying. These emotions encourage us to take coping actions, such as revenge or penance, that undermine the sense of helplessness essential to crying.

### **Sadness in *Stella Dallas* and Other Melodramas**

*Stella Dallas* (1937) is one of the most frequently discussed melodramas in film studies, and it illustrates how the genre conventions of melodrama reflect the factors that contribute to crying. The film stars Barbara Stanwyck as a working-class woman, Stella Martin, who marries a wealthy man, Stephen Dallas. Soon, they have a daughter, Laurel. Although Stella aspires to participate in an upper-class lifestyle, she is unable to fit in with Stephen's social circle; she and

---

Stephen eventually divorce and share custody of Laurel. Years later, Stella accompanies Laurel, now a teenager, to a fancy resort. After being mocked by Laurel's friends, Stella comes to realize that her unrefined ways are preventing Laurel from fully assimilating into upper-class society and enjoying its benefits. Because Stella wants Laurel to have every possible opportunity, she agrees with Laurel's father that the girl should live full time with him and his new wife. Laurel refuses to accept this because she loves her mother so much, so Stella misleads Laurel into thinking that she wants to be free of the burdens of motherhood. The film's final scene occurs some time later, at Laurel's wedding. We see Stella standing outside a building in the rain, looking in through a window at Laurel, who is presumably securing a promising future by marrying a young man from a prestigious family.

One aspect of melodramas that encourages viewers to cry is their narrative structure, which encourage both emotional intensity and the viewer's feeling of helplessness. Melodramas typically have omniscient, communicative narration (Bordwell 1985). Their narration is omniscient in the sense that the viewer's knowledge of the fictional world is not limited to any one character, but includes information from several characters. Communicative means that melodramas provide the viewer with a great deal of the information relevant to the story events. Melodrama's omniscient, communicative narration has the effect that viewers often learn about narrative events before characters learn about them, which can create situations in which we anticipate a character's reaction to learning this information. During that time, we can reflect on the consequences of this knowledge and direct our attention to the character's reaction; these activities increase both emotional intensity and the salience of our helplessness to affect the film's narrative.

For example, in *Stella Dallas*, we see Stephen Dallas run into a widow, Helen Morrison, and we anticipate that they will begin a relationship. Later in the film, Stephen makes a surprise visit to Stella's apartment on Christmas Eve. Laurel greets him and then runs into the next room to tell Stella that he is here. We see from Stella's expression that she is pleasantly surprised.

As she looks up to the ceiling, smiles, and bites her lower lip, it is clear that she is trying to figure out the significance of his visit (Figure 1). She knows Laurel and Stephen recently visited Mrs. Morrison, but the nature of that relationship is not completely clear to Stella based on Laurel's description of the trip. Earlier scenes without Stella present, however, make the viewer aware that the relationship is clearly romantic and well-established. Stella decides to throw her drunk friend, Ed Munn, out of the apartment. She goes into her bedroom, picks out a nice dress, puts on makeup, and fixes her hair. Although Stella is clearly hoping for a reconciliation with Stephen, we know that there is no chance of one.

---



*Figure 1. Stella considers the meaning of Stephen's visit.*

Seeing Stella attempt to make herself attractive for Stephen, we anxiously wonder how she will react when she realizes her hopes are fruitless. During this sequence, we have a full two-and-a-half minutes to reflect on Stella's misunderstanding and likely disappointment before she learns that Stephen has actually come to ask if he can take Laurel with him to spend Christmas with his new romantic interest. Our sympathy for Stella makes us concerned about her reaction, and during the conversation we concentrate on Stella's facial expression, which is competing for our attention with Laurel's more animated facial expression and other aspects of the shot (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Stephen asks Stella about taking Laurel for Christmas.*

Although this example demonstrates how melodramas can encourage emotional intensity in general, there are also many ways in which prototypical features of melodramas take advantage of the specific factors that intensify sadness.

#### ***Significance of Loss: Magnitude & Permanence***

Melodramas characteristically focus on family and romantic relationships, which are among the most important aspects of our lives, and are thus the domains with the greatest potential for losses of great significance. Stella's lost relationship with Laurel is the core of the film's sadness and underlies its emotional power. Stella and Laurel are shown to have an extremely strong emotional bond, starting early in the film when Stella tells Laurel, then just a baby, "You're here with Mommy, and nobody in the world will ever take you away." At the end of the film, just before Stella rejects Laurel, Laurel tells her father, "My home will be with my mother as long as I live." For Stella, who at the end of the film seems to have no friends, career, or romantic prospects, her relationship with Laurel is the only positive aspect of her life. Further, consider that Stella always had an ambition to join upper-class society. Stella's motivation to push Laurel away reflects her realization that she will never achieve this goal, so the loss of Laurel is compounded with Stella's loss of hope for changing her class identity.

The film is also structured to suggest that Stella's loss is permanent. In the film's final scene, Laurel wistfully comments that she always believed her mother would contact her when she learned Laurel was getting married. Laurel's step-mother suggests that the only reason Stella didn't contact her would be that she didn't know about the wedding. This leaves open the possibility to the viewer that Stella might, in fact, contact Laurel in the future. However, we then see Stella walk up to the building and watch the wedding from outside. Since Stella *does* know about the wedding, but chooses to stay away voluntarily, this scene suggests that Stella will, in fact, remain permanently absent from Laurel's life. The magnitude and permanence of the loss of this relationship both contribute to the sadness of the situation.

#### ***Expectation of Loss: Neither Surprising Nor Inevitable***

Melodramas also tend to set viewer expectations in ways conducive to eliciting sadness. Part of this effect is the previously mentioned omniscient, communicative narration. When we know of something in advance, we tend to reflect on it and to anticipate character reactions, which includes attending to character emotions. Melodramas, like most classical Hollywood films, generally introduce narrative elements throughout the film that establish a foundation for their later narrative events. These elements can also be thought of as clues that foreshadow future events and allow the viewer to form hypothe-

---

ses (Bordwell et al. 1985). This narrative pattern has the effect of making a film's narrative events neither surprising nor inevitable. Although this pattern of expectation is common to classical Hollywood films, it is an intensifier for the emotion of sadness, and only when it describes expectation of loss—both conditions that occur in melodramas much more often than other genres. In this way, melodramas take advantage of a common narrative feature to intensify sadness, specifically.

*Stella Dallas* is typical in this respect. As the film begins, we are shown that Stella is from a working-class background. Although she aspires to be, as she puts it, "well-bred and refined," her behavior and her conflicts with Stephen make it clear to us that she is failing in that goal. Stella's other main goal is to be a good mother to her daughter, which is established early in the film through Stella's comment to her infant Laurel that nobody will ever separate Laurel from "mommy." Yet these two goals are shown to be in conflict. The conflict between Stella's cultural status and her desire to help Laurel is first suggested when none of Laurel's boarding school friends come to her birthday party at Stella's modest apartment. We see the conflict continue to escalate through several more scenes, including a scene at a soda shop where a group of her daughter's friends mock Stella's ostentatious outfit, not knowing that she is Laurel's mother (Figure 3).

The consequences of Stella's increasingly inappropriate behavior on Laurel's life opportunities make it clear to the viewer that this trajectory cannot continue. The film also plants the seed that Stella is willing to sacrifice for Lau-



Figure 3. Stella visits the soda shop in an absurd outfit.

rel's happiness when she grants Stephen's request to take Laurel away for Christmas. Stella is clearly disappointed, but puts on a brave face because Laurel is excited to go. Later, Stella asks Helen Morris if she would act as a mother to Laurel if Stella granted Stephen a divorce, suggesting that Stella is seriously considering giving up her partial custody of Laurel. Based on these events, Stella's drastic action of ultimately severing her relationship with Laurel is not surprising, but it is also not inevitable since it is hard to imagine that Stella will be selfless enough to go through with it. These expectation-setting events intensify the sadness caused by her loss.

#### ***Cause of Loss: Impersonal***

**Sadness is most intense when loss is perceived to have an impersonal cause.**

As noted earlier, sadness is most intense when loss is perceived to have an impersonal cause, which prevents us from blaming the loss on another person. The absence of blame prevents other emotions, such as anger, from taking attention away from feelings of pure sadness. Accordingly, a typical feature of melodramas is that the losses they portray have impersonal causes, such as history, nature, or fate (Grodal 1997). In *Stella Dallas*, the main character's troubles are the result of differences between upper- and lower-class values and social mores rather than any particular blameworthy person. Although Stella initially aspires to be in high society, she is unable to change in ways that would allow her to do so. This is nobody's fault; it is just due to Stella's personal history and upbringing. Further, when the film reflects class conflict through human action, it does so in ways that depersonalize the situation. For example, consider the scene in which Laurel's friends mock Stella in the soda shop. Although this scene may seem to have blameworthy villains, the film presents them in a depersonalized manner (Figure 4). The taunts come from a crowd of minor characters rather than any salient individual, distributing the blame and undermining the sense that anyone in particular is at fault.

Later, when Laurel and Stella are taking the train home, Stella accidentally overhears some of those same friends mocking her—an unfortunate coincidence that motivates Stella's eventual decision to estrange herself from her daughter. Because the friends do not know Stella can hear them, coincidence, rather than cruelty, causes Stella's painful realization that she reflects badly on her daughter.

Ben Singer notes that melodramas focus "not on the battle between good and evil characters, but rather on the pathos of situations of moral antinomy in which two or more morally good (or at least non-villainous) characters find that their interests are fundamentally incompatible" (2001: 54). He suggests that *Stella Dallas* is so poignant precisely because we sympathize with both Stella, who has admirable intentions toward her daughter Laurel, and with Laurel, who has legitimate reasons to be embarrassed by her mother. Singer

---



*Figure 4. Laurel's friends are presented as a group of anonymous teenagers rather than individual blameworthy characters.*

describes the film's structure as establishing an antinomy between "two incompatible ethical imperatives: preserving the maternal family versus allowing the daughter to achieve the upward mobility for which she is so obviously suited" (2001: 54). Although Singer does not discuss blame as such, he suggests that pathos presupposes the absence of moral polarization. When two good characters have incompatible but praiseworthy goals, blame is mitigated, and sadness (or in Singer's terms, pathos) is emphasized. Note that melodramas' characteristic narration contributes to this effect. Part of our judgment that goals are praiseworthy is the intention behind them. When narration is omniscient and communicative, it is more likely to show all sides of the story and to explain the motivation of the actors in a way that discourages us from blaming them. Because melodramas are so communicative about their character's motivations, often we see the larger forces behind specific character's hurtful actions, which tends to cause us to sympathize with these characters and makes them a less tempting target for blame.

Another way the film undermines blame is by making both Stella and Laurel admirable characters. Each is ready to do something against her own interests to help the other. This removes any blame that we might otherwise feel toward them. If Laurel treated Stella badly due to her embarrassment, or tried to push Stella away, our sadness might mix with anger at Laurel's behavior. Since Laurel admirably embraces her mother regardless of the consequences, we feel the loss all the more.

### Conclusion

An explanation of why films make us cry, and why melodramas excel in this respect, can go further than discussing emotion, pathos, or sentiment in a general sense. Melodramas make us cry because they encourage and emphasize the psychological activities and emotions that precede crying. People cry when they perceive themselves to be helpless while experiencing intense emotions, particularly the emotion of sadness. While viewers of all films realize that they are, in fact, helpless to affect the events on screen, melodramas make our helplessness salient through passive, sympathetic protagonists who face undesirable events. Although many types of films show characters who face loss, melodramas portray characters who suffer loss of their most cherished relationships, due to impersonal forces, in a way that is neither surprising nor inevitable. Further, the narrative structure of classical Hollywood films in general, and also the structure of melodramas in particular, produce synergistic effects that allow these films to create the intense emotions and perceived helplessness that leads us to call them tearjerkers.

---

**Jonathan Frome** is a Senior Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. His research concentrates on emotional responses to media, with a particular focus on why different media tend to generate different emotions. He has published in journals such as *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and *Film Studies: An International Review*. His primary research interests outside of film are videogame studies, animation, documentary film, and aesthetics.

## References

- Bonanno, George A., Laura Goorin, and Karin Coifman. 2000. "Sadness and Grief." Pp. 797–810 in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd, ed. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bordwell, David. 1985. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson. 1985. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Borquist, Alvin. 1906. "Crying." *American Journal of Psychology* 17(2): 149–205.
- Brooks, Peter. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bylsma, Lauren M., Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets, and Jonathan Rottenberg. 2008. "When Is Crying Cathartic? An International Study." *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology* 27(10): 1165–1187. [doi:10.1521/jscp.2008.27.10.1165](https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2008.27.10.1165).
- Cook, Pam. 1983. "Melodramas and the Women's Picture." Pp. 14–28 in *Gainsborough Melodrama*, ed. Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy. London: British Film Institute.
- Cornelius, Randolph R. 1997. "Toward a New Understanding of Weeping and Catharsis." Pp. 303–321 in *The (Non)expression of Emotions in Health and Disease*, ed. Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets, Frans van Bussel, and Jan Boelhouwer. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Ekman, Paul. 1992. "Are There Basic Emotions?" *Psychological Review* 99(3): 550–553. [doi:10.1037/0033-295X.99.3.550](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.99.3.550).
- Ellsworth, Phoebe C., and Craig A. Smith. 1988. "From Appraisal to Emotion: Differences Among Unpleasant Feelings." *Motivation and Emotion* 12(3): 271–302. [doi:10.1007/BF00993115](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993115).
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 1972. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." *Monogram* 4: 2–15.
- Frijda, Nico H. 1986. *The Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frome, Jonathan, and Aaron Smuts. 2004. "Helpless Spectators: Generating Suspense in Videogames and Film." *TEXT Technology* 13(1): 13–34.
- Gledhill, Christine. 1985. "Melodrama." Pp. 73–84 in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook. London: British Film Institute.
- Grodal, Torben. 1997. *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grodal, Torben. 2001. "Film, Character Simulation, and Emotion." Pp. 115–127 in *Nicht Allein Das Laufbild Afder Leinwand ... Strukturen Des Films Als Erlebnispotential* [Not Only the Moving Picture on the Screen ... Structures of Films as Potential of Experience], ed. Jörs Fries, Britta Hartmann, and Eggo Müller. Berlin: Vistas Verlas.
- Gross, James J. 1998. "Antecedent- and Response-Focused Emotion Regulation: Divergent Consequences for Experience, Expression, and Physiology." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74(1): 224–237. [doi:10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.224](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.1.224).
- Halliday, Jon. 1972. *Sirk on Sirk*. New York: Viking Adult.
- Hendriks, M.C.P., M.A Croon, and Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets. 2008. "Social Reactions to Adult Crying: The Help-Soliciting Function of Tears." *Journal of Social Psychology* 148(1): 22–42.
- Higson, Andrew, and Ginette Vincendeau. 1986. "Melodrama: An Introduction by Andrew Higson and Ginette Vincendeau." *Screen* 27(6) : 2–5. [doi:10.1093/screen/27.6.2](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.6.2).
- Kant, Immanuel. [1790] 2007. *Critique of Judgement*. Edited by Nicholas Walker. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Labott, Susan M., and Randall B. Martin. 1988. "Weeping: Evidence for a Cognitive Theory." *Motivation and Emotion* 12(3): 205–216. [doi:10.1007/BF00993111](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993111).

- Mercer, John, and Martin Shingler. 2004. *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*. New York: Wallflower Press.
- Miceli, Maria, and Cristiano Castelfranchi. 2003. "Crying: Discussing Its Basic Reasons and Uses." *New Ideas in Psychology* 21(3): 247–273. doi:[10.1016/j.newideapsych.2003.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2003.09.001).
- Mulvey, Laura. 1987. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama." Pp. 75–79 in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute.
- Murube, Juan. 2009. "Basal, Reflex, and Psycho-Emotional Tears." *Ocular Surface* 7(2): 60–66.
- Neale, Steve. 1993. "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press." *Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall): 66–89.
- Neale, Steve. 2000. *Genre and Hollywood*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. 1977. "Minnelli and Melodrama." *Screen* 18(2): 113–118. doi:[10.1093/screen/18.2.113](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/18.2.113).
- Ochsner, Kevin N., and James J Gross. 2007. "The Neural Architecture of Emotion Regulation." Pp. 87–109 in *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*, ed. James J. Gross. New York: Guilford Press.
- Oliver, Mary Beth, and Julia K. Woolley. 2010. "Tragic and Poignant Entertainment: The Gratifications of Meaningfulness as Emotional Response." Pp. 134–147 in *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*, ed. Katrin Döveling, Christian von Scheve, and Elly A. Konijn. New York: Routledge.
- Plantinga, Carl. 1999. "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film." Pp. 239–255 in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rottenberg, Jonathan, and Ad J.J.M. Vingerhoets. 2012. "Crying: Call for a Lifespan Approach." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6(3): 217–227. doi:[10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00426.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00426.x).
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1980. "Fiction, Non-Factuals, and the Principle of Minimal Departure." *Poetics* 9(4): 403–422. doi:[10.1016/0304-422X\(80\)90030-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(80)90030-3).
- Simons, Gwenda, Martin Bruder, Ilmo van der Löwe, and Brian Parkinson. 2013. "Why Try (not) to Cry: Intra- and Inter-Personal Motives for Crying Regulation." *Frontiers in Emotion Science* 3: 1–9. doi:[10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00597](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00597).
- Singer, Ben. 1990. "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama: The Etiology of an Anomaly." *Camera Obscura* 8 (1 22) : 90–129. doi:[10.1215/02705346-8-1\\_22-90](https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-8-1_22-90).
- Singer, Ben. 2001. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smuts, Aaron. 2009. "Art and Negative Affect." *Philosophy Compass* 4(1): 39–55. doi:[10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00199.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00199.x).
- Tan, Ed S. 1995. "Film-Induced Affect as a Witness Emotion." *Poetics* 23(1–2): 7–32. doi:[10.1016/0304-422X\(94\)00024-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(94)00024-Z).
- Tan, Ed S., and Nico H. Frijda. 1999. "Sentiment in Film Viewing." Pp. 48–64 in *Passionate Views*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Vingerhoets, Ad J. J. M., Randolph R. Cornelius, Guus L. Van Heck, and Marleen C. Becht. 2000. "Adult Crying: A Model and Review of the Literature." *Review of General Psychology* 4(4): 354–377. doi:[10.1037/1089-2680.4.4.354](https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.4.4.354).

## Filmography

Vidor, King. 1937. *Stella Dallas*. USA.

---