

Melodrama, Tears, and Life of Oharu

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Many of Mizoguchi's films portray suffering women, but *Life of Oharu* (1952) may surpass all his others in the depth of suffering portrayed. The film features a young woman, Oharu, who is the daughter of an Imperial samurai. After a brief relationship with a lower class man, her family is exiled from the Imperial court. This event starts a series of misfortunes which, through many episodes, push her down the social ladder and track her moral descent. Ultimately, in her old age, she is reduced to a pathetic, elderly beggar. The film's tone straightforwardly reflects its subject matter: it is quite sad to watch Oharu systematically destroyed and left with no sense of a brighter future. Yet, other films have portrayed similarly tragic events but fail to move their audience. In this paper, I will discuss various theories of how a film's narrative structure can affect its ability to generate sadness, and analyze how Oharu arranges its narration in a particularly effective manner towards this end.

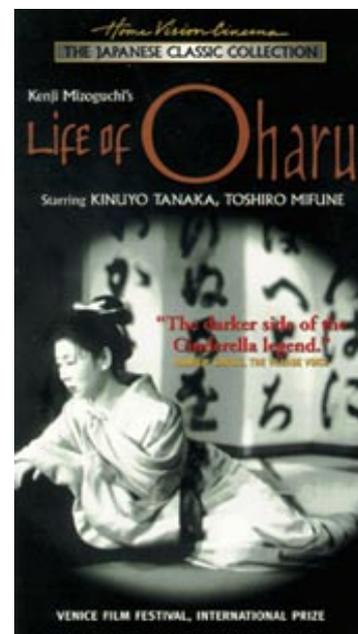
Melodrama and Tears

Why do we find melodramas moving? How do melodramas make us cry? In his well-known article "Melodrama and Tears," Steve Neale argues that melodramas' ability to generate sadness is fundamentally based in the relationship between the narrative point-of-view of the characters and the audience. To make his point, Neale borrows from Franco Moretti's theory of moving literature. Moretti's theory attempts to describe the mechanism by which moving literature causes tears. According to Neale:

[Moretti's] thesis is that particularly moving moments in such stories are the product of a structure in which the point of view of one of the characters comes to coincide with the point of view of the reader as established by the narrative. A character's mistaken perception, or lack of knowledge, is rectified in accordance with the reader's prior understanding and judgment. (7)

Thus, the narrative establishes a primary point of view, which Moretti also calls "unquestionable" and "neutral," that is distinct from a character's subjective point of view. When the two points-of-view are reconciled, an event which Moretti calls *agnition*, sadness is generated. The agnition, however, only generates pathos under certain conditions. Moretti states that the agnition is moving when it comes "too late," that is, when "change is impossible" (162). Why? Because the audience wants a happy event, but when the agnition comes too late, they realize that time is irreversible and they are powerless to change the story. These realizations generate their sadness.

Thus, on Neale's view, the viewer of a melodrama knows something that the character doesn't. When the character learns the key information (and their point of view thus reconciles with the viewer's), the agnition takes place and sadness is generated. Neale modifies Moretti's conditions, arguing that films can still be moving even if agnition occurs in time to generate a happy outcome, as long as there is a delay that creates the possibility of failure. And "the longer there is



delay, the more we are likely to cry, because the powerlessness of our position will be intensified, whatever the outcome of events, 'happy' or 'sad', too late or just in time" (12). Neale uses *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) as an example. At the end, although Cary Scott and Ron Kirby have suffered a costly delay in their relationship that generates tears, it is not too late for them to have a relationship (11). We should note, however, that many different things can cause tears, and the concept is thus poor for discussing how films generate emotions. We can cry tears of joy as well as tears of sorrow, and Neale himself describes an ending of delayed but successful agnition as both happy and sad (11). Thus, it is more fruitful to discuss sadness rather than tears. Returning to Neale's example, it is clear that *All That Heaven Allows* would be sadder if in fact Ron had died from his fall, and Cary came to learn of his death after deciding to reunite with him once and for all. Her agnition would then truly be too late. When the delay is costly but coupled with a happy reconciliation, we get the happy/sad mix Neale refers to. When the delay is truly too late, and the cost is the impossibility of change, we get the sadness of Moretti's examples. The cost of being too late is greater than the cost of delay, and, accordingly, the sadness is greater.

There are some problems, however, with attributing sadness to this structure as Neale describes it. First, it seems inadequate to base sadness solely on a reconciliation of the character's subjective point of view with the viewer's point of view, because such a moment may happen without the viewer's knowledge. That is, it may be the case that the film does not portray the moment when the character comes to learn what the viewer knows. If the viewer does not know of the agnition, it cannot generate sadness in the viewer. Consider *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948). Neale states that "Stefan indeed comes to realize who Lisa is and to know of her love too late..." (10). Yet the moment of Stefan's realization is not clearly portrayed. Despite Neale's reference to the montage of shots of Lisa from Stefan's point of view near the end of the film (10), Stefan's realization does not come during the montage. He learns of Lisa's love early in the letter, and he surely connects it to the woman he recently met at the opera while he is reading that section of the letter rather than in an epiphany afterwards. Yet, when the viewer does understand that Stefan has had this realization, the film generates sadness. Neale might modify the argument to read, "a structure in which the reader learns that the point of view of one of the characters comes to coincide with the point of view of the reader..."

Second, the discrepancy in points of view must involve the reader understanding an impending bad outcome for the character that the character fails to understand until the agnition. It is not just agnition, but agnition about something negative that generates sadness. If we know that the character has just learned that he has unknowingly killed a loved one, that agnition can be moving. If, on the other hand, we know that someone has entered a room to help a character, and the character doesn't know it until he turns around, the agnition when he does turn will not generate tears because the character's mistaken perception has no negative consequences. Similarly, if we learn something that is bad for the character, but we don't realize that it is bad, only that it occurred, when the character learns of it, there will be no sadness even if the other conditions are met.

Yet even with these qualifications, Neale's notion that agnition is what fundamentally underlies sadness in films is unsatisfying. In *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the tears generated by the film do not start at the moment of Stefan's realization. The movie is quite sad before this moment. Or consider *Stella Dallas* (1937). This film contains an example that fits Neale's description of agnition very well. In the scene when Stella overhears Laurel's friends discussing Stella's embarrassing appearance at the country club, we learn that Stella's point of view has changed to match our primary view of the event. Surely, however, the final scene of Stella watching her daughter marry is more moving. Yet this moving final scene has a structure somewhat opposite from that described by Neale. Stella knows before we do of her intended sacrifice; we learn it only as we see her enact it. Neale's

formulation, which requires that the viewer know the situation before the character, fails to explain why this scene is so moving.

Sadness in *Life of Oharu*

To further explore the question of what generates sadness in films, let us return to Mizoguchi's *Life of Oharu*, an extremely moving film about a woman who experiences a social and moral descent throughout her life. Is Oharu a melodrama? Although episodic, the film can be seen as a melodrama in the modern sense: a tale associated with heightened emotion, family, and domesticity. The protagonist, Oharu, is a member of a favored imperial family who is exiled because she falls in love with a man below her station. Each episode in the film tracks her descent into progressively lower social roles: from an imperial daughter, to a royal concubine, to a high-class courtesan, to a servant for a local magistrate, to a shop girl, to a potential nun, to a woman on the run with a thief, to a prostitute, to a beggar.

It is difficult to attribute the film's most moving moments to an agnition structure. In the film, the viewer's point of view is very closely tied to Oharu's. Generally, we know what she knows. Through the film, in fact, there are only ten times that we learn of plot developments before Oharu, and few of them meet Neale's description. Five times, we learn something that Oharu will learn momentarily. When the imperial guards come into the hotel early in the film, and catch Oharu and her forbidden love Katsunoke, we see them before she does. We see the merchant Hishiya, who recognizes Oharu as a Shimabara courtesan, before Oharu enters the room. Oharu's mother visits her near the end of the film after Oharu collapses in the temple. We see her mother approach the house while Oharu is still inside. Yet none of these examples meet Neale's description because we don't know the meaning of these characters' arrivals until Oharu herself does.

In the second episode, in which Oharu is a royal courtesan, we learn that Oharu is going to be exiled from Lord Matsudaira's estate before she does. Yet this case fails to meet Neale's structure because we never see Oharu learn the news. We merely see her arrive back home. Thus, there is no depicted agnition to generate sadness.

The longest delay between Oharu's knowledge and ours concerns Isobe, Lord Matsudaira's elderly servant charged with finding the Lord a mistress. We learn of his search long before Oharu does. When Isobe finds her, we are not sad because there is no implied bad outcome—Oharu's chance to become a high-status concubine is at least potentially positive. Similarly, we see one of Kahei's servants smooth his hair before seeing Oharu, suggesting his attraction for her. When she later learns of his attraction, the event is not sad.

Twice, we do diverge from Oharu's point of view regarding significant events, but in both cases the primary narration misleads us. When, early in the film, Oharu talks to Lord Kikuoji about a suitor, she walks off screen left and he off screen right. Katsunoke, eavesdropping, looks left to Oharu and then runs off screen right. Two shots later, he returns from the right and tells Oharu that Lord Kikuoji has arranged a meeting with her. The screen directions strongly imply that Katsunoke has just come from a conversation with Lord Kikuoji, and Oharu hasn't seen where Katsunoke just ran. Yet our privileged knowledge of Katsunoke's position is misleading, because (as we learn later) he lied about Lord Kikuoji arranging a meeting. He had concocted a ruse to get Oharu alone so he could discuss his love letter. Later in the film, at the Shimabara courtesan house, we see the counterfeiter arrive outside Oharu's knowledge. This event is similarly misleading, because we witness him lying to others about how he has been saving money for twenty years. Thus, in neither case does the primary narration give us reliable facts that Oharu later discovers.

There are two cases where we do know of an impending bad outcome for Oharu that she is unaware of, and we see her learn of these facts. The best example of Neale's structure concerns Katsunoke's last words before being executed. We hear him passionately plea for the value of

true love, and selflessly tell Oharu to marry someone else. When we see Oharu suddenly forced to deal with this information, and attempt suicide, the sadness is heightened by our knowledge of the letter. The second time we witness her agnition is when we see Oharu's father begin to amass debts after Oharu bears Lord Matsudaira's heir. She only learns of the debts after being exiled from Matsudaira's estate. The delayed knowledge heightens the impact of her return. We know that she will not only have to deal with the shame and poverty of exile, but the difficulty of her family's debts. Here, agnition could be said to cause or contribute to the sadness.

Revisiting Moretti

Yet in a film with so many very sad events, the structure Neale describes fails to explain the impact of the great majority. I don't believe, however, that Moretti's thesis is disproven by these examples, because I think that Neale has misread Moretti's thesis. For Neale, in a melodrama, sadness is generated by agnition, which he describes as a particular type of dramatic irony (the audience knows something the character doesn't). In agnition, the dramatic irony ends in a specifically timed way: the character learns something that the audience already knows. On Neale's description, the audience's point of view doesn't change, the character's changes to meet the audience's (or the primary) point of view.

This doesn't match my reading of Moretti's conditions for tears: "it is clear how the present state of things should be changed – and that this change is impossible" (162). Moretti doesn't mention character's point of view at all. Moretti is talking only about things being clear to the audience. Moretti says that moving moments occur when a "moving sentence modifies the point of view that had directed our reading, organizing its expectations and judgments..." (159). That is, the audience has a point of view that organizes their expectations, and the sentence modifies the audience's point of view.

The misreading occurs, I believe, because of a key difference between literature (which is the object of Moretti's study) and film. According to Moretti, a written story can hold the reader in a character's subjective point of view for many pages. It is rare in a film to be seeing the story fully through a subjective viewpoint for a sustained time (*Lady in the Lake* (1947) being a rare counter-example).

Neale quotes Moretti's article as saying: "The moving sentence dissipates Sir Everard's mistaken perception....by a short circuit that definitively re-establishes the original 'truth'" (8). Neale elides the key phrase: "(which, for a number of pages, is also the one through which the reader is forced to follow events)" (160). Moretti's thesis is that the audience has a certain point of view established early in the narrative, which is temporarily put aside when reading through a character's subjective point of view. When the subjective point of view is forced to accord with the primary point of view (i.e., Moretti's notion of the "neutral" point of view), the reader is reminded of the earlier-established primary point of view, and is moved. One reason Neale may have misread Moretti is that in Moretti's examples, he cites sentences in which characters' points of view reconcile to the main point of view of the narration. The change in the characters' points of view, however, are not important in themselves, they are only important in that they remind the reader of the objective point of view of the narration, which contains facts suggesting sad outcomes that the reader is powerless to prevent. When reading through the point of view of an unknowing character, the reader (presumably) does not focus on these negative facts. When the point of view changes in the written story, the reader is reminded of these facts. Moretti's original intent explains why Neale's notion of agnition fails to explain certain types of sadness in film.

Moretti's specific mechanism may explain moving literature better than film, but Moretti's actual thesis can be useful if instead of focusing on primary and subjective points of view per se, we look at his claim that tears are generated by knowing how things should be and knowing that this outcome is impossible. Combining this idea with the idea that a

sudden change is needed to generate tears, we might say that *Life of Oharu* generates sadness by repeatedly offering the possibility that things will be improved for Oharu, and then suddenly reminding us that these hopes will not materialize. It is not as important when the character realizes such things in relation to the viewer; what is important is merely when the viewer realizes the potentials and the actual sad outcomes.

Obviously, having Oharu fail to achieve her goals is only sad if we want her to achieve them, or, in other words, if we think her achieving her goals is the way "things should be." If she were a villain, by contrast, we might be glad that she fails. Very briefly, the film encourages us to sympathize with Oharu in two ways. First, as already noted, we see almost all plot information in accordance with her knowledge. Using Murray Smith's terms, we are thus aligned with her (142). Further, we are sympathetic with Oharu's moral traits. Smith calls this allegiance (188). Oharu, at least initially, stands for true love, dignity, individuality, and beauty. Although I cannot speak for the film's initial Japanese audience, these traits seem generally admirable or heroic. According to Smith, these factors encourage the audience to want Oharu to achieve her goals. Although she loses these traits as the film progresses, we are by that point already committed to her as a character.

The film thus sets up a primary narration in which we want Oharu to succeed. Yet the primary narration also suggests that Oharu cannot improve her lot and will inevitably decline. We know this because in the beginning of the film it is established that she was once of good standing but has eventually become a prostitute. The film's episodic structure allows her to try to succeed but repeatedly fail. When we see an opportunity for Oharu to maintain or improve her status during the film, we may for a time focus on her opportunity rather than thinking about her inevitable failure. This operation is akin to, in Moretti's theory, reading within a subjective point of view. Our realization comes when Oharu's hopes are dashed, and we are reminded of the primary fact that she will fail. At these moments, the film generates sadness.

The film's circular flashback structure cleverly begins not at the end of the film, but just before the last episode. This structure limits our knowledge about the outcome of the film, regardless of whether we realize during the film that there is significant plot development after the opening framing segment. Near the end of the film, when Oharu's mother tells her that Oharu's son wants her to come live at the Matsudaira estate, we no longer know whether Oharu will succeed or fail. When our hope that she will be saved is dashed, the film reaches its saddest moments. This episode is particularly poignant because Oharu was initially exiled simply because the Lord was too fond of her. Now, after that exile has led to her downfall, her own son rejects her.

Having Oharu's descent evenly distributed across so many episodes, and having each episode just a little worse than the last is a highly formal structure. Part of the pleasure of the film is seeing how slight variations in the episodes can accomplish the same task of taking Oharu down just slightly, while successfully engaging us with characterization and the possibility of her success. If instead of alternating opportunity and failure, the film offered unceasing failure, it would not be nearly as sad.

Faktaboks

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