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Preface

Like many people who watched the October 3, 1995, verdict in the trial of O. J. Simpson, I felt deeply implicated in its drama. The verdict in what some would call "the trial of the century,"[1] viewed by more Americans than any other event in the history of television, resonated profoundly with the earlier verdict in the trial of the police accused in the beating of Rodney King. And that verdict, in turn, resonated with a long history of racial villains and victims. This book is my attempt to understand how that long history came to inform these trials. Sometime between the verdict in the police beating of Rodney King on April 29, 1992—a verdict that sparked a major race riot—and the 1995 verdict in the Simpson trial—a verdict that sparked unprecedented white resentment—I realized that a book I had been writing on the American melodramatic imagination as played out in "moving pictures" would have to become a book about black and white racial melodrama. It would need to reach back to the moving picture of the violent beating death of Uncle Tom at the hands of the white slave driver Simon Legree in countless stage melodramas and forward to the Rodney King beating and the O. J. Simpson murder trial. In other words, to understand the collision of these two contemporary "trials in black and white," it would be necessary to trace the mass culture genealogy of black and white racial melodrama over the last hundred and fifty years. It would not be sufficient to limit the "moving pictures" of this study to "the movies" alone. Rather, it would be necessary to study a set of racially resonant music and pictures that have moved the American public to feel sympathy for racially beset victims and hate for racially motivated villains across a wide range of mass media.

If, as Robyn Wiegman (1991, 325) has argued, the commodified appearance of the black body became "a representational sign for the democratizing process of U.S. Culture itself," and if, as Michael Rogin (1996, 14) has argued, the black body has had a "surplus symbolic value," then it is important to determine what *form* that democratizing, commodified, symbolic value has taken. I will argue that this form is melodrama, conceived not as a genre, as

many film critics have thought, but as a central *mode* of American popular culture. In narrowing my topic from melodrama in general to "black and white" racial melodrama in particular, in taking what seemed at first to be a "detour" through race, I believe I ultimately found a more direct route to the heart of melodrama itself. In racial melodrama we discover the generation of "moral legibility" (Brooks 1995) through the spectacle of racialized bodily suffering.

Melodrama will be understood in these pages not as an aberration, archaism, or excess, but as the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has "talked to itself" about the enduring moral dilemma of race. I hope we will come to understand how two key icons—the suffering black male body and the threatened white female body—have generated such highly charged racial feelings over so much time. Why, for example, have the iconography and music (melos) of black male suffering been so enduring in mainstream American culture even at those moments when, as in *The Jazz Singer* or *Gone With the Wind*, black people themselves were shunted to the periphery or evacuated entirely from the story? And why has the counter-icon of white female suffering at the hands of hyper-sexualized black men been the focus of white resentment against the gains of African Americans since Reconstruction?

Working backward from my confused and outraged response to the verdict in the O. J. Simpson trial, I have sought to understand the reasons for my own raced and gendered resentment—not to vindicate it, but to better understand the deep-seated racial and sexual fantasies that fuel it. The genealogy that I offer in this book traces back to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first widely popular moment in the melodrama of black suffering, and its key icon of the beaten black slave, played to a white public as commodified mass entertainment. This icon has not ceased to resonate in contemporary American culture. Looking back at Uncle Tom from the vantage point of Rodney King and O. J. Simpson, I began to see that the emotionally charged "moral legibility" that we shall see to be so crucial to the mode of melodrama is intrinsically linked to a "racial legibility"[2] that habitually sees a Manichaean good or evil in the visual "fact" of race itself—whether it is the dark male victim of white abuse or the dark villain with designs upon the innocent white woman. This genealogy has enabled me to take a longer and deeper look at the psychic investments in these archaic, yet ever-modernizing forms of racial victimization and vilification.

While the spectacle of Uncle Tom's suffering at the whip of the white slave driver once functioned progressively to "humanize" the figure of the slave, the romantic racialism of this negrophilia humanized him in his very blackness as a figure of racialized suffering. By the same token, the sympathy I felt for Nicole Simpson, and which I wanted to believe was "race neutral"—

uncontaminated by any preexisting scripts of racial pity or antipathy—could not be extricated from a virulent strand of negrophobia that was inextricably connected to a cycle of racial melodrama begun by the antebellum Uncle Tom and "answered" by the Progressive Era's *Birth of a Nation*. Leslie Fiedler (1979, 1982) has provocatively dubbed the dialectic between these two (negrophilic and negrophobic) scenarios "Tom" and "anti-Tom." I have adopted elements of Fiedler's terminology and dialectic in the following study, keeping his sense that these works speak to some of the culture's most utopian hopes as well as its most paranoid delusions about race and gender, but adapting it to my strong belief that these works are not epics, as Fiedler calls them, but melodramas, a form that has been insufficiently understood as a major force of moral reasoning in American mass culture.[3]

The O. J. Simpson murder trial, and the earlier trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King that so informed it, were such galvanizing experiences for Americans of all races, genders, and ethnicities because there was no race-neutral—no unmelodramatic, no non-Tom or non-anti-Tom—way of seeing them. Morally, one had to put one's finger on the scales and decide who was the victim and who was the villain of these racially saturated scripts. This is not to say, however, as have many critics of the Simpson verdict, that a pure "colorblind" justice was perverted by the calculated invocation of racialized ways of seeing. Rather, it is to say that from the very beginning of this tradition, the quest for justice has depended upon the application of a melodramatic "Tom lens," with a habit of seeing virtue in the suffering of the black male body at the hands of white villains and white female bodies suffering at the hands of black male villains. In the trial of the police in the beating of Rodney King this "Tom" lens collided with an equally melodramatic "anti-Tom lens" capable of seeing every movement of the black body as a potential assault on white law and order and as lust for the endangered white woman. Similarly, in the Simpson trial, the alleged attack on the blond white woman by the jealous black ex-husband invoked an "anti-Tom" lens that immediately racialized the case, as in the infamous darkening of the mug shot of O. J. Simpson as soon as he became a suspect. This racial vilification then collided, in its turn, with a predominantly "black" jury's perception that every movement of the white police was an effort to frame the black defendant.

For good reason, many intellectuals have done their best to resist the lurid confluence of these two trials, to resist being sullied by the commodified frenzy that was O. J. and to resist the paranoid fantasies that have fueled black and white responses to these trials. My approach, on the contrary, has been to delve deeper into the paranoid nature of these fantasies, to pursue the logic of racial victimization and vilification that fuels them. At times this has meant writing a book from inside the logic of white supremacy, for even the "Tom lens," for all its romantic racialist sympathy for the suffering African, is undeni-

ably white supremacist and deeply violent. I realize that in doing so I run the risk of making legible that which might better be excoriated and refused. Nevertheless I hope to trace the genealogy of black and racial melodrama from a time when white (and male) meant American to a time when American has come to include diverse races, genders, and ethnicities—not to celebrate a progress of inclusion, but to show instead how basic the melodramatics of racial suffering has been to the very process of inclusion.[4]

Acknowledgments

Only gradually and with a certain trepidation did the necessity of writing about racial melodrama dawn on me. Only gradually did I expand an original study on film melodrama into a larger study of many media. I could not have done this without a great deal of help and encouragement. A deep debt of gratitude goes to the friends, colleagues, and fellow scholars who have patiently read and generously advised me in the overlong process of writing this book. Eric Lott and Michael Rogin were very helpful readers of early drafts; Carol J. Clover and Lauren Berlant gave especially important guidance at a middle stage; and Valerie Smith and Susan Gillman were generous readers of a near-final draft. If I have not realized all that these readers wished, I hope that I have at least not betrayed their interest. I especially want to acknowledge how deeply I have been influenced by the examples of each of their work. I also owe thanks to no fewer than two editors at Princeton University Press: Deborah Malmud, whose interest initiated the book and whose enthusiasm for an "American Studies" project at first intimidated and later fully engaged me, and Mary Murrell, whose wise advice and steady follow-through toward the end encouraged me to prune a great deal of extraneous material. In addition, thanks are due Donna Kronemeyer and Anne Reifsnyder, who shepherded the manuscript through the production process, and Eric Schramm, whose skillful and knowledgeable editing greatly improved the final manuscript.

A President's Fellowship while at the University of California–Irvine and a Guggenheim while at UC-Berkeley provided invaluable time, the first for research and the second for writing. An early formulation of my thinking about genre and melodrama was made possible during a wonderfully congenial research seminar at the University of California's Humanities Research Institute in Irvine, for which I thank Leo Braudy, Nick Browne, Carol J. Clover, George Lipsitz, David Russell, Nita Rollins, Thomas Schatz, and Vivian Sobchack. Collegiality doesn't get much better than that. Students at UC-Irvine (Farid Mattuck, Fiona Ng, and Betinna Soest Wohner) and UC-Berkeley (Scott Combs, Kiersten Johnson, Melissa Riley, Steve Sun, and Domietta

Introduction
Playing the Race Card

The "race card" was invoked as a term during the first O. J. Simpson double-murder trial when the prosecution accused Johnny Cochran's team of cheating by introducing evidence of detective Mark Fuhrman's racism. This evidence—of Fuhrman's prior use of the word "nigger"—was called an "ace of spades" by prosecutor Christopher Darden: "Mr. Cochran wants to play the ace of spades and play the race card. . . . If you allow Mr. Cochran to use this word and play this race card, not only does the direction and focus of the case change, but the entire complexion of the case changes. It's a race case then. It's white versus black" (Bugliosi 1996, 66). According to Darden, evidence of Fuhrman's racism, which permitted the defense to put the Los Angeles Police Department on trial, should have been irrelevant to the question of Simpson's guilt. Behind this statement stands a moral assertion that within American jurisprudence—and indeed in many other areas of contemporary American popular culture—race should be unmentionable. As Peggy Pascoe (1999, 482) puts it, "In a society determined to be colorblind, granting public recognition to racial categories [seems] to be synonymous with racism itself."

In the Simpson trial the term "playing the race card" became a frequently invoked mantra. It would be invoked again by defense attorney Robert Shapiro

after the verdict to distance himself from an overtly raced defense. Once again, the term was invoked with no sense of the history behind it, or even the short-term memory that it was Shapiro himself who first introduced the evidence of Fuhrman's racism; his criticism thus smacked of hypocrisy. As it became possible for some whites to say that one extremely privileged African-American male may have "gotten away with murder" by deploying the disadvantage of race to make the jury see him as a racial victim, it also became possible to say that the address of past African-American grievances through affirmative action and othe programs no longer deserved priority.[1] In effect, then, one race card of racial grievance was being used to trump another.

Instead of accusing racialized persons of playing the race card, I argue that it might be more useful to consider how extensively race cards have been in play in the racial power games of American culture. If the very accusation of playing the race card has now become a way of disqualifying the attempt to discuss past and present racial injury, then we need to understand the history that has led up to that disqualification—a history in which both blacks and whites have repeatedly played the race card. We need, further, to understand the metaphor of the cheating card game itself. As Anne Cheng (2000, 103–104) has noted, the rhetoric betrays a peculiar logic by which what constitutes a winning hand has been identified with a handicap. To win at the "game" of race is to lose the larger game of life in which unraced competitors already play with a full deck. Liability is transformed to asset and reformed again as liability. Thus the metaphor of the race card attempts to discredit any racialized suffering that can be turned to advantage now that colorblindness is supposedly in effect. It acknowledges, and simultaneously condemns, what Wendy Brown (1995) has called a politics of identity grounded in injury. Yet if offers no alternative means to the redress of injury beyond the injunction to get over it, to not drag the baggage of past injury into the present.

How, then, shall we understand the term race as it figures in this study of black and white racial melodrama? One lesson that the Simpson trial teaches is that even if race is a fiction, even, if, as Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman (1996, 37) put it, race does not exist as an essential, biological category upon which identity is based, it is equally the case, as Hazel Carby (1992, 193) notes, that it constructs "racialized subjects" in the political imagination. In the Simpson trial, for example, we saw its famous defendant and his ex-wife racialized before our very eyes. If race as an essential entity does not exist, racialization does; it gives meaning to the visible signs of difference and that meaning has long been embedded in popular culture in such icons as the beaten black man or the endangered white woman. The race card is best viewed, then, not as a cheating, marked card. It needs to be seen, rather, as an integral process of the gaining of rights through the recognition of injury. It was in play when Americans first recognized the virtue of black victims in the beating of Uncle Tom; it was in play when Americans first perceived the white woman endangered by the black man. The study of black and white melodrama affords an opportunity to see just how frequently racialized claims of injury have been in play and how they are linked with that other familiar history of embodied difference: gender. For example, prosecutor Darden himself could not help but play a gender-inflected version of the race card when he showed pictures of the battered face of the blond Nicole Brown Simpson during the trial, or when, in objecting to the very deployment of the "race card," he mentioned how "outrageous" it would be were he to insist, in turn, that the "defendant has a fetish for blond-haired or white women."[2] Indeed, the very fact that the accusation of playing the race card was made by a black attorney—whom some believed was chosen as a prosecutor in the case at least partly because of his race[3]—demonstrates how futile the quest for race neutrality and "color blindness" was, and how deeply a melodramatic ethos of race and gender permeated all judgments.

I will argue in the following pages that Harriet Beecher Stowe played the first mass-culture version of the race card when she pictured the sufferings of Tom and Eliza at the hands of white masters. Early in the next century in the Progressive Era, Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith trumped Stowe's race card by inverting its racial polarities to show white women threatened by emancipated black men in *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation*. The card has been in play whenever racial abuse is invoked to cast one racially constituted group as the victim of another. It would seem, then, that there is no single race card; rather, there is a history of mutually informing, perpetually trumping, race cards animating a long tradition of black and white racial melodrama. One of the purposes of this book is to trace the moments of emergence of new versions of racial victimization and vilification through the mode of melodrama.

Like the mode of melodrama, the race card has been vilified as an archaic evil, a throwback to a distant era beyond which modern, and postmodern, American citizens have long since "progressed." And yet, like melodrama, the race card finds unsuspected relevance and appeal with each new configuration of racial victims and villains, with each new stage of American racial politics. In the painfully long and slow movement toward and beyond civil rights, and no matter how each "bad" old melodrama is vehemently rejected by whites or blacks, these two central and opposed "moving pictures"—the vision of a black man beaten by a white and the responding "counter" vision of the white woman endangered or raped by the emancipated and uppity black villain—have endured even as they have transmuted. The power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "to convulse a mighty nation," as literary historian George Whicher (1963, 583) once said Stowe's novel had done, thus needs to be seen not simply as the power of a single work to convulse viewers into sympathy with racial victims, but as the inauguration of an extended cycle of racial melodrama seeking to give "moral legibility" to race.

The Leaping Fish

Henry James once described Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "wonderful 'leaping' fish" alighting first in one medium and then in another. Recalling in particular an actress from a P. T. Barnum production with a memorable "swelling bust" whose portrayal of Eliza's flight across the ice blocks of the Ohio River was particularly graceful, James took a somewhat condescending view of the phenomenon's disconcerting inability to remain in its original literary form.[4] But he importantly reminded his readers that for his generation *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had ceased to be a novel and had become a more general "state of vision, of feeling and consciousness" (James 1941, 159–60), leaping about the American cultural landscape. I will argue that this "leaping" quality that James observes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be applied to an entire tradition of black and white racial melodrama that often leaps out of literary incarnations to more visual (or musical) media. Black and white racial melodrama as a whole leaps from medium to medium, functioning, whether on page, stage, screen, or courtroom as "a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness." The works we will examine in this book include novels, plays, films, Broadway musicals, and televised events, yet even though they inhabit some of these media quite vigorously, they often exceed any one of them. I have done my best to do justice to the myriad and multiple nature of the forms while focusing on the versions that were most moving in their own day. In the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* this has meant focusing on several of the Tom plays rather than the more canonical novel, while in the case of the *Birth of a Nation* it has meant giving equal attention to Dixon's novels and play as well as the more canonical film. In all cases, however, I have tried not to slight the multiplicity of the forms taken by all these works, since in many cases the real point of the importance of the melodrama is not only a particularly memorable media incarnation but its ubiquitous cross-media influence. The melodramatic playings of the race card will be best understood, then, as a story cycle brought to life by a circulating set of transmuting icons and melos pointing sometimes to the virtue of racially beset victims and sometimes to the villainy of racially motivated villains.

Each new incarnation of this negrophilic/negrophobic cycle cites a previous version of the Tom or anti-Tom story of racial victims and villains, sometimes reversing the moral polarities, sometimes simply appropriating old polarities in new ways. Each version is a partial attempt to explain the secret of American national identity in relation to that racial "Other" whose enslaved presence in the nation precipitated an original crisis of moral legitimacy. In all cases, however, the old melodrama is made new through a shift of moral valence and through an animation of new media. Indeed, one of the greatest fascinations of the American melodramas of black and white is the way they have brought to life new forms of media even as they have seemed to have a ubiquity that transcends individual media form.

To have been a white American who saw a "Tom show" in the 1850s or the film *The Birth of a Nation* on its first release in 1915 was to be converted to the new power, unprecedented length, and legitimacy of media that had not previously been taken seriously: the morally serious stage melodrama in the case of *Tom*, the "two-dollar movie" in the case of *Birth*. In both instances the thrill to the power of a new medium and the thrill to the experience of new racial sympathy are linked. Both became integral to the very formation of national identity. On stage in the mid-nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* broke with minstrel stereotypes (even as it created new forms of blackface minstrelsy) and embraced moral reform melodrama, by discovering the suffering humanity of slaves. On screen in the early twentieth century, the "anti-Tom" reversal of the Tom story in *The Birth of a Nation* gave power and moral seriousness to the new medium of film. Once again a novel object of sympathy—in this case the racially threatened white woman—gave moral legitimacy to a new medium. The melodramatic theater and the melodramatic film thus became distinctly American with the "leap" of the thematics of raced and gendered suffering into their midst.

Each animation of a new form of melodrama has constituted a new wrenching of the signs of racialized virtue: *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *Show Boat* (1927) would confer importance to the stage and filmic form of the musical and would borrow elements of the Tom melodrama of suffering slaves to lend virtue and seriousness to assimilating white ethnicities. *Gone With the Wind* (1936, 1939) would confer importance on the new producer-system epic blockbuster novel transformed into film while rewriting both the Tom and the anti-Tom narratives to suit the travails of a Depression-era and New Deal southern belle hero. *Roots* (1976, 1977)—both the bestseller family saga and the subsequent television miniseries—would rewrite all of the above from an Afrocentric post–civil rights perspective. Finally, as we have begun to see, racial melodrama would find its most recent form in the televised "race trial." Through the close study of these works in relation to one another, I hope to show how differently raced and gendered persons have played the race card and parlayed victimization into melodramatic forms of moral power.

The Home "Space of Innocence"

One of the key ways of constructing moral power is the icon of the good home. The icon of home helps establish the "space of innocence" of its virtuous victims (Brooks 1995, 29). Black and white racial melodrama originates in the homey virtues of Uncle Tom's cabin, which renders familiar the American "family values" of the African slave. In an era when even many abolitionists

(Stowe included) preferred Liberia to Kentucky as the proper home for emancipated African slaves, the humble cabin of Uncle Tom worked, against official ideology, to make Tom and his cabin seem quintessentially American. The icon of home is thus essential to establish the virtue of racially beset victims. It comes as no real surprise, then, that Dixon and Griffith's "former enemies of North and South" would find themselves uniting in "common protection of their Aryan birthright" within the confines of this symbol of humble virtue borrowed from the tradition of Uncle Tom. Nor is it surprising that the cabin as space of innocence is reworked in the Jazz Age for assimilating whites as a Lower East Side Jewish home in *The Jazz Singer* and as a kind of floating plantation in *Show Boat*. The home is refunctioned again in the next decade in *Gone With the Wind*, where the plantation itself becomes a paradoxical icon of land and people tailored to a post–Jazz Age New Deal.

In post–civil rights America, however, the plantation home could no longer serve as the locus of virtue. Once African Americans finally took on the full mantle of citizenship and became themselves the authors of the master narrative of racial melodrama, home sweet home began to be figured as home sweet Africa. Because nostalgia for the good home could not be, for African Americans, the place of slavery, yet because nostalgia for the "good home" continued to function as it had in both the Tom and the anti-Tom traditions, an exotic and idealized Africa took on that function, leaving the ongoing melodrama of black and white without a homegrown icon. At its deepest level the icon of O. J. Simpson's Brentwood mansion, known familiarly as Rockingham, resonated with this problem of good home versus Gothic mansion, taking on an iconic significance, as Uncle Tom's home had before, out of all proportion to its actual importance in the story.

This study opts to focus exclusively on a very limited cycle of works whose unquestioned popularity and importance gives them an almost mythic dimension and cultural ubiquity. Authorship matters, of course, and there are some very important authors in this study. However, I will be less interested in individual vision and personality than I will be in the interpenetrating cycle of "Tom" and "anti-Tom" in which these authors participate. Many familiar and important African-American writers have engaged with the dialectic of Tom and anti-Tom, from Harriet Jacobs to Toni Morrison, to produce works of great brilliance and importance. Nevertheless, these works have often not deeply affected the more popular, subliterary realm of mass culture addressed here. Instead, I have treated African-American authorial intervention with the tradition only at the point at which, as in the media events of *Roots* or the O. J. Simpson trial, it has registered as part of the mass-culture mainstream.

My goal in what follows will neither be to rehabilitate the mode of melodrama nor to weigh in on one side or the other of the "black and white" resentments about race. Rather I consider it sufficient to recognize melodrama's almost incalculable influence on American attitudes toward race and to

trace the genealogies of an influence that, whether because it is too obvious or because it is too embarrassing, has been relatively ignored. The study of melodrama has the potential to explain why it is that in a democracy ruled by rights, we do not gain the moral upper hand by saying simply that rights have been infringed. We say, instead, much more powerfully: "I have been victimized; I have suffered, therefore give me rights." To understand racial melodrama is to see why repeated calls for more accurate, or more "realistic," representations of racially marked characters are powerless to overturn deeply embedded racial stereotypes that seem hopelessly outmoded yet live on in the culture. Until we understand the melodramatic imagination that these stereotypes serve, and the historical dynamic of its popular cycles, we will never grasp why we are compelled to feel for the raced and gendered sufferings of some and to hate the raced and gendered villainy of others.

1 The American Melodramatic Mode

As a modality, melodrama organizes the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and contractions of a newly emerging secular and atomizing society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms.

—*Christine Gledhill*

"Melodramatic, Melodramatic, Terribly So!"

In 1853, the year after she had become a celebrity with the publication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe embarked upon a tour of Europe. In a book of letters describing her travels, she narrates a visit to Windsor Castle. Passing unmoved before a succession of paintings by such masters as Van Dyke and Caneletto, she suddenly finds herself transfixed before a marble monument by an unnamed sculptor. It is a scene depicting the death of the Princess Charlotte, daughter of King George IV. Stowe describes the sculpture in great detail. On the terrestrial side, the princess has just "thrown herself over in a convulsion, and died" (Stowe 1854, 2:45). Around her are four figures bowed in mute despair. On the celestial side, however, the princess's spirit is seen to rise toward heaven. "Two angels, one carrying her infant child and the other with clasped hands of exultant joy, are rising with her, in serene and solemn triumph" (45).

Stowe and her party shed tears before the "unutterable pathos and beauty" of a monument depicting the sorrow of death and the triumph of afterlife (46). Soon after, however, she finds her taste challenged by precisely the kind of refined cultural authority she has come to England to encounter. A cultivated artist, the sort who "knows all that is proper to be admired," informs her that the statue is a "shocking thing" in "miserable taste" (46).

Alarmed, Stowe inquires what is wrong with it; the artist informs her, as if there could be nothing more to say, that it is "melodramatic, melodramatic, terribly so!" (47)

In midcentury England, a cultivated artist would indeed have condemned the histrionic pathos of such a statue as "melodramatic." In invoking this term he would have meant very much what we mean by it today: a seemingly archaic excess of sensation and sentiment, a manipulation of the heartstrings that exceeds the bounds of good taste.[1] No doubt if this same artist had read Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or seen any of its stage productions already sweeping Stowe's home country, he would have deplored a similar "miserable taste" encountered in the terrestrial pathos and celestial triumph in the deaths of her Little Eva and Uncle Tom.

What interests me in this anecdote is not only the familiar high culture contempt for the presumed "excesses" of the "melodramatic," but Stowe's desire to present herself as not quite comprehending what it means. She first reports that she is "so appalled by the word, of whose meaning I had not a very clear idea, that I dropped the defence at once and determined to reconsider my tears. To have been actually made to cry by a thing that was melodramatic was a distressing consideration" (2:45–47). At the same time, however, she vehemently defends the unsophisticated cultural consumer against the judgment of experts: "A thing may be melodramatic, or any other *atic* that a man pleases; so that it be strongly suggestive, poetic, pathetic, it has a right to its own peculiar place in the world of art" (47). Without specifically taking up the defense of the term, Stowe nevertheless defends the right of an artist to break the "classical" rules of unity and decorum even if it means "being melodramatic." After all, where would "Shakespeare's dramas have been, had he studied the old dramatic unities?" (48).

Stowe's folksy and democratic defense of such a "melodramatic" "moving" picture is typical of the ad hoc nature of many attempts to defend melodrama. While unwilling categorically to defend the word, Stowe nevertheless defends an art of strong pathos and action that recognizes the virtues of suffering victims. Her gesture of disavowing participation in a mode of representation that has been universally condemned as manipulative and spurious but which, in this unique case, seems justified has been frequently repeated by popular artists and critics from Stowe's day to the present. Typically, when an emotionally powerful work is deemed good it is seen to "transcend" melodrama; when not, it is inevitably the melodrama that prevents it from being so. According to this system it is rarely possible to invoke melodrama as the source of a work's power unless this melodrama is judged ironic or what film scholars like to call "Sirkian."[2]

Today, as in the mid-nineteenth century, the word melodrama seems to name an archaic form—what vulgar, naive audiences of yesteryear thrilled to, not what we sophisticated realists and moderns (and postmoderns) enjoy

today. Yet melodrama remains the most accurate name for what all these and many, many more moving pictures do, and melodrama is, in the eyes of most critics who have studied it closely, fundamentally modern. Indeed, melodrama perpetually arises from the ashes of critical disrepute to demand an ad hoc defense of its popular appeal, yet it never quite receives the full description and analysis that its sheer power to move generation after generation warrants. Sometimes, as with Stowe, these ad hoc defenses operate against the classical and neoclassical strictures of good taste and high art in the name of sentiment; sometimes they operate against the values of realism in the name of stylistic "excess." Within the field of cinema studies, a field that will concern us in this chapter, the defense of melodrama has often been marshaled against something that has been called both classical and realist, as in the eminently confusing category "classical realist" cinema.[3]

It is the primary thesis of this chapter that melodrama is neither archaic nor excessive but a perpetually modernizing form that can neither be clearly opposed to the norms of the "classical" nor to the norms of realism. Melodrama, in fact, is precisely what most people mean when, like Stowe, they rise to the defense of "pictures"—whether literal or metaphorical—that move them to powerful sentiments. Only the disrepute of the term has prevented, and still prevents, the categorization of "moving pictures" as melodrama, and the categorization of melodrama as modern.

By what better name, however, shall we refer to those novels, stories, stage plays, movies, songs, and media events that move us to sympathy for the sufferings of the virtuous? I argue that melodrama is still the best, and most accurate, description of the serious narrative and iconic work performed by popular American mass culture, broadly conceived. Melodrama endures not only as an archaic holdover of the nineteenth-century stage play (and its virtuous victims and leering villains) and not only in soap operas and disease-of-the-week TV movies, but as an evolving mode of storytelling crucial to the establishment of moral good.[4]

A corollary thesis to be explored later is that while it is possible to study melodrama as it has evolved in a single medium—as, for example, in the nineteenth-century stage or the twentieth-century film—it may be more appropriate to its dynamic and protean nature to see it as a broad aesthetic mode existing across many media and in certain interpenetrating narrative cycles. Once again, however, Harriet Beecher Stowe can instruct us and lead us into that place in American culture where melodrama has been paramount. When Henry James described Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a "wonderful 'leaping' fish," effortlessly flying from one medium to another. James was evoking a version of the play produced by P. T. Barnum, one of whose set pieces pictured the fleeing mulatta slave Eliza, incarnated by an actress with a memorable "swelling bust," whose flight across the ice of the Ohio River was "intrepidly and gracefully performed." James recalls how "we lived and moved at that

time, with great intensity, in Mrs. Stowe's novel." Yet he also insists that it was not in the novel alone that this intense living and moving took place but in all manner of derivative pictures, exemplified for us by this image of Eliza's flight reproduced on a late-nineteenth-century cigar box (Fig. 1.1). As James explains, for an immense number of people Uncle Tom was "much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness" (James 1941, 159–60). As we shall see in Chapter 2, this "state of vision" and "feeling" was inseparable from an incendiary revolutionary sympathy felt by whites toward the sufferings of blacks.

James's insight about this most important American melodrama of the nineteenth century can be extended to the whole of the melodramatic tradition. Melodrama, too, is a "wonderful 'leaping' fish," reformulating itself as a configuration of "moving pictures" alighting first in one medium, then another, functioning, whether on the page, stage, or screen as "a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness." Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, melodrama "leaps" from one spectacular, popular manifestation to another. Although it can be and has been viewed as a genre, for the purposes of this book it will be best understood as a fundamental mode of popular American "moving pictures." Sentimental novels painted metaphorical pictures of pathos and action that moved readers to strong emotions and occasionally even to action.[5] The melodramatic stage, in contrast, delighted in the construction of literal moving pictures and even found a powerful emotional emphasis in the freezing of these pictures into still tableaux of the narrative's most intense moments. In the twentieth century, the predominant moving pictures before the arrival of television are, of course, "the movies" themselves—pictures that literally move and that move their viewers emotionally in turn. Today, the heritage of moving picture melodrama shapes not only fictional films and television but the media representation of war, athletic competitions, and courtroom trials. These diverse forms of melodrama have moved American readers and audiences throughout the last century and a half of American popular culture to feel for the virtue of some and against the villainy of others.

The goal of this first chapter will be to represent some of the most familiar and recognizable features of a melodramatized media in the twentieth century through an overview of the form of moving pictures with which we are most familiar today: popular American movies. I begin my discussion of melodrama in this chapter with the movies because they represent some of the most accessible examples of American popular culture and because the movies are, as Nicholas Vardac long ago showed, the twentieth-century inheritors of the stage melodrama (Vardac 1949).

Studies of the nineteenth-century stage in France, England, and the United States have established the international existence of an amazingly protean theatrical form that dominated the popular theater and offered a crucial means of "resolving" the many contradictions of modern life.[6] While the

Figure 1.1 Eliza flees with her child over the ice of the Ohio River with slave-catchers and hounds at her heels. (Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Conn.)

study of the melodramatic stage proper has been crucial to the understanding of the importance and reach of melodrama, there is a danger in locating it too firmly on the stage and in the too-far-distant past. Henry James's somewhat condescending memory of Eliza's "swelling bust" as she negotiated the theatrical ice blocks is a case in point. Melodrama is often referred to as occupying the childhood of the nation, or, as in the case of James, the childhood of

individual readers or viewers. Yet as Peter Brooks's study of the melodramatic imagination of James's own fiction has shown, melodrama does not reside in any essential way in the theater, and it can often be found in works, such as those of James, otherwise thought to represent the height of subtlety and psychological realism. I will have much to say in the next chapter about the specifically melodramatic theatrical tradition that reigned supreme in American popular culture in a wide variety of forms from the 1820s through the 1870s. It would be a mistake, however, to perceive a form as contemporaneously vital and adaptable as melodrama as only a reprise of the supposedly archaic emotional forms of the nineteenth-century stage. If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering, then the operative mode is melodrama.[7] The kind of novelistic, theatrical, or cinematic realism that introduces the look and feel of real city streets, contemporary social problems, or more complex psychological motives is perfectly compatible with what needs to be regarded as an ever-modernizing melodrama.

Consider the case of the 1996 Olympics, whose reporting by NBC may well prove to be a landmark in the contemporary melodramatization of American sports. In these Olympics, as many commentators have remarked, the story was not only in the (time-delayed) presentation of the action of competition, but in the way that action combined with the pathos of each athlete's story of overcoming adversity. Swimmer Tom Dolan did not just swim a terrific 400-meter individual medley; the action of that competition was combined in the NBC coverage with the pathos of the much-publicized fact that his asthma gave him much less oxygen than other swimmers. Gymnast Kerri Strug did not just perform a great vault to push the U.S. women's gymnastic team to victory; she landed in great pain on an injured leg and attempted to overcome that pain with a smile. This "vault over adversity" would come to be called the "defining moment" of the whole games (as seen from a certain U.S.-centric, melodramatic point of view). Another such "defining moment" occurred when former heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali overcame the adversity of his mute, Parkinson's-afflicted body to light the Olympic flame and become, in dramatic contrast to his once defiant, anti-mainstream politics, everybody's favorite American.

Although many "pure" sports lovers objected to this emotional "feminization" of the Olympics—not to mention the feminization of a once super-macho black nationalist—the astronomical ratings won many nonpurists, especially women, to the spectacle.[8] If the form of melodrama was old and familiar, recognizable as a cliché to all, NBC had nevertheless succeeded in applying pathos to realms of action that made an old form seem new. Something of the same kind of novelty was at work, I suspect, when Henry James encountered the melodramatic "moving picture" of a maiden in distress in

Uncle Tom's Cabin.[9] The cliché was hardly new, even to James's "small boy." What was new, however, was its novel object of sympathy: not simply the conventional maiden-in-distress of melodrama, but a mulatta slave escaping bondage. This sympathy for another grounded in the manifestation of that person's suffering is arguably a key feature of all melodrama.[10] Here again, however, we find melodrama modernizing and renewing itself with new objects of sympathy embedded within new social problems, new contexts for pathos and action, and new media. We should not be fooled, then, by James's nostalgic memories of the quaint features of the mode into thinking that melodrama itself is passé. Though its roots are in the theater, melodrama exceeds the limits of the theatrical. Its genius lies in its protean ability to "leap" across centuries and media, to make jaded readers, audiences, and viewers thrill to ever new forms of pathos and action.

"Classical" Cinema vs. Melodrama

In the field of film studies melodrama has often been regarded as a genre, or subgroup of films, situated within the larger film style called variously "classical" Hollywood or "classical realist" cinema. In this field, melodrama has rather consistently been characterized as a narrow and particular exception to the "classical" norm, either in its emotional and scenic "excesses" or in its peculiar address to female audiences. Further specified into subcategories of melodrama known as "women's films," "weepies," and "family melodramas," melodrama has not been viewed, as I wish to see it here, in its more general and pervasive operation as a mode of representation with a particular moralizing function operating across many genres. Thus film critics have tended to establish a rigid polarity between, on the one hand, bourgeois, classical realist (often masculine) "norms" and, on the other hand, anti-realist, melodramatic (often feminine) "excesses."[11] One problem with this approach is that it defines melodrama in opposition to a cinematic "classicism" that quickly evaporates under close scrutiny.[12] The generic category of melodrama has been so consistently identified in recent years with women's concerns that its central relation to what Christine Gledhill has called the "great tradition of humanist realism" was never investigated except as an oppositional excess.[13]

Missing in many of these previous approaches to cinematic melodrama is the sense in which it has been the norm, rather than the exception, of American cinema. American movies, like most forms of popular storytelling, have been popular because of their ability to seem to resolve basic moral contradictions at a mythic level—whether conflicts between garden and civilization typical of the western, or between family-love and ambition-career typical of the biopic, the "family melodrama," and the gangster film.[14] Film critics have often not seen the forest of melodrama—the sense in which all these genres, and many more, partake of a basic melodramatic mode—for the trees of these individual genres. They have not seen the way in which melodrama constitutes the larger cultural mode driving the articulation of specific genres. In a related way, they have also been blinded to the larger entity of melodrama in their concern to distinguish it from realism. We need, as Christine Gledhill (1987, 2000) has urged, a general study of melodrama as a broadly important cultural mode inherited from the nineteenth-century stage, in tension with and transformed by infusions of realism—whether of content or form—yet best understood *as melodrama*.

Melodrama can be viewed, then, not as a genre, an excess, or an aberration, but as what most often typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film, and television when it seeks to engage with moral questions. It is the best example of American culture's (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue. If we want to confront the centrality of melodrama to American moving-picture culture, we must first turn to the most basic forms of melodrama, and not, as many feminist critics—myself included—have previously done, to a ghetto subgenre of "women's films."[15] Rather, we must seek out the dominant features of an American melodramatic mode. For if melodrama has been classified in film studies as a sentimental genre for women, it is partly because other melodramatic genres, for example the western and gangster films that received early legitimacy in film study, had already been constructed, as Christine Gledhill notes, in relation to supposedly masculine cultural values (1987, 35).

Narrative cinema as a whole has been theorized as a realist, inherently masculine medium whose "classical" features were supposedly anathema to its melodramatic infancy and childhood. Thus, while narrative silent cinema has always been recognized as melodrama at some level, the "essential" art and language of cinema has not. Melodrama has been viewed either as that which the "classical" cinema has grown up out of, or that to which it sometimes regresses. However, as Gledhill notes, well into the sound era, industrial exhibition categories continued to assert the melodramatic base of most genres. The names of these categories are themselves revealing: western melodrama, crime melodrama, sex melodrama, backwoods melodrama, romantic melodrama, and so on. (Gledhill 1987, 35).[16] What is striking in the above examples is the way the noun *melodrama* functions to denote a certain form of exciting, sensational, and, above all, moving story that could then be further differentiated by more specifications of setting or milieu and/or genre. It is this basic sense of melodrama as a modality of narrative with a high quotient of pathos and action to which we need to attend if we are to confront its most fundamental appeal.

Perhaps the most influential work contributing to the understanding of melodrama as a vital cultural form has been Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, James and the Mode of Excess*. Brooks offers a valuable

appreciation of the historical origins of the nineteenth-century melodramatic project. This appreciation is still the best grounding for an understanding of its carryover into twentieth-century mass culture. Brooks takes melodrama seriously as a quintessentially modern (though not modernist) mode. He sees it arising historically out of a "post-sacred" world where traditional imperatives of truth and morality had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need to forge some semblance of truth and morality (Brooks 1976, 15). Brooks's central thesis is that the quest for a hidden moral legibility is crucial to all melodrama. In the absence of a traditional moral and social order linked to the sacred, and in the presence of a reduced private and domestic sphere that has increasingly become the entire realm of personal significance, a theatrical form of sensation developed that carried the burden of expressing what Brooks calls the "moral occult"—"the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality" (Brooks 1996, 5).[17]

The theatrical function of melodrama's big sensation scenes was to be able to put forth a moral truth in gesture and picture that could not be fully spoken in words. Brooks interestingly shows, in fact, that the rise of melodrama was linked to the ban on speech in unlicensed French theaters, which originally turned to pantomime as a more powerful and direct form of communication.[18] Typically the "unspeakable" truth revealed in the sensation scene is the revelation of who is the true villain, and who the innocent victim, of some plot. The revelation occurs as a spectacular, moving sensation. That is, it is felt as sensation, and not simply registered as ratiocination in the cause-effect logic of narrative, because it shifts to a different register of signification, often bypassing language altogether. Music, gesture, pantomime, and, I would add, most forms of sustained physical action are the elements of these sensational effects most familiar to us today in film, television, and musical theater.[19]

Despite the fact that Brooks's study works hard to give melodrama its due, rather than to treat it as failed tragedy or as realism manque, his subtitle, *The Mode of Excess*, betrays the sense in which it is seen as a deviation from more "classical" realist norms. "Excess" for Brooks is ultimately the triumph of desire over reality, "a plenitude of meaning" that restores melodramatic subjects to a fullness of expression. As in the psychoanalytic theory that serves as his ultimate model of melodrama, the payoff is in the final ability of the mode to speak the unspeakable, to express the inexpressible, even in novelists with realist reputations like Balzac and James.

Adapting Brooks, Christine Gledhill has argued that melodrama typically seizes upon the social problems of everyday reality—problems such as illegitimacy, slavery, racism, labor struggles, class division, disease, nuclear annihilation, genocide. All the afflictions and injustices of the modern post-enlightenment have been dramatized in melodramatic form. Part of the excitement of the mode is the genuine turmoil and timeliness of the issues it takes up and

the popular debate it can generate when it explores controversies not yet placed on the agenda of liberal humanism. Thus melodrama differs from realism in its will to force the status quo to yield signs of moral legibility within the limits of the "ideologically permissible," even as it builds upon genuine social concerns (Gledhill 1987, 38). The French, of course, have a long tradition of classical tragedy which led them to believe that the "norms" of literature and theater are antithetical to melodrama. Americans, however, have a very different set of norms. Whether we look at the novelistic romances of Hawthorne, Stowe, or Twain, the popular theater of David Belasco, George Aiken, Augustin Daly, or Dion Boucicault, the silent films of D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, or Frank Borzage, the sound films of John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, or James Cameron, the most common thread running through them is not simply a lack of realism or an "excess" of sentiment, but the combined function of realism, sentiment, spectacle, and action in effecting moral legibility. Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Stowe's Uncle Tom, Twain's Jim and Huck, Ford's searcher, Spielberg's E.T., Elliot, and Schindler, and Cameron's Rose and Jack all share the common function of revealing moral good in a world where virtue has become hard to read.

The bad reputation of melodrama in American popular culture derives, like the derision of the "cultivated artist" who deplored Harriet Beecher Stowe's taste, from the sense that such emotional displays of virtue necessarily cheapen a more stoical (and sternly masculine) morality. Ann Douglas's (1977) study of nineteenth-century American culture, for example, traces the long process by which a rigorous Calvinist morality was supplanted by what she views as a cheaply sentimental "feminization" of American culture carried out by ministers and lady novelists. Using Little Eva's death in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as her melodramatic touchstone, Douglas argues that a wholesale debasement of American culture took place in the idealization of feminine qualities of piety, virtue, and passive suffering. Douglas opposes a popular literature of "excessive" feminine sentimentalism to a high canonical literature—Melville, Thoreau, Whitman—that was masculine and active but never fully popular. Her study of the feminization of nineteenth-century American culture is a study of how a masculine "high" culture was feminized and degraded. Douglas thus blames the increased anti-intellectualism and consumerism of American culture on a facile cultural feminism.

Rather than blame the excesses of a feminizing melodrama, however, we need to investigate the reasons for its popularity: the search for moral legibility in an American context that was increasingly unattainable in the belief system of Calvinist election. We need also to recognize that melodrama is only in some of its manifestations an exclusively sentimental, feminine form. The sensationalism of which it partakes can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon by which sensational pathos *and* action—the sufferings of innocent victims *and* the exploits of brave heroes or monstrous criminals—become the focus

of cultural attention. Karen Halttunen has shown, for example, that the rise of sensational accounts of crime in American culture in the early nineteenth century was the result of a shift that took place once the manifestation of good or evil could no longer be attributed to God's providential power (Halttunen 1998, 47). Where crime, murder, and excruciating suffering had once been explicable as proof of the inherently sinful nature of the human soul and were thus unworthy of detailed attention, new interest developed in the sensational details of pain, suffering, and crime in early nineteenth-century America. Where previously the accounts of sensational incidents had been offered in the form of "execution sermons" interested only in the state of the soul of condemned prisoners on the way to meet their makers, in the early nineteenth century, secular narratives routinely invoked liberal humanist explanations for violent acts that just as routinely failed to understand the deeper mysteries of why crimes were committed. Halttunen argues that in this period sensational, horrifying details were increasingly invoked in place of explanation for the acts of criminals. In place of the religious understanding of the "common sinner," modern secular American culture produced new conventions for the account of lurid, sensational crime. These conventions of sensationalism produced a popular culture fascinated with pain and suffering. Murder narratives increasingly sought, Halttunen argues, not only to report intense excitement and horror, but to incite it in readers of the news (73).

Gothic horror, as we shall see, is the flip side of melodramatic pathos. In the American context the end of Calvinist moral and religious certainty about the power of God and the sinning nature of the human soul gave rise to a modern fascination with, on the one hand, the spectacle of the good person who suffers and, on the other hand, the evil person who creates suffering. Mass culture melodrama and mass culture horror (not to mention the simultaneous rise of mass culture pornography) would prove to be the quintessential modern forms created to fill the void opened up by the loss of religious certainty. There are important gender issues to bring to bear upon all three of these sensational genres, considered *as* genres—most significantly the traditional feminization of the suffering body (Williams 1991). It is clear, however, that "feminization" does little to explain the deeper cultural reasons for the rise of sensationalism in American mass culture in general and the rise of the particular appeal of melodrama as a means to establish a compensatory moral legibility. So while the historical waning of Calvinist morality in America might be seen to function much like the end of the sacred in Brooks's French-based model, it is important to recognize the differences between American sensationalist melodrama and that produced by the French. In a country with a much less established tradition of high art and letters than Europe, it is not surprising that sensationalist melodrama in the United States became so popular. However, while England had Dickens, and France had Hugo—both melodramatists who were also in some sense "great" writers—America had Stowe, a writer who has never been given much credit as a writer. Writing, however, has never been the essence of melodrama. Its sensations are the means to something more important: the achievement of a felt good, the merger—perhaps even the compromise—of morality and feeling into empathically imagined communities forged in the pain and suffering of innocent victims, and in the actions of those who seek to rescue them.

Recent American film scholars have attempted to recuperate emotionality and sensationalism from the status of excess. Tom Gunning, for example, has rehabilitated the term "attraction" in order to address the emotional and sensational side of cinema spectatorship. Gunning borrows the term from Sergei Eisenstein's celebration of spectacles with particularly strong sensual or psychological impact and the ability to aggressively grab and move spectators. The acknowledgment of the existence of a "cinema of attractions" different from the linear narrative of the "classical realist text" has fruitfully called attention to the spectacle side of cinematic visual pleasures in early cinema.[20] However, when the term simply posits the existence of some ideological "other" that "escapes" the dominant ideology of the classical, it remains implicated in the putative dominance of the "classical."[21]

Another film critic to argue for the importance of melodrama is Rick Altman. Questioning a long tradition of film theory and criticism that, ever since Bazin, has described mainstream sound cinema as "classical," Altman ponders the very "classicism" of the classical. Arguing in particular against Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger's notion of an enduring classical tradition of rule-bound invisible storytelling, self-effacing craftsmanship, and causality motivated by character, Altman points out that this description cannot accommodate much of the spectacle, "flagrant" display, showmanship, and "artistic motivation" of melodrama.[22]

The notion that the "classical" Hollywood narrative subordinates spectacle, emotion, and attraction to the logic of personal causality and cause and effect assumes that the "action" privileged by the classical mode is not in itself spectacular. However, we have only to look at what is playing at the local multiplex to realize that the familiar Hollywood feature of prolonged climactic action is, and I would argue has always been, a melodramatic spectacle fully consonant with Gunning's notion of "attraction," and with Altman's notion of "flagrant" display, no matter how goal-driven or embedded within narrative it may be. Indeed, nothing is more sensational in American cinema than the infinite varieties of rescues, accidents, chases, and fights. These "masculine" action-centered climaxes may be scrupulously motivated or wildly implausible depending on the film. While usually faithful to the laws of motion and gravity, this realism of action should not fool us into thinking that the dominant mode of such films is realism. Nor should the virility of action itself fool us into thinking that it is not melodrama.

Altman argues that film scholars have not attended to the popular theater of melodrama as the original sources of these spectacles. He rightly chides film historians and scholars for skipping over theatrical melodramas in their rush to link the emerging film to the realist novel. He also points out that this repression of popular theater has the effect of denying Hollywood cinema its fundamental connection to popular melodramatic tradition. "Unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the existence of a competing logic, a second voice" (Altman 1989, 346). To Altman these "excesses" give evidence of an "embedded melodramatic mode" within the classical (347). He thus sees popular American cinema—which he nevertheless calls classical—as proceeding from a dialectic between a submerged, nondominant, melodrama and a dominant classicism. Thus, like Brooks, Altman too easily cedes to the dominance of the classical, and to melodrama as its excess.

More recently, Ben Singer (2000) has also challenged Bordwell's assertion of the dominance of the classical style with a study of stage and film melodrama's relation to modernity. Focusing exclusively on those films that in the first two decades of film history were actually called melodrama, Singer importantly establishes what others have challenged—the stable existence of melodrama as a coherent genre—a genre with a specific relation to the hallmarks of modern life: urbanization, cultural discontinuity, increased mobility, and sensory complexity.[23] Also, Miriam Hansen recently has questioned the ahistorical, antimodernist tendencies in the term *classical cinema*, suggesting that the very category of the classical verges on anachronism when we are using the term to refer to "a cultural formation that was, after all, perceived as the incarnation of *the modern*" in its methods of industrial production and mass consumption (Hansen 2000, 337). Like Singer, Hansen wants to keep in mind the inherent modernism of cinema—the fact that it was the first mass-based, international, modernist idiom to offer a cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were negotiated. But after a slight hesitation, Hansen, like Altman, retains the term classical, albeit with some qualification.[24] It seems that even those critics who question the totalizing and universalizing nature of the term still hold on to it, despite the fact that it gives us no way to account for the more destabilizing effects of the modern world so important to the cinema.

For years I have held on to the term too, laboring under the impression that the "nonclassical" cinematic forms that have been my particular interest—pornography, horror, melodramas—were simply exceptions to classical norms (Williams 1984, 1991). Now, however, I recognize that these binaries, whether between classical and excess, or classical and modern, or classical and nonclassical, are simply too crude to perform much analytical work. They perpetually relegate the sensational, affective, destabilizing, spectacular, hap-

tic, exciting, and moralizing dimensions of cinema to some kind of deviation from a more "harmonious" "norm."

It is time, then, to make a bolder claim: not that melodrama is a submerged, or embedded, tendency, or genre, within classical realism, but that it has more often itself been the dominant form of popular moving-picture narrative, whether on the nineteenth-century stage, in twentieth-century films or, as we shall explore in the last chapter of this book, in contemporary media events. The emotional content and vivid style regarded as excess, in other words, much more often constitutes the mainstream even as it continues to be perceived as excess. And most important in this mainstream are the entertainment needs of a modern, rationalist, democratic, capitalist, industrial, and now post-industrial society seeking moral legibility under new conditions of moral ambiguity. In other words, the ongoing loss of moral certainty has been compensated for by increasingly sensational, commodified productions of pathos and action.

This is certainly not to say that all popular cinema is dominated by melodrama. But it is to say that the mode of melodrama drives the production of a great variety of familiar film genres. As Christine Gledhill writes, "The success of melodrama lies partly in its heterogeneity, arguably producing a greater variety of genres than its close modal neighbor, comedy, and able, moreover, to draw into its articulation the other dominating modes of contemporary popular culture: comedy, romance, realism" (Gledhill 2000, 235).[25] The mainstream of melodrama is often not acknowledged as such, however, since melodrama consistently decks itself out in the latest trappings of realism in order to command recognition of the world it represents. We need to see, however, that melodrama is the name of the cultural force that, beginning in the nineteenth century, supplied story materials about race, gender, and class already organized into visually compelling forms of pathos and action, already performable in pictures through a system of gesture and demeanor, and already given musical accompaniment on the stage. The melodramatic mode of narrative in American popular culture is thus nothing less than the process whereby melodrama sheds its old-fashioned values, acting styles, and ideologies to gain what Gledhill calls the "imprimatur of 'realism'" (Gledhill 1992, 137).[26]

Suffering and Suffrage[27]

Feminist critic Lauren Berlant has written insightfully about the role of pain and suffering in the construction of American citizenship. In the liberal, Constitutional model of citizenship, a citizen's value is secured through the notion of an abstract personhood protected equally under the law. But since this juridical notion of abstract personhood often fails to provide equal protection

to all citizens, a second model of citizenship has emerged around the visible emotions of suffering bodies that, in the very activity of suffering, demonstrate worth as citizens. In this model, pioneered by abolitionists and feminists of the nineteenth century, and continued in contemporary identity politics, citizenship is paradoxically established not through reason, nor the acquisition of wealth and power, but through "the trumping power of suffering" (Berlant 2000). Manifestations of pain—or what Wendy Brown calls "states of injury" (Brown 1995, 67)—become, in themselves, evidence of a subjectivity worthy of recognition. Uncle Tom, as we shall see in Chapter 2, is the prototypical American mass-culture example of such a "state of injury." His suffering at the hands of Simon Legree confers upon him the eventual right to recognition as a person—if not yet in Stowe's ideology to citizenship proper.

There is every reason to be critical of the manipulations of these forms of "sentimental politics." Like Ann Douglas (1977) before her, Lauren Berlant critiques a culture that grounds the construction of citizenship in channels of affective identification and empathy. She points out that the eradication of pain does not necessarily equate with the achievement of justice. Unlike Douglas, however, Berlant recognizes the seriousness and complexity of what she calls "sentimental politics" (Berlant 2000). Such a politics tends toward climaxes that offer a feeling for, if not the reality of, justice. Melodramatic climaxes that end in the death of a good person—Uncle Tom, Princess Charlotte, Jack Dawson (in *Titanic*)—offer paroxysms of pathos and recognitions of virtue compensating for individual loss of life. But if we persist in calling these paroxysms of pathos sentimental, we relegate them to a realm of passivity that misses the degree to which sentiment enables action. For melodrama—the term that I believe can best encompass both pathos *and* action—can also channel the paroxysm of pathos into the more action-centered variants of the rescue, the chase, and the fight (as in the action genres).

Melodrama, as in our examples of NBC's Olympics, the statue of Princess Charlotte, and the diverging stories of Eliza and Uncle Tom, most typically offers combinations of pathos *and* action. Virtuous sufferer and active hero may be divided into conventional male and female roles or combined in the same person. "Women's film" heroine Stella Dallas, for example, throws herself quite actively into the self-sacrificial task of alienating her daughter's affections. In the film's pathos-filled ending she also physically pushes through the crowd in order to see her daughter's wedding. While such action is hardly thrilling in the manner of male action films, within the more circumscribed realm of action available to women it may seem quite thrilling. On the other hand, Rambo—to cite a stereotypically masculine, action- oriented, example—endures multiple indignities and pathetically suffers in ways that elicit audience empathy before he begins his prolonged rescue-revenge. [28]

Big "sensation" scenes, whether of prolonged "feminine" pathos or prolonged "masculine" action, do not interrupt the logical cause-effect progress of a narrative toward conclusion. More often, it is these spectacles of pathos and action that are served by the narrative's cause-effect. As American melodrama developed from nineteenth-century stage to screen, and from silent movie to sound, it frequently instituted more realistic causations and techniques for the display of pathos and action, but it never ceased to serve the primary ends of displaying both in the service of moral legibility.[29] To study the relation between pathos and action is to see that there is no pure isolation of pathos in woman's films nor of action in the male action genres. For if, as Peter Brooks argues, melodrama is most centrally about being able to read an occulted moral truth, and the assigning of guilt and innocence in a "post sacred," post-Enlightenment, modern world where moral and religious certainties are no longer self-evident, then pathos and action are the two most important means to the achievement of moral legibility.

D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is an excellent early model for this pathos-filled, self-sacrificing side of melodrama, as well as for its racialization. Griffith's feminized Chinese victim-hero proves his virtue by not taking sexual advantage of the waif he befriends. His attempt to save her from the clutches of her brutal father comes too late, however, and in the pathos-filled ending, in which a virtuous heroine in need of rescue does not get saved "in the nick of time," he can only lay out her body and join her in death. Pathos predominates in a range of sad-ending melodramas: in most "women's films," in many "family melodramas," and sad musicals in which song and dance do not save the day—such as *Applause* (1929), *Hallelujah* (1929), *A Star Is Born* (1954, 1976), and in "social problem" films without optimistic endings, such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) or *You Only Live Once* (1937). It also continues in biopics such as *Silkwood* (1983) or *Malcolm X* (1992). In these films victim-heroes, following in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century melodrama's Uncle Tom and Little Eva, achieve recognition of their virtue through the more passive "deeds" of suffering and/or self-sacrifice.

The action side of the melodramatic mode finds its silent cinema prototype in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Way Down East* (1920). It is continued in most of the male action genres—westerns, gangster films, war films, cop films, Clint Eastwood films, as well as happy musicals and social problem films. In these films active victim-heroes either solve problems through action—such as *Salt of the Earth* (1953) or *Norma Rae* (1979)—or are themselves rescued from some fix. The suffering of the victim-hero is important for the establishment of moral legitimacy, but suffering, in these examples, is less extended and ultimately gives way to action. Similarly, the recognition of virtue is at least partially achieved through the performance of some deed. Here pathos mixes with other emotions—suspense, fear, anxiety, anger, laughter, and so on—experienced in the rescues, chases, gunfights, fistfights, or spaceship fights of the various action genres.

Westerns, war films, and Holocaust films, no less than women's films, family melodramas, and biopics thus participate, along with any drama whose outcome is the recognition of virtue, in the long-playing tradition of American melodrama.[30] We do well, then, to shift our critical gaze from the often superficial coherence of specific genres with their familiar costumes, locales, and themes, toward the deeper coherence of melodrama. Of course, we may still rail at the simplification and obfuscation of melodrama; we can regret the absence of moral ambiguity in the "solutions" posed to the problems of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and disability; we can criticize the perverse location of moral power in the role of victims; but even as we note all limitations of the mode we need to recognize that it is in ever-modernizing forms of melodrama—not epic drama, not "classical realism"—that American democratic culture has most powerfully articulated the moral structure of feeling animating its goals of justice.

Typical Melodrama: The Case of *Way Down East*

"Every discussion of film should begin with Griffith." Jean-Luc Godard's famous advice to the student of cinema derives from the fact that the art and technique of the "first author" and "father" of film is often equated with the art and technique of "the movies" themselves. This advice is all the more pertinent if the goal in discussing film is to determine the significance of melodrama to popular moving-image culture. Griffith's reputation as "father" of film was established by an influential first generation of film historians and scholars as that which not only grew out of, but also outgrew, the more "infantile" and "primitive" form of stage melodrama.[31] In the rest of this chapter I will counter this tendency with an attempt to articulate what is typical, and typically melodramatic, about one of D. W. Griffith's most popular and familiar films, *Way Down East* (1920). I choose this film because of its status as a well-loved, enduringly popular example of the American silent cinema, and because it has obvious roots in the American melodramatic stage. When Griffith announced he was making this film he was laughed at for reviving a "horse and buggy melodrama" already considered past resuscitation (Gish 1969, 229). He surprised everyone with the viability of the hoary material in what was to be his last truly popular film. My point about this viability is the same as my point about the melodramatic mode: it is not the transcendence of melodrama to which we should attend, but its forms of revitalization. In what follows I undertake the obvious, but oddly neglected task of situating *Way Down East* as a melodrama, and, by extension, melodrama itself as a basic mode of American moving pictures.[32] In order to suggest the ways in which popular American cinema is still, *mutatis mutandis*, melodrama, I will supplement this discussion with a somewhat briefer comparison of

James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), a film whose ability to excite and move audiences and critics who, like Griffith's, thought they knew better is typical of the way the power of melodrama continually takes its audiences and critics by surprise. Like *Way Down East*, *Titanic* has been acknowledged to be melodramatic by its supporters and detractors alike. Yet as with Griffith's film, its critics have usually moved on to peg its appeal to other elements—in this case the genre of disaster genre, historical romance, and the techniques of spectacular special effects—without first considering the framework that holds them all together.

Another reason for examining Griffith's film is that, unlike some of his earlier, more controversial, racially based melodramas—most significantly *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), but also many of the early Biograph films—*Way Down East* allows an investigation into some of the primary, and enduring, features of melodrama without the added complication of racist stereotyping. Although we will pursue the way the melodramatic mode has shaped the controversies of race and gender in American popular culture in the following chapters, for the moment in order to be as clear as possible about what a typical melodrama is, let us investigate the simpler case of a popular silent melodrama of gender and class and its end-of-the-millennium parallel.

Way Down East is a 1920 film adaptation of Lottie Blair Parker and Joseph Grismer's popular stage melodrama first performed in 1898 under that title. This play was itself an adaptation of Parker's play of 1896 called *Annie Laurie*. All versions tell the story of Anna, a poor country girl who goes to the city to claim help from rich relations. There an aristocratic cad tricks her into a mock marriage and leaves her pregnant. The baby dies soon after birth and a destitute Anna finds work on a New England farm. However, when the farm's stern squire learns that Anna has had a child out of wedlock, he expels her from his house in the middle of a blizzard. His son, David, then rescues her from the storm. Both versions of the play begin with Anna arriving at the farm, a woman with a secret. The story of her pregnancy and the death of the child only comes out when the villain, Sanderson, encounters Anna at the farm.

Griffith altered the play by telling the story of Anna from the beginning. He shows her domestic life with her mother; her trip to the big city where she is ridiculed by female cousins, elegantly decked out by an eccentric aunt, then seduced into a fake marriage by the suave villain. One of the most moving scenes in the film is also a Griffith "invention"—though actually one freely borrowed from Thomas Hardy's 1891 novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: Anna's baptism of her dying baby.[33]

What, then, are the key melodramatic qualities of this film that can be applied to the melodramatic mode as a whole? I will isolate five features drawn from the previous discussion of melodrama, some of them adapted from Peter

Brooks's seminal study. These features will prove useful touchstones for understanding melodrama throughout the rest of this book. Each of these features was significantly modernized by Griffith from the stage melodrama and is further modernized in Cameron's *Titanic*. Each will be seen to be central to the racial melodrama that constitutes the rest of this study. And in each case I will connect the now "hoary" example of Griffith's film to a recent example, James Cameron's eleven-Oscar, all-time highest-grossing film.

Home: Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a "space of innocence." Peter Brooks (1995, 29) notes that while tragedy usually begins at a moment of crisis and proceeds to the fall, classic stage melodrama usually begins by offering a moment of virtue taking pleasure in itself. Gardens and rural homes are the stereotypical icons of such innocence. Melodrama seizes upon the icon of a home with which to figure this innocence. Uncle Tom's "Old Kentucky Home" is a key icon in the melodramas of black and white we will soon engage. The narrative proper usually begins when the villain intrudes upon this idyllic space. The narrative then ends happily if the protagonists can, in some way, return to this home, unhappily if they do not. It is not necessary that the space of innocence be an actually realized, pre-lapsarian garden. Uncle Tom's cabin (see Fig. 2.1, 2.8) or the carefree revels of the innocents in the steerage of the Titanic are cases in point. Both are fragile and fleeting spaces of innocence and freedom embedded within larger corrupt social orders: chattel slavery in the first instance, a class system that will only provide sufficient lifeboats for first-class passengers in the second. Even if this space is not literally represented, and the narrative cannot begin there, even if it has never been possessed, the most enduring forms of the mode are often suffused with nostalgia for a virtuous place that we like to think we once possessed, whether in childhood or the distant past of the nation.

The beginning of *Way Down East* is emblematic: Anna (Lillian Gish) performs household tasks, sews with her mother; and plays with a puppy. In Gish's girlish performance she is the perfect example of what Brooks calls innocence "taking pleasure in itself" (69). The pleasure, however, is momentary. When Anna is compelled to visit the big city in search of rich relations, she encounters the feminine antithesis of the original space of innocence: the decadent city where New Women with bobbed hair slink about in low-cut gowns. After she is similarly decked out by an eccentric aunt, Anna catches the eye of the villain, Lennox Sanderson (Lowell Sherman), and is seduced and abandoned. Later, finding work at the farm of Squire Bartlett, she encounters a second rural haven and a second mother in the squire's wife. The melodramatic climax of her rescue from the raging torrent of an icy river will finally restore Anna to this substitute home. *Way Down East* is thus a happy-ending melodrama that regains the space of innocence with which it began, ending in a three-way marriage between all eligible couples. But the final kiss is not between any of the heterosexual couples but instead between the two mothers—Anna and Mrs. Bartlett—who represent a restoration of the original innocence of the mother-daughter "space of innocence" of the film's beginning.

Titanic, too, offers a restoration of innocence even though its male hero, unlike Anna, is not rescued in time from the icy waters that become his grave. In this case, his embrace of life lives on in the person of Rose and makes nostalgia for the doomed ship a viable structure of feeling by the film's end. At the very end of *Titanic*, the happy ending that parallels the double wedding of *Way Down East*, is Rose's dream of a resuscitated ship restored magically from present wreck to past glory. In this depiction of glory, Jack in his humble clothes greets Rose in elegant attire on the grand staircase of the "ship of dreams." Surrounding them are rich and poor passengers mingled promiscuously in a kind of curtain call that recognizes the virtue of the democratic romantic couple against the evil of class division and separation. The very class-based grandiosity that made a ship like the Titanic possible in the first place is thus denied in this final image of the "ship of dreams."

Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and on recognizing their virtue. Recognition of virtue orchestrates the moral legibility that is key to melodrama's function. Thomas Elsaesser (1975, 86) argues that a characteristic feature of melodrama is its concentration on "the point of view of the victim." One of the reasons Elsaesser privileges fifties family melodrama as the "genre's" quintessential form is the tendency for these films to "present *all* the characters convincingly as victims" (86), but just as melodrama needs a home as its locus of innocence, it needs a victim whose visible suffering transmutes into proof of virtue.[34] The key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode, for if virtue is not obvious, suffering—often depicted as the literal suffering of an agonized body—is. The suffering body caught up in paroxysms of mental or physical pain can be male or female, but suffering itself is a form of powerlessness that is coded feminine. Of course the transmutation of bodily suffering into virtue is a topos of western culture that goes back to Christian iconography. I shall be arguing in the next chapter that the "Christian passion" of death on the cross carried special weight in American melodrama through its importation via Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery appeal in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The American variant of melodrama was thus invested, from the mid-1850s on, in the iconographic display of passionate suffering of a feminized, if not feminine, body. Even happy-ending melodramas are heavily invested in displays of bodily suffering as the means to the recognition of virtue. Indeed, the happy ending dramatic outcome that is often derided as the most unrealistic element of the mode—the reward of virtue—is only a secondary manifestation of the more important *recognition* of virtue in a world in which such recognition is not obvious. Virtue can be recognized through suffering alone, or in the action variants of melodrama by suffering that calls for deeds.

In stage melodrama, the moment of recognition is often the classic theatrical tableau used at the ends of scenes to offer a concentrated summing up of and punctuation for the tensions of the whole act. Peter Brooks points to a moment in *La Fille de l'exilé* when evil tartars fall down on their knees before a virtuous Siberian girl. In such theatrical tableaux the actors would move into a held "picture," sometimes self-consciously imitating existing paintings or engravings. The tableau was used theatrically as a silent, bodily expression of what words could not fully say. It was also a way of crystallizing the dramatic tensions within a scene and of musically prolonging their emotional effects. The sustained close-up of a character's prolonged reaction to some dramatic news before the cut to commercial in soap opera is the contemporary inheritor of this tradition adapted to the needs of commercial interruption.

In *Way Down East* the recognition of Anna's virtue takes place in the sugar shack after her climactic rescue from the ice when first Sanderson, then the squire, ask her forgiveness. In *Titanic*, Jack's virtue is most fully recognized as he tells Rose, even as he himself freezes, that she must promise to survive and go on to make "lots of babies." In both cases the victim-hero's virtue is initially misrecognized—as when Squire Bartlett "names" Anna as an unwed mother and as when Cal Haukley "names" Jack a thief after planting a diamond in his pocket.

The astonishment that typically follows the misrecognition of virtue enhances the tension of establishing female virtue in *Way Down East* and male virtue in *Titanic*. For Anna *is* the unwed mother named by the squire, and Jack, if not an actual thief, *is* the low-class interloper who has painted Rose in the nude. Both films thus need their victim-heroes to suffer in order to purge them of the taint of selfish ambition. The final and full recognition of virtue will not take place, in Anna's case, until she receives the apology of both the squire, who had condemned her as a fallen woman, and Sanderson, who had wronged her in the first place. It will not take place in Jack's case until the aged Rose tells the world the many ways this man has rescued her. In both cases, a climactic rescue from icy water—rescue that occurs either too late (Jack) or in the nick of time (Anna)—proves crucial. But just how such exciting climaxes enable the recognition of virtue cannot be explained without a discussion of the phenomenon of melodramatic timing in the following section.

Melodrama's recognition of virtue involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of "too late" and "in the nick of time." We have seen that pathos is not the only emotional note sounded by melodrama. However, pathos is crucial, and even in happy-ending action melodramas there is tension between the paroxysm of pathos and the exhilaration of action. Franco Moretti (1983) is one of very few critics to analyze the phenomenon of crying in response to "moving literature."[35] Moretti writes not about melodrama, but about what might be called a particularly melodramatic form of Italian boys' fiction. Perhaps because it is about boys' literature, the essay does not spend too much time worrying about the "excess" femininity of tears. Instead, Moretti notes the vast literature on what makes for the somatic response of laughter and the paucity of literature on the response of tears. Setting out to be for tears what Bergson was for laughter, Moretti ventures an explanation connected, like Bergson's, to temporality: we cry when we recognize that something is lost and cannot be regained. Time is the ultimate object of loss; we cry at the irreversibility of time. We cry at funerals, for example, because it is then that we know, finally and forever, that it is "too late" (Moretti 1983, 159–62).

Moretti borrows the rhetorical term "agnition"—the resolution of a clash between two mutually opposed points of view—as the key "moving" device in the stories he discusses (161–62). He argues that the precise trigger to crying occurs at the moment when agnition reduces the tension between desire and reality: e.g., it is too late for the father to make amends to his dying son, so he cries. The tension ends, according to Moretti, because desire is finally shown to be futile. When we let go of this desire the sadness that results is also a paradoxical kind of relief. Tears can thus be interpreted, Moretti argues, as both an homage to the desire for happiness and the recognition that it is lost. Hence tears are always a kind of false consciousness, released, hypocritically as it were, when it is already too late. But Moretti also notes that tears at least acknowledge that in this sad reconciliation with the world, something important has been lost (180).

It is this feeling of loss that is crucial to crying's relation to melodrama. A melodrama does not have to contain multiple scenes of pathetic death. What counts is the feeling or threat of loss suffused throughout the form, the sense that something has, as one of our later racial melodramas will put it, "gone with the wind," and the imagination of a loss that is not normally spoken. Audiences may weep or not weep, but the sense of a loss that implicates readers or audiences is central. And with this feeling of "too late," suspenseful time and timing become all-important.

In an adaptation of Moretti's thesis to film melodrama, Steve Neale suggests that in practice we do not cry just when it *is* too late, we cry even in happy-ending melodrama, out of the desire that it *not* be too late. Happy-ending melodramas can move us to tears, Neale explains, when, hope against hope, desire is fulfilled, and time is defeated. In these cases—he cites *The Big Parade* (1925), *Only Yesterday* (1933) and *Yanks* (1979) as examples; I would cite *Way Down East* (1920), *Rambo* (1985), *Schindler's List* (1993), and *Titanic* (1997)—Neale argues that we cry because we fulfill an infantile fantasy that on some level we know is infantile and fantastic (Neale 1986, 8).

Neale thus explains psychoanalytically the pleasurable tears of the happy-ending and sad-ending melodrama: crying is a demand for satisfaction that can never be satisfied, yet tears sustain and express the fantasy that it can.

However, if the pathos of tears derives from the knowledge of loss, and if what is lost is ultimately time itself—our connection to the lost time of innocence—then we need to examine the timing of the relation between the pathos of lost time and the action that sometimes regains it.

Moretti argues that a key element of "moving literature" occurs when what one character knows is reconciled with what another knows, but "too late." In death scenes, for example, tears unite us, not to the victim who dies, but to the survivors who recognize the irreversibility of time (Moretti 1983, 179). For example, in the pathetic scene of the death of Anna's baby, we see an example of Moretti's agnition played out when Anna's desire to believe that her baby is merely cold comes into conflict with her suspicion, and the doctor's certainty, that her baby is dead. When Anna hears this news, so Moretti would say, the discrepancy between her and the doctor's point of view is reconciled; tension is released and at this point, Anna, and we, can cry. We have seen above, however, how the powerlessness of tears that flow too late can be the proof of a virtue that, at another point in the narrative, can give moral authority to action. Both Moretti and Neale note that tears are a product of powerlessness. It seems to me, however, that if tears are an acknowledgment of a hope that desire will be fulfilled then they are also a source of future power; indeed, they are almost an investment in that power. The pathos of suffering thus not only ensures virtue, but also seems to entitle action. Let us see how this works in *Way Down East* by turning again to the climactic scene of astonishment that precedes the famous rescue from the ice.

Wronged by the upper-class villain Sanderson but silenced by his power throughout the bulk of the film, Gish's Anna is forced to serve Sanderson as a guest in the home of the family that has taken her in. But she cannot speak of his wrong to her because of the double standard that would shame her more than him. It is only when a busybody gossip reveals what all believe to be her sexual taint that she is forced into action—to name Sanderson as her seducer.

This naming of the villain, which occurs in both the stage play and film, is Anna's big moment of action before throwing herself out into the snowstorm. It is well earned by her many earlier moments of silent pathos, which the audience, but none of the other characters, has been able to appreciate. Our tension mounts as we await this long-wished-for and equally long-delayed "nomination" of the guilty villain. But nomination is only a first step; it is not yet an achieved and public recognition of her virtue and his villainy. For this recognition to really work the film must move from pathos to action and from the tears that pay homage to "too late" to a rescue that is "in the nick of time."

We are so familiar with the "in the nick of time" rescue of the happy-ending melodrama that we take its seemingly facile effects for granted. Popular criticism will often praise the effective direction of such scenes.[36] In a famous appreciation of Griffith's melodrama, V. I. Pudovkin has noted that Anna's

ordeal is in three stages: "First the snowstorm, then the foaming, swirling river in thaw, packed with ice blocks that rage yet wilder than the storm, and finally the mighty waterfall, conveying the impression of death itself. . . . This harmony—the storm in the human heart and the storm in the frenzy of nature—is one of the most powerful achievements of the American genius" (Pudovkin 1970, 129).

Each of these stages of Anna's ordeal, intercut with David's (Richard Barthelmess) painfully delayed pursuit, increases our sense of her helplessness (Fig. 1.2). Yet the very investment of film time in the detailing of the different stages of the ordeal provides the counter "hope-against-hope" for her rescue. David's last-minute capture of Anna's body at the very last moment before she and he plummet over the falls has been seen as an unrealistic heroic exploit saved by the beauty and power of the natural elements that form its context, as well as by the device of parallel montage. Because some of the best appreciations of Griffith's editing come from Soviet directors, American critics have often seen Griffith's melodrama through the lens of what it might have become had Griffith been able to transcend, as Eisenstein wished, the "Dickensian [read melodramatic] limits" of his montage. Eisenstein cites this rescue to fault the lack of unity between the race of the ice break and the race of David to the rescue, accusing the film of not becoming the human flood that Pudovkin's *Mother* becomes (Eisenstein 1949, 235). In effect, both Eisenstein and Pudovkin laud the technique of parallel montage but fault the rescue itself as an intrinsically hokey outcome, a product of dualistic thinking in which "reconciliation" is hypothetical wish fulfillment. If rescue as unrealistic reconciliation is ideologically flawed, especially from a Soviet perspective, this same Soviet perspective calls attention to temporal, rhythmic elements that make Griffith, and by extension American action melodrama, an effective manipulator of audience response.

There is still a need, however, for a better understanding of these temporal and rhythmic elements on their own, melodramatic, terms. To watch a last-minute rescue—whether of Anna from the ice, of American P.O.W.'s from the Vietnamese prison in *Rambo*, of the women prisoners from Auschwitz in *Schindler's List*—is to feel time in two contradictory ways. Although a rapid succession of shots specifying the physical danger gives the effect of speed, of events happening extremely fast, the parallel cutting between the breaking ice, David's pursuit, Anna's unconscious body, and the churning falls prolongs time beyond all possible belief. Actions *feel* fast, and yet the ultimate duration of the event is retarded. We are moved in both directions at once in a contradictory hurry-up and slow-down. The effect is to propel events into the future while insisting on the continued reminder of the past pathos of "too late." However, often if a film invests too much time in suspenseful delays that enhance the effect of the "in-the-nick-of-time" rescue, it cannot then convincingly revert to the pathos of "too late" in the end. Paradoxically, it is as if the

Figure 1.2 Anna freezes on the ice, suffering as David attempts a painfully delayed rescue. (*Way Down East*, D. W. Griffith, 1920, Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

more the temporal prolongation of suspense builds, the more sure we can be that this investment of time will have a successful outcome.

If and when a film moves to the fast-paced register of suspenseful action, we experience enormous relief from the constant repetition of loss. Exhilarated, we are caught up in the physical logic, one might even say the physics, of time and space. But this exhilaration does not progress linearly. Whether

in stage melodrama's episodic "cutting" back and forth between endangered heroine, and pursuing hero, or the film melodrama's cross- cut editing, we encounter an intensely rhythmic tease whose core question is melodramatic: will we ever get back to the time before it is too late? Only the teasing, suspenseful retardation of the outcome, constantly threatening that it must by now, certainly, be too late, permits the viewers felt acceptance of the fantasy that it is not.

This teasing delay of the forward-moving march of time has not been sufficiently appreciated as basic to the cinematic application of theatrical melodrama.[37] Nor has it been appreciated as an effect that cinema realized more powerfully than stage or literary melodrama. As suggested above, it needs to be linked with melodrama's larger impulse to reverse time, to return to the time of origins and the space of innocence that can musically be felt in terms of patterns of anticipation and return. The original pattern—whether of melody, key, rhythm, or of physical space and time—thus takes on a visceral sort of ethics.[38] They are a form of somatic knowledge, *felt* as good. The "main thrust" of melodramatic narrative, for all its flurry of apparent linear action, is thus actually to get back to what *feels* like the beginning.

Melodrama offers the hope, then, that it may not be too late, that there may still be an original locus of virtue, and that this virtue and truth can be achieved in private individuals and individual heroic acts rather than, as Eisenstein wanted, in revolution and change. For these reasons the prolonged play with time and timing so important to the last-minute rescue should not be attributed to the linear cause-effect outcome of classical realism or to the naturalism of scenery, sets, or acting. The rescue, chase, or fight that defies time, and that occupies so much time in the narrative, is the desired mirror reversal of the defeat by time in the pathos of "too late."

The physical "realism" of this climax, so devoted to convincing viewers of the reality of the material forces that combine to make the victim-hero suffer, so little concerned with the plausibility of their implementation, is thus inherent to its melodrama. At its deepest level melodrama is thus an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast. This may be why the spectacular essence of melodrama seems to rest in those moments of temporal prolongation when "in the nick of time" defies "too late."

Titanic offers an interesting '90s revision of the gendered convention of active male hero rescuing a passive heroine "in the nick of time." In this case, the failure of all but one of the twenty lifeboats full of survivors to come to the rescue of the passengers immersed in the icy water after the ship's sinking represents a manifestly class-based victimization, a rescue that is definitively "too late" for the vast majority of victims. Jack Dawson, without life jacket and immersed, freezes while aiding Rose, with life jacket and partially above water. In the process, however, repeating the rescue he effected at the beginning of the film, he passes his masculine virtue and energy onto Rose. Rose, we are

meant to understand, will henceforth live her life as an independent woman freed from the classed and gendered prison that had made the supposed "ship of dreams" a "slave ship" for her. Thus Rose is rescued from her gendered and class-based exploitation as chattel in a loveless marriage, even as the brutal class system that will only rescue the "better half" of the passengers kills Jack. Jack's own death is nevertheless redeemed by the will to live that he passes on to Rose. When the lone lifeboat finally does appear, "too late" to rescue all but a few survivors, Rose severs the death grip of Jack's frozen hand, paradoxically recognizing that it is through her will to live that she will "never let go" of him. She then calls for help and is rescued. The rescue that was "too late" for Jack is "in the nick of time" for Rose. Through a sleight of hand typical of melodrama, we morally condemn the class system that kills so many poor passengers yet feel good about the rescue that will permit Rose—an upper-class heroine now properly identified with the déclassé poor—to live free. What is rescued, in the end, is not only the individual victim-hero, but the memory of the Titanic as a "ship of dreams," despite the class-crime that failed to rescue so many of the poorer passengers. Here too, the melodramatic narrative recovers, like the explorers probing the wreck of the doomed ship, the virtue of a lost past.

Melodrama does not always move, then, toward a new future; very often it moves to restore some semblance of a lost past. To this degree melodrama can be considered an inherently conservative and backward-looking form even as it progressively tackles basic problems of social inequity. Consider, for example, how Anna's rescue from the ice functions as much to restore the virtue of the beginning as it does to imagine a new society at the end. We have seen that just before she runs out into the storm, Anna "nominates" Sanderson as the villain. This nomination produces astonishment, but it does not produce the public recognition of Anna's virtue. Her guilt remains in the eyes of a patriarchal status quo that the film does not directly confront. Yet somehow the snowstorm of the play and the snowstorm and ordeal on the ice of the film eradicate this guilt and make possible the final denouement that not only recognizes, but actually restores, Anna's innocence.

Why is this recognition only possible after the rescue on the ice? How does the in-the-nick-of-time rescue function to solve the problem of Anna's sexual guilt in the eyes of the stern patriarch? To answer we need to realize that what is at stake in the rescue is much more than Anna's and David's lives. At stake is the viability of the patriarchal law that has more harshly blamed the unwed mother than the man who seduced her for sexual misconduct, and that is therefore, at least technically, allied with the villain. Indeed, if any work of Griffith's deserved to be called *The Mother and the Law*—the title of the modern sequence of his 1916 film *Intolerance*—it is this one.

When David saves Anna from the icy river and waterfall, he also saves the system that has so harshly expelled her. He tempers his father's law with

his mother's love, saving the patriarchal family from casting out the maternal figure of love capable of tempering its stern law. He is able to do so, however, precisely because at this moment it is no longer the villain, nor even his father, who endangers Anna but instead the icy river. We have seen how Griffith's use of these natural elements have been praised as transcending melodrama and yet falling back into it. I have been arguing, however, for the need to recognize such moments as fully melodramatic. One of the key features of melodrama noted above is its compulsion to "reconcile the irreconcilable"—that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return. By posing the problem of injustice to the unwed mother, Griffith set himself the impossible task of reconciling the double standard with a culture and an ideology that did not, in fact, grant equality to women.

When the good-hearted but stern patriarch, Squire Bartlett, learns that Anna has been an unwed mother, he feels his moral duty is to expel her from his home. Though he has grown to love Anna, "the law is the law." The film is thus not simply about a "good" woman victimized by a "bad" man, but about what happens when a "good" man condemns, according to his code of ethics, an otherwise "good" woman. The happy-ending resolution of this conflict must reconcile a maternal empathy that feels for Anna with the stern, paternal law that cannot, within the limits of conventional ideology, be fundamentally challenged.

When David rescues Anna from the river, the fight that could easily be with his father is displaced onto a battle with the river. At this point in the film the natural elements take on the role of the villain. What, then, does the perilous ice accomplish that a personal villain does not? I believe it affords a covert satisfaction of the punishing law that unjustly accuses Anna. Ice, icy water, and snow are frigid elements that counter the sexual fires that produced the illegitimate child whose brief existence still haunts her. They cool and wash Anna metaphorically clean of the crimes she technically did commit and which the patriarchal double standard still believes stain her. The "moving picture" of the frozen heroine passed out on the ice, hair and hand trailing in the water, rushing toward the falls—enhanced by extratextual legend that Lillian Gish suffered acutely from frostbite during the shooting of the film—moves us not only because it combines the pathos of her suffering with the action of David's rescue; it also punishes the heroine in the most appropriate manner for a sexual crime that the melodrama both believes and does not believe she is guilty of committing. Anna's flight into the storm is a suicidal, self-punishing gesture. But Anna is melodramatically saved by this punishing instrument of her near destruction.

Operating here in the more optimistic vein of American melodrama, Griffith wanted, like the stage play on which his film was based, to save his

victim-heroine not only from the falls, but from her taint as a fallen woman. But, unlike the theatrical melodrama on which his film was based, he wanted realistically to show the pathos of her sexual victimization. Griffith therefore had to devise a rescue that could save Anna from the more vivid sins he had realistically insisted on showing. He thus needed a better resolution of Anna's sexual "guilt" than had been offered by the brief mechanical snowstorm of the original play. In other words, he needed a realistic *and* melodramatic resolution. This resolution was, in effect, to prolong what had been an offstage rescue into an on-screen ordeal that was itself a form of punishment.[39]

Where Griffith's 1920s update of an already ancient melodrama deployed icy water to covertly punish his heroine for sexual crimes he and his film cannot fully ignore, James Cameron's deployment of icy water has no such function with respect to Rose's sexual adventure with Jack Dawson. Anachronistically for the era it represents, but appropriately for the postmodern era of its audience, Rose's virtue is actually established by her willingness to pose nude for, and engage in steamy sex with, a poor man. Yet as we have seen, the melodramatic reconciliation of the irreconcilable still operates through the mechanism of the icy water that kills Jack to free Rose.

The dialectic of pathos and action can be viewed as a crucial feature of melodrama. It was a melodramatic staple long before *Way Down East* and it will continue to be so long after *Titanic*. It controls the structures of feeling that animate the form. It combines a fear of loss with the excitement and suspense of action. The study of melodrama has often suffered from the misperception that it was either one or the other of these poles. One of melodrama's greatest interests as a form is in the dialectic between them.

Melodrama borrows from realism but realism serves the melodrama of pathos and action. Theater history, no less than film history, has tended to posit melodrama as a crude retrograde form out of which a more modern realism (and in film studies "classical realism") has developed. Theater historian Jeffrey Mason, for example, argues that theatrical "melodrama is a means of affirming a belief in a reductive perception of reality" (Mason 1993, 93). Film historians, too, have tended to follow the model of Nicholas Vardac (1949) to see the rise of cinema as quickly transcending theatrical melodrama. More recently, however, theater historian Thomas Postlewait has argued that melodrama did not come to an end or evolve into something else at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historically, melodramatic and realistic dramas developed during the same period in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They have been mutually influential. Although theater history has most commonly been written as the victory of realism over melodrama, a more careful history observes the mutual borrowings and lendings of the two forms (Postlewait 1996, 46–50).

Consider, for example, Richard Schickel's praise for the realistic qualities of *Way Down East* in contrast to the archaic melodrama of the

> classic casting-out scene, inspiration since of a thousand cartoons and parodies. . . . It is the ability to show real sleigh rides and spacious barn dances, to place Gish and Barthelmess in a real blizzard, and on a real river as the winter ice breaks, that gives the film an insuperable advantage over the stage. Whatever reservations one entertains about the motives and psychology of these characters, whatever strain has been placed on credibility by the coincidences on which the story so heavily depends, they are (almost literally) blown away by the storm sequence, so powerfully is it presented. (Schickel 1984, 431)

I argue in contrast that an accurate account of D. W. Griffith's version of *Way Down East* would see these realistic touches as a way of modernizing stage melodrama into a popular cinematic form rather than as the triumph of realism over melodrama. Indeed, without the "classic casting-out scene" that Schickel ridicules, none of the realistic background would come into play to purify Anna and permit the recognition of her virtue.

To understand just how the climax of *Way Down East* achieves the happy-ending issue-in-action of the familiar melodramatic rescue, we have seen that what really victimizes Anna is not simply the personal villain Sanderson, but the patriarchal double standard that permits men to sow wild oats and then punishes women for the consequences. One of Griffith's inimitable, preachy titles directly states the problem: "Today woman brought up from childhood to expect ONE CONSTANT MATE possibly suffers more than at any moment in the history of mankind, because not yet has the man-animal reached this high standard, except perhaps in theory." As Virginia Wright Wexman has noted, in the same year that American women won suffrage, *Way Down East* realistically posed the problem of a woman with no rights and with no proper place in the public sphere. This woman is sexually deceived by a powerful, aristocratic man and then condemned by the stern patriarchy that does not grant her equal rights (Wexman 1993, 43–63). Griffith graphically portrayed this victimization in several ways: in a highly realistic scene of Anna's seduction; in another scene showing—unprecedentedly even in discrete long shot—the travail of childbirth; in the wrenching scene, mentioned above, of the baby's death; and finally in the last-minute rescue from the breaking ice of an unmistakably real river and waterfall. None of these scenes appeared in the stage melodrama. All are usually cited as examples of Griffith's realism "transcending" melodrama.

Christine Gledhill notes that the mode of realism pushes toward renewed truth and stylistic innovation, while melodrama's search for something lost, inadmissible and repressed, ties it to the past (Gledhill 1987, 31–32). *Way Down East* does both. While the film is undeniably more realistic than its turn-of-the-century stage version, its solution to the problem of out-of-wedlock maternity is fundamentally melodramatic. That is, rather than directly address

the double standard as a social problem, the narrative works to retrieve Anna's personal innocence so that she can return to the rural happiness of her original bond with her mother. Thus the more profound, patriarchal causes of her suffering are never addressed.

In this way, the film thus "solves" the problem of the persisting double standard by avoiding its source in flawed patriarchal law.[40] Rather than argue, then, that Griffith took a melodramatic stage play and made it realistic by confronting the harsh realities of Anna Moore's victimization, we can say that having realistically brought up the pressing social problem of out-of-wedlock motherhood, and having presented the dilemma of the stern patriarch who condemns the woman for crimes for which she is not responsible, the narrative then entirely evades this problem by retrieving Anna's innocence through its climax of pathos and action.

Titanic can be seen to observe much the same deployment of realism in the interest of melodrama. In this case the realism consists of the special effects that recreate the experience of a famous historical shipwreck and the social criticism of class privileges that doomed the poorer passengers to a watery grave. At the same time, however, as we have already seen, this very same social critique depends upon the resurrection of the splendor and elegance of the very class system it condemns. The fantasy of the transcendence of class embodied in the love story between vagabond Jack and aristocrat Rose thus relies entirely upon the resurrection of an elegance that belonged exclusively to a class-bound world. The fantasy of the transcendence of class—the sense in which the ship does become for Rose the "ship of dreams"—depends upon the meticulous depiction of class distinction, the Titanic as "slave ship."

The final key feature of melodrama is the presentation of *characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaean conflicts between good and evil* (Brooks 1995, 2–4). This feature is melodrama's infamously simplistic moral stereotyping: Anna is the good daughter, David the good son, the squire the stern father, Sanderson the selfish cad. The drama operates to reveal simple, but "true," moral identities; characters are "monopathic," lacking the more complex mixes of feelings and the psychological depths of realism.[41] It is easy to view the primary psychic and Manichaean characters of melodrama as archaic features of crude theatricalism lacking the depth and social texture of more realistic, and psychologically nuanced, characters. However, such a view perpetuates the antagonism between melodrama and realism, casting realism as the modern and melodrama as the archaic form of characterization.

When Peter Brooks (1995, 160) writes that evil is a "swarthy cape-enveloped man with a deep voice," he notes that moral forces are viewed in melodrama as expressions of personality embodied in physical being and gesture. However, one era's swarthy cape-enveloped villain is another era's smiling one. Evil, like virtue, can be differently embodied and differently revealed. It is the constant goal of melodrama to make visible occulted moral distinctions

through acts and gestures that are felt by audiences to be the emotional truths of individual, but not too individualized, personalities. What is truly modern about melodrama, then, is its reliance on personality—and on the revelation of personality through body and gesture—as the key to both emotional and moral truth.

Christine Gledhill argues that the entire Hollywood star system, including the tradition of method acting, is a more sophisticated development of the traditions of melodramatic character and performance (Gledhill 1991, 208). Adapting Brooks's notion that amid the collapse of the sacred as the standard of value, the individual ego became "the measure of all things," Gledhill argues that this reduction of morality to an individual embodiment of ethical forces prepared the way for the psychologization of character and the performance orientation of twentieth-century popular culture (Brooks 1995, 16; Gledhill 1991, 209). Faced with the familiar dilemmas of modernity—the decentered self, the failure of language to say what is meant—melodrama responded with a heightened personalization and expression of the self. The cult of the star fed into this personalization. The contemporary phenomenon of the commodified star whose task is not so much to act as it is to embody a "truthful" "presence"—an authentic performance of his or her "self"—is simply another example of the melodramatic attempt to articulate what Brooks calls "full states of being" (Gledhill 1991, 216–218).

The "method" acting popularized by Lee Strasberg on the American stage and in film in the fifties became known as a means of increasing performative realism, but Gledhill convincingly shows that it actually drew realism toward melodramatic concerns by dissolving the boundaries between acting and psychotherapy and by providing the melodramatic imagination with a new form of the articulation of the moral occult: only now it was the very existence of an individual self that was at stake. The pathos of melodrama becomes the pathos of the assertion of self in the face of encroaching meaninglessness and nonentity (Gledhill 1991, 221–25). In a very real sense, then, melodrama has evolved in the direction of expressing ever more primary psychic roles, not just in the silent cinema's typage—of the father, mother, son, daughter—but in the primary psychic resources drawn upon by actors to express the very pathos of their being.[42]

In the early-nineteenth-century melodramas cited by Brooks, the villain would thus indeed be the swarthy cape-enveloped man with a deep voice and the victim-hero would be a young man and/or woman whose goodness was equally manifested in visible bodily signs. As we shall see in the next chapter, however, a remarkable reversal of these coded stereotypes of good and evil occurred in the forging of a new type of victim-hero in the swarthy complexion of Uncle Tom, whose blackness flew in the face of previous conventions of the representation of good, and the forging of a new type of villain who was

not the least "swarthy" and whose whiteness contrasted with the blackness of Uncle Tom.

By the 1920s and the advent of an advanced silent cinema typified by *Way Down East*, victim-heroes became part of a cinematic star system that not only codified goodness in blond innocence (for Gish) or earnest handsomeness (for Barthelmess), but also through close-ups that isolated and privileged these features as part of the discourse of the star. The villain was in this case a sophisticated variation of what was by now the too-easily deciphered swarthy, cape-enveloped man. Lennox Sanderson, for example, is a suave man of the world who hesitates before committing his villainous seduction and abandonment and who even apologizes for his wrongdoing afterward.

Black and white Manichaean polarities simplify and twist the real social and historical complexities of the problems addressed by melodrama. The melodramatic solution to the very real social and political issues raised by the form can only occur through a perverse process of victimization. Virtuous suffering is certainly, and quite literally, a pathetic weapon against injustice, but we need to recognize how frequently it has been deployed as the melodramatic weapon of choice of American popular culture from Lillian Gish to the newly feminized hero personified by Leonardo DiCaprio, from Uncle Tom to Rodney King.

These, then, are five key features of melodrama isolated in a single 1920 silent film, but applicable, I believe, to a wide range of "moving pictures" existing across many genres and media. Not all melodramas begin and end in a space of innocence; not all melodramas successfully recognize the virtue of victim heroes; not all melodramas modernize by borrowing from realism. Certainly some melodramas may have a less complex dialectic of pathos and action than does *Way Down East*. And certainly the tendency toward primary psychic roles may range from purely Manichaean forms of good and evil to more complex, psychoanalytically motivated combinations of symptoms. Nor do these five key features exhaust the definition of melodrama. They are a start, however, in our attempt to grasp the basics of a mode that has been so fundamental to American popular culture that it has often been taken for granted. It is my hope that these five categories will serve us, in the chapters to come, as we pursue the most influential melodramatic story of all American culture: the story of black and white racial victims and villains.

Melodramas of Black and White

I have attempted to introduce the mode of melodrama through the relatively innocent examples of a well-loved silent film and a more recent blockbuster partly because I want to offer a sense of the typicality of the melodramatic mode as it has operated and continues to operate in cinema before turning, in the rest of this book, to a very specific tradition of black and white racial

melodrama. If we can now entertain the notion that melodrama is a fundamental mode by which American culture has dealt with the problem of "moral legibility," and if we can also accept that race and ethnicity (in complex intersections with gender and class) represent a primary and enduring moral dilemma of American culture, then the importance of investigating racial melodrama—of understanding the dynamics of melodrama in relation to the stories about race that American popular culture has long been telling itself—becomes clear.

American racial melodrama deploys the paradoxical location of strength in weakness—the process by which suffering subjects take what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*, a moralizing revenge upon the powerful achieved through a triumph of the weak in their very weakness. In contemporary political terms this is what feminist political scientist Wendy Brown has called the overvaluation of the "wound" in the political rhetoric of liberal identity politics (Brown 1995, 67). As we have already seen, Lauren Berlant has further investigated the process by which pain and suffering confers moral power on "wounded" subjects (Berlant 1998, 637; Berlant 2000). Ever since the abolitionist and suffrage movements, Berlant argues, individual citizens have been most compellingly identified with the national collectivity not through a universalist rhetoric of abstract citizenship but through a "capacity for suffering and trauma" viewed as the core of citizenship (Berlant 1998, 636). "It would not be exaggerating to say that sentimentality has long been the more popular rhetorical means by which pain is advanced, in the United States, as the true core of personhood and political collectivity. It operates when relatively privileged national subjects are exposed to the suffering of their intimate Others, so that to be virtuous requires feeling the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their own pain" (Berlant 2000).

Nowhere has this advancement of pain as the true core of personhood and political collectivity been more in evidence than in the "big" melodramas of racially beset victims that have galvanized American audiences over the past century and a half—on stage, in film, and on television. From the moment Simon Legree's whip first lent Uncle Tom a paradoxical visibility and dignity as a suffering, and thus worthy, human being, the political power of pain and suffering has been a key mechanism of melodrama's rhetorical power. But who has the franchise on being represented as suffering victims? Not only the racial minorities who found themselves at the wrong end of a whip or gun. Consider this compelling description of performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show depicting wagon trains attacked by Indians toward the end of Ric Burns's PBS documentary *The West*: "This is a show about . . . the conquest of the West. Yet everything that the audience sees is Indians attacking whites. This is the strange story of an inverted conquest in which the conquerors are the victims. . . . What is going on when you celebrate a conquest and you only show yourself being victimized?" (*The West*, episode 8). What is going on, we should immediately recognize, is melodrama: the generation of

sympathy for the position of suffering victims, in this case white settlers victimized by marauding "redmen." It is a peculiarly American form of melodrama in which virtue becomes inextricably linked to forms of racial victimization. The white settlers are not just victims in this scenario; they are racially beset victims who acquire moral legitimacy through the public spectacle of their suffering. Racial melodrama takes on enormous importance as the engine for the generation of legitimacy for racially constituted groups whose very claim to citizenship lies in these spectacles of pathos and action. Racial melodrama is the popular form that gives permission to these racially constituted groups to carry out actions that they could not carry out in the name of bald self-interest. In terms of our third feature of melodrama, the pathos of the suffering of white settlers victimized by marauding Indians in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show ultimately authorizes the action of the conquest of the West. As Ric Burns's commentator puts it, it gives the impression of a conquest won without any intentional quest: "They attacked us and when we ended up, we had the whole continent."

How, then, should we go about grasping the importance of these stories in which racialized suffering trumps conventional attributes of power? This is where genre criticism, of the Western, or the "race problem" film, for example—while it may trace important traditions of the construction of racial victims and villains—fails to grasp the full measure of the phenomenon because it does not confront the mode of melodrama centrally. Recourse to a broader melodramatic mode can more fully grasp the complex networks and recombinations of racial victimization and vilification in American culture.

The rest of this book argues that since the mid-nineteenth century, melodrama has been, for better or worse, the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans. It argues that melodrama is the alchemy with which white supremacist American culture first turned its deepest guilt into a testament of virtue. But, as we shall see, it is also the alchemy by which African Americans would themselves eventually reframe both the Tom tradition of white sympathy for blacks and the anti-Tom tradition of sympathy for beleaguered whites to their own ends. Melodrama is therefore much more than an embarrassing, excessive leftover of popular Victorian theater; if the works we are about to examine are "melodramatic, melodramatic, terribly so," then we do well to do more than lament the "terribly so." Melodrama may prove central to who we are as a nation, and black and white racial melodrama may even prove central to the question of just who we mean when we say "we" are a nation.

2 "A Wonderful, 'Leaping' Fish": Varieties of *Uncle Tom*

"[*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] knew the large felicity of gathering in alike the small and the simple and the big and the wise, and had above all the extraordinary fortune of finding itself, for an immense number of people, much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness, in which they didn't sit and read and appraise and pass the time, but walked and talked and laughed and cried. . . . Letters, here, languished unconscious, and Uncle Tom, instead of making even one of the cheap short cuts through the medium in which books breathe, even as fishes in water, went gaily roundabout it altogether, as if a fish, a wonderful 'leaping' fish, had simply flown through the air. . . . If the amount of life represented in such a work is measurable by the ease with which representation is taken up and carried further, carried even violently furthest, the fate of Mrs. Stowe's picture was conclusive: it simply sat down wherever it lighted and made itself, so to speak, at home."

—Henry James

When Henry James called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a "wonderful 'leaping' fish," he meant to describe the almost unfathomable popularity and ubiquity of a work that once seemed to leap freely about the American cultural landscape. "Leaping" beyond its original literary incarnation, Uncle Tom made itself "at home" in so many places that it was hard to pin down to any particular text or form. Following James's insight, this chapter assumes that we must attempt to understand these "leaps" into new forms of media if we are really to understand the power of "Mrs. Stowe's picture" and the variety of its ways of making itself "at home" in the culture. This means that, although we will certainly begin with Stowe's written "picture," it will only be as the starting point.