

Melodrama in Dostoyevsky and Zola
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The American Heritage Dictionary, third edition, defines *melodrama* simply as this: "a drama...characterized by exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts." Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Émile Zola have often been credited as masters of this particular literary genre, crafting works often teeming with melodramatic characters and distinctively hyper-emotional scenes. Yet the desired outcome of each author -- and the steps taken to reach that end result -- are often markedly different. By examining their respective work, then, and by comparing and contrasting specific examples from the novels *Crime and Punishment* and *Thérèse Raquin*, I hope to better illustrate how and why melodrama comes into play in each author's work and how the novel is ultimately affected through its use.

For an author purporting to be interested merely in documenting human nature, in writing an almost clinical "study [of] temperaments and not characters," Émile Zola has created in *Thérèse Raquin* a work practically inundated with melodrama. His scenes are often filled with exaggerated action; his desire to illicit an emotional response in the reader seems often paramount to his stated objective, that of writing a novel that "applied to two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses." Characters become not so much realistic portrayals as archetypes, caricatures and stereotypes. Zola, one might easily argue, wants it both ways -- that he is writing both as the intellectual naturalist, who views the novel as a case study, and as the practical author, who realizes that melodrama will sell copies in Parisian bookstores.

Where specifically, then, does Zola utilize this exaggeration and what is its ultimate effect? Its most striking use, perhaps, can be found not necessarily in the murder of Camille Raquin, as one might first suspect, but in the final pages of the text when Madame Raquin attempts to vindicate her murdered son by spelling out his killers' names.

As Zola writes: "Since she had known the horrible secret Madame Raquin had been feverishly waiting for this evening....she felt a thrill of joy at the thought that she was about to avenge her son" (Tancock, 210). Yet as Zola continues, the scene is rendered almost comical and absurd, or at the very least unrealistic, as tension mounts and Madame Raquin's actions continue to fail. The murderers, Thérèse and Laurent, watch on anxiously, with bated breath, dreading the feeble movements of the old woman's hand "as an avenging hand about to speak" until she is too tired to lift a potentially incriminating finger and sinks back into despair (211).

"In the depths of her terrible despair," Zola then tells his readers, "the old woman looked at her hand. It had betrayed her. Now it felt as heavy as lead, and never again would she be able to lift it. God did not want Camille to be avenged....And the wretched woman told herself that now she was only fit to go and join her child under the earth. She lowered her eyelids, feeling that her usefulness was over, wanting to believe that she was already in the darkness of the tomb" (213-214).

How, one must no doubt wonder, do these passages fit into the work of an author claiming to be driven by "scientific curiosity alone"? Surely this scene adds little or nothing to a clinical case study, a simple examination of the human animal at work, and is instead provided merely to entertain and appeal to the reader's emotions. And yet, on that level it is effective. We cannot help but pity Madame Raquin as we read these pages, cannot help but feel anger and revulsion toward Thérèse and Laurent or be incensed at the stupidity of Grivet as he pretends to understand.

Melodrama, therefore, a heightening of tension and an exaggeration of character and scene, is put to great use by Zola. In a truly naturalistic world, which he clearly claims to espouse, there would be neither room nor need for either pity or revulsion -- as everything could be defined in terms of chemical reactions within the brain and human body -- yet both emotions can be found in almost unlimited supply in this and other scenes throughout the novel. Zola's chief aim, therefore, does indeed seem to be to "have it both

ways," to create an objective study of two individuals and craft scenes where those individuals are rendered in anything but an objective light.

Dostoyevsky also makes effective use of melodrama in *Crime and Punishment*, although perhaps not entirely for the same reasons as Zola, nor with the same end results. The novel, this tale of Raskolnikov's grisly crime and ultimate redemption, is in many ways a story about the Russian character and spirit, viewed by Dostoyevsky as inherently larger-than-life, innately melodramatic and given to sweeping gestures and emotion. It is this melodrama, this exaggeration or embellishment of everyday life, that Dostoyevsky believes makes the Russian soul unique and worth cherishing.

For that reason, therefore, the very scenes which we would naturally *expect* to find rendered in exaggerated, hyper-emotional language -- the violent, bloody murders of the old woman and Lizaveta chief among them -- show little hint of the melodramatic at all. "He pulled the axe quite out," Dostoyevsky writes, "swung it with both arms, scarcely conscious of himself, and almost without effort, almost mechanically, brought the blunt side down on her head" (Garnett, 78). Neither murder is given much more than a single paragraph of description; these are straightforward, unemotional acts.

That, Dostoyevsky seems to say, is ultimately the central problem of Raskolnikov; when he attempts to separate himself from Russian society, to become a Napoleon among men and sidestep both law and emotion, he and those around him suffer. Only when he acknowledges and surrenders to his impulses -- impulses like generosity which he clearly possesses -- can he truly be happy and regain his Russian spirit. Melodrama, for Dostoyevsky, is a positive influence, not merely entertainment; his characters are naturally exaggerated since in his Russia *real life* is larger-than-life.

Melodrama does, therefore, play a key role in the novel, though it is attributed most often to flawed yet honest characters, such as the Marmeladov family, whom Dostoyevsky views as more real, more Russian, than Raskolnikov allows himself to be. In particular, one of the most striking moments of exaggerated melodrama occurs near the end of the novel when Katerina Ivanovna has quite literally lost her mind and has taken to wandering the streets with her children. "Kolya and Lida," writes Dostoyevsky, "scared out of their wits by the crowd, and their mother's mad pranks, suddenly seized each other by the hand, and ran off at the sight of the policeman who wanted to take them away somewhere. Weeping and wailing, poor Katerina Ivanovna ran after them. She was a piteous and unseemly spectacle, as she ran, weeping and panting for breath" (419).

As readers, we pity Katerina Ivanovna, if only *because* she is so exaggerated, so over-the-top. Our emotions are not stirred for Raskolnikov in the same way, however, for his is not a crime of passion, nor is he driven by a melodramatic and distinctly Russian nature. His character -- or at least the elements he attempts to assert, those elements that are not natural impulses -- is the very absence of melodrama. He is dispassionate; only when he accepts his Russian soul can he regain it.

Both Dostoyevsky and Zola make wonderful use of the melodramatic in their novels, for different reasons and with different (although equally successful) results. Zola wants the reader's emotional, as well as intellectual, involvement; *Thérèse Raquin*, therefore, is a novel designed to entertain as well as educate and hold up a mirror to human existence -- no matter what Zola might maintain in his introduction. *Crime and Punishment*, however, presents melodramatic moments not simply for the amusement of the reader, but so that we might better understand the Russian character, know that it is naturally overstated, sometimes excessively dramatic, and know that Raskolnikov's misfortunes stem from his failure to accept this life of melodrama.