

# The Myth of the American Identity in American Melodrama

**Ribut Basuki**

English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Surabaya  
e-mail: rbasuki@peter.petra.ac.id

**Abstract:** Melodrama reflects and constructs ideology. In American melodrama, the dominant social group imposed its ideology by constructing the standard American identity and its opposite through the heroes and villains. In the four plays discussed, the standard is pictured through the heroes in terms of their ability to get financial success, their acceptance of the Protestant moral codes, and their being white. Thus, in the world of melodrama people of color as well as financially deprived people are marginalized.

**Key words:** ideology, melodrama, hero, cultural poetics, hegemony, identity, villains, history

During the colonial period and the early years of independence, the United States was socio-politically still a shadow of the old world. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, as the common people demanded equality, the United States began to develop its own democracy. The “new democratic spirit” continued to grow, and eventually it brought Andrew Jackson, a leader of this movement, to presidency (Burns, 1986). The election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1828 opened a new era in American politics and strengthened the American faith in the common man as well as America’s pride in her own achievements (Wilson, 1982, p. 36, Spielvogel, 1994, p. 757). Mason (1993) even believes that this movement started earlier, at the end of the eighteenth century. He argues, “As events led toward establishment of the republic in the late eighteenth century, those who had once identified themselves as European colonists now desired a new self image”(p. 33). Therefore, the “new world” gave them not only a new place to live but also that to create a new identity. “For members of the majority and minority alike, the old world is the world in which one’s place in the community establishes one’s identity and the new world is the world in which one creates an identity, or self” (Andreach, 1976, p. 47).

By looking at how the United States came into being, Daniel C. Gerould considers that the birth of America is similar to that of melodrama (1983, p. 7). Even further, Jeffrey D. Mason clearly argues that American history can be seen as a melodrama (1993, p. 194). “Anyone who crossed the Atlantic and braved the challenge of an unknown continent had to be optimistic. The cowards never started; the weak died on the way” (Wilson in Basuki, 2003). What Wilson means, in agreement with Mason’s statement, is that the journey was something heroic, and heroes are the main characters in melodrama. Thus, American history is a melodramatic history, and melodrama takes part in shaping American history. For instance, in the 1800s, American theatres performed melodrama in which the Americans found references for where they were from and what they were to become. Therefore, Gerould, who adopts a sympathetic approach to melodrama, considers melodrama as “cultural artifacts, expressing the American temperament, preaching American ideologies, embodying American aesthetic principles” (1983, p. 8). Mason contends that “melodrama creates the myth of America, the myth that . . . establishes and preempts the moral high ground and becomes the standard against which all experience is measured” (p. 187). In other words, melodrama presents a standard self-identity against which every individual is measured.

The question is: “What is the standard identity imposed by melodrama?” To investigate the American “identity,” I will discuss *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by George L. Aiken (1887), *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault (1859), *The Great Divide* by William Vaughn Moody (1906), and *The Girl of the Golden West* by David Belasco (1905). Although I cannot claim that the four plays I discuss represent the complex world of American melodrama, I hold that they present good examples of how the myth is established.

The theoretical lens I am using is cultural poetics (or new historicism), since through cultural poetics I can investigate ideologies hidden in a literary text. “Where many previous critical approaches to literary texts assumed that text had some universal significance and essential historical truth to impart, new historicist critics tended to read literary texts as material products of specific historical conditions” (Branigan, 1999, p. 417). Branigan further states that “literature is a vehicle for the representation of history, and it does contain insights into the information of historical moments” (p. 418). Bressler (1999) notes

that “the cultural milieu of the times operate together to create literature” (p. 240), which means that literature is never created without the influence of the values of the culture in which it was written. He further states that cultural poetics “seeks out the seemingly insignificant details and manifestations of culture usually ignored by most historians and literary critics” (p. 246). For example, Montrose (1999) finds that in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Nights Dream* there are a lot of “figurations of gender and power in Elizabethan culture” (pp. 439-460). Therefore, in cultural poetics lens, any work of literature, be it canonical or otherwise, is never free from ideological presuppositions. It should be understood, however, that cultural poetics/new historicism gives a different reading to literary texts. “Where traditional ‘close readings’ tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000).

## **MELODRAMATIC HEROES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN IDENTITY**

Like in any other cultures, Americans create their own heroes to establish the ideal ‘self’ or identity. Nations with long history such as the Chinese, Indian, Greek, etc. have their own heroes in the godly characters. The Indians, for instance, find references for their morality in the heroes of *Ramayana* or *Mahabarata* epics. Being a relatively new nation, Americans find their heroes, among others, in their melodrama. These heroes have been the best examples of how an American should be. Since the birth of the nation and its early development (especially the westward movement), these heroes have been created to exemplify an ideal identity of America; America that is different from Europe, the “old world.”

### **The “Prodigal Son” Model in the Construction of the American Identity**

The construction of the American identity can be seen in William Vaughn Moody’s *The Great Divide*. Moody sets his play within two grounds: the earthly ground is an East-West binary, and the moral high ground is Christian morality. With the context of the westward movement

of the American society, *The Great Divide* presents the model of the Biblical parable of the prodigal son in an original American way. The prodigal son is Stephen Ghent, who has a conflict with the heroine, Ruth Jordan. The conflict brings Ghent “home” to Christian morality, the process of which also brings Ruth to a new realization of her faith.

The East-West binary is pictured in the characters of Winthrop Newbury, an easterner, and Stephen Ghent, a westerner. Newbury is pictured as a person who is culturally sophisticated, almost like a European, while Ghent is a rough westerner with a rough background of the Wild West. Ruth prefers to choose Ghent because Newbury is a “finished” easterner. In rejecting Newbury Ruth says: “. . . . He’s so good, so gentle and chivalrous. But – [*with a movement of lifted arms, as if for air*] ah me, he’s—finished! I want one that isn’t finished!” (Moody, 1960, p. 109). To Ruth, Winthrop is already a perfect individual, and this does not present a challenge to her. Moreover, as an easterner Winthrop “smells” European, whereas Ruth wants an unpolished “jewel” who needs her to make him shine. She desires a real American, an unfinished man as a part of her western romanticism.

Stephen Ghent, on the other hand, is a man she wishes to encounter. Not only does “the unfinished jewel” come with his rough surface, but also he comes with sharp edges that carry a great potential to hurt her. Ghent provides the challenge that Ruth wants to face, an allusion to the challenging west which is open to exploration. Ghent, armed with guns and accompanied by a dangerous Mexican scoundrel, comes as a robber. Ghent is ready to do anything to get what he wants.

However, in true melodramatic fashion, instead of robbing her, Ghent falls for her and, instead of hating him, Ruth falls for him. Ghent falls for her because she shows her strength as a woman (which is the reflection of her strong faith), and Ruth falls for him, especially, for the romantic idea of making the “savage” noble. She does not mind being his captive, and she even drops the chance of shooting him with his own gun.

GHENT. . . You ought to shoot me like a rattle snake!

RUTH. I know that

GHENT. Then why don’t you?

RUTH. (*slowly*) I don’t know. (p. 114)

Her desire to change Ghent appears when a few moments later she says, “You must live—to pay for having spoiled your life” (p. 114).

Ruth's job of polishing Ghent is a hard effort. Although Ghent is in love with her and is amazed by her tenderness which is, as Ghent puts it, "not in the (western) rule of the game" (p. 115), changing Ghent is a real challenge since they stand on completely different grounds. While Ruth aims at "the kingdom of heaven," Ghent goes for "the kingdoms of the world and all the glory of 'em"(p. 116). They decide to get married and live together, but they have completely different dreams. Ghent tries his best to make Ruth happy by working hard without understanding what she wants from him, while Ruth, more than just dreaming of a wealthy life, wants him to change. Actually, within these two characters there are elements of the American ideal self: one is the value of hard-work and the other is the moral value. However, at this point, the two elements have not been integrated.

The meeting of the two elements, of course, should not be made easy since there is more to discuss: the idea of an unpolished man with a bright future which reflects an unpolished land with a promising development. Of course, people like Ruth's brother, Philip, cannot envision it. He does not understand that she is in the business of "the finding of the prodigal" (p. 123). Some, however, can see the promising future, like her sister in law who—after seeing Ghent—says, "This one certainly isn't finished. But when he is, he'll be grand!" (p. 126). This statement shows the picture of the future of Ghent as the representation of an American individual which is free from the 'old world's influence and, at the same time, it reflects the dream of how America will be like.

Yet, winning Ghent's soul is not easy. Ghent remains a gentleman with a devilish soul, just like the fact that the west is hard to control. Unless Ghent realizes that he should embrace the protestant moral values, he still belongs to the devil and, therefore, he will lose his soul. In her desperation Ruth says, "...when you stand there before my eyes, you fade away, and in your Place I see —the Other One!" (p. 128). Ruth sees in Ghent a human beast, "[t]he human beast that goes to its horrible pleasure as not even a wild animal will go . . ." (p. 128). Ruth finally reaches her utmost desperation when Ghent insists that she is his; Ghent never realizes that she should belong to "the kingdom of heaven," never to a mortal man. At this point, although pregnant, she gives up hope and chooses to go home to the east.

Ghent finally "comes back," although initially for a different reason from the return of the Biblical prodigal son when he goes after Ruth to

New York. While the Biblical prodigal son comes back because of bankruptcy, Ghent “comes back” because of his undying love for Ruth. Financially, he even rescues Ruth’s family, quite the opposite to the Biblical model. He comes as a propertied gentleman who has a lost soul, not a wretched individual who has lost everything. Fortunately (and melodramatically), Ghent finds enlightenment from “one of the meeting – houses” (p. 137) during his effort to get Ruth back. He starts to realize what is wrong with him, and he is in the process of changing when he talks to Ruth’s mother:

GHENT. Mrs. Jordan, you come of the old stock. Do you believe in the devil?

Mrs. JORDAN. Perhaps not in the sense you mean.

GHENT. (*Tapping his breast*). I mean the devil inside a man—the devil in the

Heart! (p. 134)

After he learns about “The Second Birth” and being a “new man” (p. 137), Ghent finally understands Ruth’s statements when they were still together. Yet, at first, not knowing the change in Ghent, Ruth refuses to meet him. When they finally meet, it’s what melodrama is all about: the prodigal son has come back to the mythical ideal.

For the ending, Moody gives his own bent to the Biblical story line. When Ruth brings forth suffering and sacrifice in the discussion, Ghent answers, “. . . It’s they who keep your head set on the wages of sin, and all the rubbish. What have we got to do with suffering and sacrifice?” (p. 137). Moody leaves Christian pietism behind, for it does not agree with the idea of the American dream. An American “self” has to be a successful one, for America is the land of opportunity. Suffering and sacrifice only belong to characters like Uncle Tom, who is “not American.” Suffering and sacrifice are parts of the ideology of the loser, and Ghent is not. He may lose his fortune, but as a true American he has every opportunity to succeed again as long as he works hard.

Ghent also represents the western attitude of being open-minded and self-forgiving. Unlike the puritanical eastern gentleman, Philip, who cannot accept the intrusion of a “savage” in his family, Ghent is even able to see his own weaknesses and is ready to change. Ghent is the embodiment of the new “self” that is open to possibility and challenge, while Philip is the embodiment of a fixed, or “finished” eastern identity which is rooted in the old world’s culture.

The Prodigal Son model can also be seen in David Belasco's *The Girl of The Golden West*. The difference is that its use of the Christian morality is much subtler, and less puritanical, than that of Moody's *The Great Divide*. Moreover, the characters are mostly western-born, although the hero and heroine finally "go back east." The setting is also completely western with the gold rush as the background. The heroine (Minnie/The Girl), unlike Ruth in *The Great Divide*, is more driven by her true love for the hero than by an initial desire to change him. While Ruth wants to change Ghent to be a moral Christian, Minnie wants a good gentleman whom she trusts to give her life to. Minnie's intention to change Johnson comes only after she realizes that she loves him.

The hero is pictured as having two appearances: at one time he is the gentleman Johnson and at another he is the scary road-agent Ramerrez. Therefore, the hero is also one of the villains at the same time. In the stage direction, Belasco (1983) describes him:

Mr. Johnson is a young man of about thirty—smooth-faced, tall. His clothing is bought in fashionable Sacramento. He is the one man in the place who has the air of a gentleman. At first acquaintance, he bears himself easily but modestly, yet at certain moments there is a devil-may-care recklessness about him. He is, however, the last man in the world one would suspect of being the road-agent, Ramerrez. (p. 199)

Johnson is also pictured as a well-read gentleman, a man with eloquent speech and profound understanding of Dante. Belasco makes Johnson know more about Dante than Minnie, who understands it with less sophistication.

Johnson actually comes to rob the Saloon; however, upon seeing Minnie, the Ramerrez side of him is suppressed and the desire to rob the saloon melts. The other side of himself can only ask: "Johnson, what the devil's the matter with you?" (p. 209). He finally drops the plan to rob the saloon, which has been carefully crafted with his companions (the Mexican "greasers"), and risks his life by going to the Girl's house.

In Minnie's house Johnson shows his real attitude toward women; he always makes sexual advances. However, she is able to control him: "You must in the habit of taking things, Mr. Johnson, I seen you on the road Monterey, goin' an' comin' but that don't give you no excuse to begin this sort of game" (p. 214). In addition, Minnie's observation about his habit

of taking things provides a strong dramatic irony since it refers to his being Ramerrez—the devil inside him—the robber.

The therapy begins with the Girl's question: "What brought you here?" (p. 214), and Johnson's answer is: "It was Fate" (p. 214). One of the hallmarks of melodrama is that somehow there is a divine intervention in somebody's life. "I got an idée maybe God's back of this here game" says old Sonora (p. 245) about Minnie's love of Johnson. There is a divine plan that the hero—however evil he is—can change when God desires him to. The combination of God's plan and the human's will can change anybody.

Minnie finally believes that Johnson is "the right man" for her (p. 218). She even says that she had fallen in love with him the first time she saw him: "I said that day: 'He's good—he's grand—he can have me!'" (p. 218). However, there are times when Johnson realizes who he really is. It develops a conflict within him as to whether or not he deserves her love. "You're worth something better than me, Girl; but they say love works miracles every hour: it weakens the strong and strengthens the weak" (p. 220). His two personalities tear him apart: one wants him to go; the other wants him to stay.

Minnie is also torn apart when the boys tell her that Johnson is actually Ramerrez. She hates Ramerrez and wants him to go, but she loves Johnson and wants him to stay. After succeeding in hiding Johnson from the boys who hunt him, Minnie says: "I ought to have told the boys—but I wasn't going to let on I could be so took in" (p. 225). The only way to solve the problem is to kill either Johnson or Ramerrez. Of course, Ramerrez should perish as Johnson vows: "But, so help me God, from the day I kissed you tonight, I meant to change" (p. 225). Once again, the melodramatic belief in chance and change is manifested. Like Ruth in Moody's *The Great Divide*, the Girl finally says: "If you can't save your own soul . . . I'm goin' to save it for you" (p. 226).

Belasco's Minnie, unlike Moody's Ruth, is a more three-dimensional character since she cheats in the poker game against Rance (the gentleman she rejects) to save Johnson. Probably one of the reasons why Belasco's melodrama is considered more sophisticated is that the characters are more "realistic," with their own inner struggles. Belasco makes Minnie a common western girl who grows up with gambling as a part of her environment—she has a deck of cards ready in her house. She can blend with other western characters, yet she can still maintain a Christian quality in her. Minnie's rejection of Rance is also more probable than Ruth's of

Newbury. Minnie's rejection does not come from the desire to find an "unfinished man," but simply because she already loves Johnson.

Minnie's inner struggle about cheating Rance becomes a part of her struggle in accepting Johnson. Upon the boy's rejection of Sidney Duck, she comments, "and I fell to thinking of the Prodigal Son. Can't we forgive him? He says he's sorry. Sid, you git your chance" (p. 237). And the chance is not only given to Sidney Duck, but also to Johnson and herself. Moreover, Johnson is also ready to change by killing Ramerrez inside him.

JOHNSON : Girl, it's been worth life just to know you. You 've brought me nearer Heaven. You—to love a man like me! (*He covers his face with his hands, breaks down and sobs.*) (p. 244)

However, Johnson's change is not instant like that of Moody's Ghent. Johnson has to struggle with it

JOHNSON. Oh, Girl, Girl! That first night I went to your cabin—I saw you kneeling—praying. Say that again in your heart for me—now. Perhaps I believe it—perhaps I don't. I hope I do. I want to. (p. 245). Johnson intends to die without Minnie's notice; however, Minnie finally knows about it and pleads for Johnson's life.

Because of Minnie, Johnson gets a second chance from those who want him dead. The boys act as gentlemen by letting Minnie have the one she loves. Johnson and Minnie end up going east to build a new life, and Ramerrez is dead. Johnson declares, "Through you, all my old life has faded away. I have lost that" (p. 247). In fact, Ramerrez could never belong to the myth. It is a name taken from the "other." The real self is the new-born Johnson; the evil part of him is dead.

Both Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* and Moody's *The Great Divide*, although they have differences, operate on the model of the Biblical prodigal son. The model provides room to explore "the dark sides" of the hero. More than that, it gives room to create western characters with their wildness in the search for "a cultural self-definition, the American preoccupation with defining 'American-ness' (Katterer quoted. in Erishman, 1997, p. 180).

### **The Moral Reference of the American Identity**

Like Moody's *The Great Divide*, Christianity clearly occupies the moral background in Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It utilizes Christian values about children and the poor as "the owners of Heaven." It even

uses the biblical idea that the rich have difficulty in entering the kingdom of Heaven. Thus, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is different from *The Great Divide* in its treatment of success. While *The Great Divide* rests more on earthly ground, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rests on heavenly ground. Therefore, it serves to give a moral reference to the construction of the American "self."

The Biblical idea that children are the owners of the Heaven is portrayed in Eva, St. Clare's child. Eva is pictured as a loving, meek, and heavenly child. She is the one who loves Tom, who is black, as no other white person would. For his effort to save her from drowning in the river, she thanks him by kissing him. This astonishes Ophelia:

OPHELIA. Well, I want to be kind to everybody, and I wouldn't  
Have anything hurt, but as to kissing—

St. CLARE. Niggers! That you're not up to, hey?

OPHELIA.. Yes, that's it—how can she? (Aiken, 1983, p. 88)

Eva is the only one who can really treat Tom as equal, and appreciate him for his being a good Christian. She also loves and understands Topsy, a naughty black girl, although she wants her to change to be good. She hopes that Topsy can be "one of those sprits bright Uncle Tom sings about" (p. 97). She is the only one who can make Topsy cry with her tender words.

Eva knows that her real home is in heaven, and she feels sad being on the earth. "I had rather be in heaven! There are a great many things here makes me sad—that seems dreadful to me; I had rather be there; but I don't want to leave you—it breaks my heart" (p.105). She is sad because she cannot see "her people" free: "I feel sad for our poor people; they love me dearly, and they are all good and kind to me. I wish, papa, they were all *free!*" (p. 105).

Eva finally dies, and she can remain forever a child in the audience's (or reader's) mind. She becomes the moral reference for the self: A white child who owns heaven and is full of unconditional love. Her death, unlike Zoe's in *The Octoroon*, is not tragic. It is sad but full of peace. After all, she "goes home" to a place where she actually belongs. Her death is a melodramatic death, a death that leaves a moral message for those who still live—that when they live well, they die well. It is a death that leaves hope for the future.

The immediate person who has Eva as a reference is her father, St Clare. St. Clare is a good gentleman, knowledgeable and rich, yet he is

like the characters in Biblical stories about a rich young man and a wise man. His possessions and his knowledge have prevented him from knowing the truth.

St. CLARE. A Tom! I do look up; but the trouble is, I don't see anything when I do. I wish I could. It seems to be given to children and poor, honest fellows like you, to see what we cannot. How comes it?

TOM. Thou hast hid from the wise and prudent, and revealed unto babes; even so, Father, for it seemed good in thy sight.

St. CLARE. Tom, I don't believe—I've got the habit of doubting—I want to believe and I cannot. (p. 110)

This dialogue is completely Biblical. St. Clare represents the rich and the wise or knowledgeable persons in the Biblical parables. Uncle Tom even quotes the Bible as he answers St. Clare. Finally, St. Clare is led by the poor (the black Uncle Tom), and guided by a child's virtue (the white child Eva) to the truth when he dies: "No! It's coming home at last! ...At last, at last! Eva I come!"(p. 114).

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a melodrama that ends with deaths. It may be sad, but behind the sadness there is hope—the hope of having a happy afterlife. It also serves as a lesson to the audience, a lesson about the American identity. It is a lesson that teaches how to be "a good American": religious and loving, based on Christian values.

"Myths, whatever their origin, are necessarily integral to the originating society. That they *reflect* pervasive social themes is clear, but (what is more important) equally clear is that they also *influence* the attitudes and operation of the society," says Erishman (1997, p. 168). The three plays show that Erishman is not mistaken. They show American experience, portray the American dreams, and put forward American ideas.

## THE VILLAINS: DEFINING IDENTITY FROM WHO IS NOT

"Melodrama deals with the construction of a myth, sets up a structure of values, and at the summit places the very idea of America: a transcendental signified that establishes and preempts the moral high ground and becomes the standard against which all experience is measured" (Mason,1993, p. 187). Melodrama is a good medium for the

construction of the myth because it gives room for the development of the identity through its treatment of heroes and villains. Since “the myth defines the American in terms of his difference from those who are not the American” (p. 191), the presence of the “Other”—whether or not they are villainous—is important in melodrama. In fact, to Stuart Hall, whether we are conscious or not, we also need to see “the Other.” The Other is important to our own identity (1996, p. 342). Hall further argues that “the two [the Self and the Other] are the two sides of the same coin. And the other is not *out there*, but *in here*. It is not outside but inside” (p. 342). The discussion of the “Other,” therefore, provides an explanation of the Self by seeing who is not. The four plays: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Octoroon*, *The Great Divide*, and *The Girl of the Golden West* provide good examples of the “other” in American melodrama.

In the construction of myths in any culture, creating an “Other” is usually unavoidable. Creating an “Other” is usually based on either race, class, gender, or any combinations of the three. However, in discussing “what is not American” in this chapter, I will focus on racial issues only although I may seem to touch other issues, especially the class, due to the fact that issues sometimes overlap.

### **Non- white as ”Not American”**

Indians entered the American melodrama stage together with the westward movement of the American people. In Western melodrama, although not always, they usually fill the slot of the villains. “The frontier, as it pushed westward during the nineteenth century, was rich in the materials of which melodrama is made: savage Indians as well as Bandit gangs were everywhere,” says Rahill (1967, p. 234). In *The Octoroon* and *The Girl of the Golden West*, we can see how Indians are pictured. Wahnotee (in *The Octoroon*), although not pictured as evil nor characterized as a villain, is shown as a savage, uncivilized creature. “The red skin is a nuisance” (Boucicault, 1979, p. 415), and he doesn’t speak English. He is pictured as belonging to wild nature and can mysteriously disappear in the wilderness.

Interestingly, Wahnotee is the one who haunts M’Closky—the villain—when he tries to escape the trial. Wahnotee, therefore, is like a spirit of the wilderness which can punish the villain. To Mason, such a portrayal is creating the native as the object of white nostalgia, “as though the white man perceives the Indian as a version of himself—younger and

more innocent, but weaker and less sophisticated—a false memory of what he wants to think he could have been” (Mason, 1993, p. 25). Mason argues that the Indian in American melodrama serves as a creation of the identity. To elaborate the Indian, therefore, becomes an exercise of self-creation for the Europeans (p. 26).

In *The Girl of the Golden West* (Belasco, 1983), apart from being portrayed as uncivilized, the Indians are portrayed as thieves. They are like dogs who, when their master is off guard, will steal food, drink, or other little things. Jackrabbit is characterized as the “thieving redskin”(p. 195). He is clearly described as:

... a full-blooded Indian, lazy, shifty and beady-eyed, wearing moccasins, odds and ends of white man’s costume and quantity of brass jewelry. He frequents the barroom, picking up cigar butts, and occasionally, when opportunity present itself, steals a drink. (p. 188)

Jackrabbit is also portrayed as being unable to have a decent marriage since he is too uncivilized to understand the marriage institution. He is also stupid, as is the woman Indian character. In the stage direction about the Girl’s “Academy” Belasco writes: “The two Indians, Billy Jackrabbit and Wowkle, enter quietly and sit on the bench by the wall under the blackboard. They take no part, but listen stupidly” (p. 237). Like Wahnotee in *The Octoroon*, although close to the heroine, the Indians are used to show the wildness of the west, the west that needs to be tamed to make a perfect home for the settlers. If they cannot be tamed, they had better be killed. Therefore, there is a common saying that “a good Indian is a dead Indian” (Rahill, 1967, p. 232) since, Rahill argues, Indians in the American melodrama are usually depicted as “dirty, drunken, treacherous, murdering scoundrel[s]” (p. 232). In both plays, however, although portrayed as uncivilized and useless, the Indians are not pictured as really villainous.

Although *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is supposed to be “in the service of social criticism” (Gerould, 1983, p. 15), it is not free from “othering” the Africans. This is because myth in melodrama does not really offer a critique of culture; it rather affirms the status quo (Mason, 1993, p. 194). Uncle Tom and George, for instance, although they have the characteristics of either a good Christian or a gentleman, lack the quality of the American identity because they are black. That is also true of Zoe (in *The Octoroon*), who is raised as a lady but fails to become one owing

to her being half black. Although they raise the question whether being a real American means being white, the plays finally affirm that unless one is white s/he is just “not a real American.”

Uncle Tom is made as good as a Christian ideal should be. “Tom is a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow,” says Shelby (Aiken, 1983, p. 79). He is portrayed as a man who understands Christianity, and more than that, practices it. He is humble, meek, forgiving, and full of faith, yet Uncle Tom becomes no more than the biblical “good Samaritan”—a good fellow who practices good teachings, yet he is still the “other.” Just as a Samaritan was not a respectable person in the Jewish context during the early Christian time in Israel, Uncle Tom is just “a good other.” He can never be raised to meet the ideal American identity since he is black.

George (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and Zoe (*The Octoroon*) show that one is still non-American as long as s/he is not white although s/he is a gentleman or well educated. George and Zoe have almost the same problem. They are not completely black, but since they are not purely white they are black anyway. Although a gentleman and a very resourceful young man (he invented some machinery), George is no more than a slave. He has to fight for his freedom. He is just traded like a piece of property and hunted like a running dog when he escapes. George’s story can serve as a social protest in a way, but the fact that he has to flee to another country shows that somehow he is not an American. His choice is clear: living in the country as a slave or leaving the country as a free man. Both ways he is still an alien.

Zoe is another example of being an alien just because of having “a drop of black blood” in her. Although “she has had the education of a lady” (Boucicault, 1979, p. 412) and even “has won this race agin the white” (p. 433) as Scudder puts it, she finally has to die for not being a white lady. From the mouth of Zoe herself the idea that being black is a misery is revealed:

ZOE. ...one drop in eight is black—bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons all the flood; those seven bright drops give me love like yours—hope like yours—ambition like yours—life hung with passions like dew-drops on the morning flowers; but the one black drop gives me despair, for I’m an unclean thing—forbidden by the laws—I’m an Octoroon! (p. 426)

This is a very strong statement of ‘alienating’ Black people. Unlike George’s statements which are in the form of protest, Zoe’s statement is a

submission. Although her statement points out the evil and her being powerless to change it, it indirectly affirms that having a black blood is having a poison. The poison hinders her from having hope, ambitions, or even love. In fact, a one-in-eight drop of black blood has given her despair. She has to die for she has no place: she is finally free from being a slave which makes her different from other blacks, but she still has black blood so that she does not deserve the love of a white man. Boucicault may try to criticize the society's values, but the fact that he makes Zoe die, in my opinion, indirectly shows that he does not have the courage to really challenge them.

The best way to be a black person, it seems, is to be like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Aiken, 1983). She is the real black the whites want: a slave, uneducated, poor, dirty, and most of all, she hates herself. Therefore, she does not feel any pain whatever the master does to her.

TOPSY. Lord, yes, mas'r! old missis used to say so, too. She whipped me a head harder, and used to pull my ha'r, and knock my head agin the door; but it didn't do me no good. I 'spects if they's to pull every spear of ha'r out o'my head, it would do no good neither—I's wicked! Laws! I's nothin' but a nigger, no ways! (p. 103)

If she happens to have a good master, she will be a good slave (or even get "adopted" by a northerner like Ophelia). If she has a bad master she is bullet-proof. That Topsy is adopted by Ophelia and brought to the North gives a hope of a better treatment for her, yet she still remains a black girl who is far different from the white child, Eva.

Like Indians, Mexicans also became aliens in American melodrama within the western context, especially since there was a territorial dispute between the U.S. and Mexico. Of the four plays I am discussing, Mexicans appear in *The Great Divide* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. In *The Great Divide* a Mexican appears only as the companion of Ghent. He is portrayed as a scoundrel who speaks bad English. Once he gets enough money for letting Ruth fall into Ghent's hands, he disappears for good.

In *The Girl of the Golden West* there is a Mexican with a bigger role, but he is no more than the ghostly outlaw, Ramerrez. Interestingly, Ramerrez is none other than Johnson, a good-looking white man whom the Girl falls in love with. So, there is an interesting interplay between white and Mexican constructions. As a road-agent, an outlaw, Johnson is

Ramerez, a Mexican; while as a gentleman, he is white. This play, therefore, although considered as a “sophisticated” or “higher class melodrama” (Gerould, 1983, p. 23), treats the characters stereotypically as melodrama commonly does. While the Indians get the brand of being uncivilized, the Mexicans—complete with their pejorative term “the greasers”—are characterized as outlaws or criminals.

The other Mexican character in *The Girl of the Golden West* is Castro, who functions similarly to the Mexican in *The Great Divide*, yet Belasco (1983) gives a clearer description:

Castro is an oily, greasy, unwashed Mexican Greaser of a low type. His clothing is partly Mexican. He is yellow, sullen, wiry, hard-faced, tricky and shifty-eyed. He has the curved legs of a man who lives in broncho. (p. 202)

Belasco also describes how other characters see a Mexican. When dragging Castro to the saloon one character says, “Come on, you oily, garlic-eating, dog-trottin’ sun-baked son of a skunk!” (p. 204). The Mexicans really have a bad fate in American melodrama. Their proper role seems to be mainly as villains.

### **White as Not a Real American**

A white man is not a real American when he fails to comply with the standard self or, even worse, if he tries to destroy it. He becomes an alien if he is, first of all, immoral. More specifically, since morality is measured by Christian (Protestant) values, somebody is immoral when he breaks Christian precepts. We can see such a person in *Legree* (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Legree is portrayed as a merciless slave owner who “can make a slave realize who he is.” His villainy and rudeness is rooted in his being a sinner.

LEGRE. My heart inly relented; there was a conflict, but sin got victory, and I set all the force of my rough nature against the conviction of my conscience. I drank and swore, was wilder and more brutal than ever. (Aiken, 1983, p. 128)

Legre becomes villainous because he fails to be a good Christian; his life is dominated by sin. His sin has driven him to disobey Christian standards, such as not drinking and swearing, and it makes him do more evil things.

LEGRE. There is a dreads, unhallowed necromancy of evil, that turns things sweetest and holiest to phantoms of horror and afright.

That pale, loving mother,—her dying prayers, her forgiving love, —wrought in my demoniac heart of sin on as a damning sentence, bringing with it fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. (p. 128)

Legree is so sinful that he cannot even read his mother's love. The demon in his heart sees his mother's prayers as a threat so that he keeps rejecting her until her death. Legree, as well as M'Closky (*The Octoroon*), is the typical villain in melodrama, a villain who at his best is a superman of crime, tireless in iniquity, implacable in vengeance, inexhaustible in evil resources (Rahil, 1967, p. 207)

M'Closky, the villain in *The Octoroon*, is discussed in comparison to Scudder. Not really good Christian characters, M'Closky and Scudder are used to differentiate a gentleman from a crook. M'Closky becomes a crook since he does not act as a gentleman by admitting his defeat, which Scudder does. Both M'Closky and Scudder love Zoe, but Scudder can accept the fact that he does not win Zoe's heart. M'Closky, on the other hand, uses every means to get Zoe even if he has to kill and steal. Scudder, therefore, is far closer to the white male Christian "self" than M'Closky. He even reminds George, Zoe's lover, that "If we can't behave like Christians, let's try to act like gentlemen" (Boucicault, 1979, p. 443).

From Scudder's mouth we also learn that a gentleman obeys the law. He "preaches" the ideal Western personality: the one who respects law and order. Scudder is the personification of a gentleman, a real white man, although not necessarily a good Christian.

SCUDDER. Here's a pictur' for a civilized community to afford: yonder a poor, ignorant savage, and round him a circle of hearts, white with revenge and hate, thirsting for his blood: you call yourselves judges—you ain't—you're jury of executioners. It is such scenes as these that bring disgrace upon our Western life. (p. 447)

On another occasion Scudder preaches:

SCUDDER. Put your hands on your naked breasts, and let every man as don't feel a real American heart there, bustin up with freedom, truth, and right, let that man step out—that's the oath I put to ye—and then say, Darn ye, go it!" (p. 448)

While these speeches clearly make an "other" of Wahnotee, the Indian, they also make "others" of other people such as M'Closky and those who

do not respect justice. Although white, they are the “other” since they are not good Christians and not gentlemen. It is also interesting to note that they are Yankees who are working in the south. Evidently, the whites make “others” of other whites in terms of their sentimental attachment to their territories: North against South or East against West. In general, however, although they “other” each other, those who are “othered” can become part of the ideal self again if they “repent,” as do the characters of Johnson in *The Girl of the Golden West* and Ghent in *The Great Divide*.

Some other whites do not fit the standard identity because they do not work decently. We can see it in the character of Cute and in the slave hunters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Cute is the example of a white man who is working his way to meet the standard, but always fails because of his lack of luck or effort. Moreover, he is not a good Christian, either. Even a successful gentleman like St. Claire is not complete until he finally “surrenders to the Lord,” or becomes a good Christian. A white man does not meet the standard identity if he is not a good Christian, not a gentleman, and—although not always—not propertied.

Stereotypical as it might sound, the aliens in American melodrama are those who are not white, not Christian, not gentlemen, and not propertied. It is hard to find in American melodrama a character who is Christian (Protestant), a gentleman, and propertied, but not white. A white man who is not a Christian, but is a gentleman and propertied, has a better chance to become “a prodigal hero” who finally meets the standard identity. A propertied white man who is not a Christian and not a gentleman, unless he experiences a drastic change, deserves only to be a villain or a bystander. On the other hand, although not propertied, as long as he is a good Christian white gentleman, he has the chance to strike gold and become a hero.

## POST-SCRIPT

Not all melodramas, however, use Christianity as the immediate moral standard. Instead, they play it as the background of the ideal American gentleman. In temperance melodrama, for instance, the emphasis is more on the “secular equivalent of a religious conversion” (Tyrrell quoted in Mason, 1993, p. 66)—the conversion from being a drunkard to an alcohol-free man. The point most often repeated was that liquor was harmful rather than useful, that the drinker tended to develop

an uncontrollable appetite for it, that it was a waste of money, and that it jeopardized the family (p. 67). In reality, as the American society changed, the preferences of the audience also changed. As we see in its newest forms in films nowadays, melodrama gradually avoided direct religious issues. Instead, it talks more about American morality in general.

Melodrama in theatre was popular well into first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When film was developed in its fullest sense toward the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, melodrama started to “move” to film industry (see Basuki, 2003). Since racial issues finally came to fore in the American landscape, the black-and-white treatment on people of color gradually changed. While melodrama did not become the major genre anymore so that the theatre world did not become the spokesman of the major American ideology, melodrama in film also experienced changes in that the use of people of color as villains were not anymore interesting to the audience.

## REFERENCES

- Aiken, G. L. 1983. Uncle Tom’s cabin. In Daniel C. Gerould (Ed.), *American Melodrama* (pp. 76-133). New York: Performing Arts Journal.
- Andreach, R. J. 1976. *Creating self in the contemporary American theatre*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois IP.
- Basuki, R. 2003. A journey across the Atlantic: the history of melodrama in western landscape. *k@ta: a Biannual Publication of the Study of Language and Literature*, 5 (1), 1 – 11.
- Belasco, D. 1983. The girl of the golden west. In Daniel C. Gerould (Ed.), *American Melodrama* (pp. 76-133). New York: Performing Arts Journal.
- Boucicault, D. 1979. The octoroon. In Katharine Rogers (Ed.), *The Meridian Classic Book of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Drama* (pp. 407-457). New York: New American Library.
- Brannigan, J. 1999. Introduction: history, power and politics in the literary artifact. In Julian Wolfreys (Ed.), *Literary Theories: A Reader and a Guide* (pp. 417-427). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bressler, C.E. 1999. *Literary criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

- Burns, E. McNall. et al. 1986. *World civilizations*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. C. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Erishman, F. 1997. The enduring myth and modern west. In G. D. Nash & R. Etulian (Eds.), *Researching Western History: Topics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (pp. 167-188). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Gallagher, C. & Greenblatt, S. 2000. *Practicing new historicism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gerould, D. C. 1983. The Americanization of melodrama. *American Melodrama*, 7-29. New York: Performing Arts Journal.
- Hall, S. 1996. Race, culture, and communications: looking backward and forward at cultural studies. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What Is Cultural Studies?: A Reader* (pp. 336-343). London: Arnold.
- Mason, J. D. 1993. *Melodrama and the myth of America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Moody, W. V. 1960. The great divide. In A. S. Downer (Ed.), *American Drama* (pp. 106-139). New York: Cromwell.
- Montrose, L. A. 1999. Shaping fantasies: figurations of gender and power in Elizabethan culture. In J. Wolfreys (Ed.), *Literary Theories: A Reader and a Guide* (pp. 439-460). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Morse, W. R. 1993. Desire and the limit of melodrama. In J. Redmond (Ed.), *Themes in Drama: Melodrama*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Rahill, F. 1967. *The world of melodrama*. University Park: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Spielvogel, J. J. 1994. *Western civilization*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. C. Minneapolis/St. Paul: West Pub.
- Wilson, G. B. 1982. *Three hundred years of American drama and theatre*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.