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# Mediation and Genre

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*This paper examines the constitutive elements of the genre of melodrama and relates them to typical Western conflict stories. It demonstrates why a conflict narrative based on the genre of melodrama tends to work against the resolution of the conflict and proposes tragedy as a more constructive genre for a conflict narrative. The paper also discusses how the mediation situation itself can constrain the possible genres that can be constructed in the process and explores the implications of those constraints for people in conflict and for the mediators facilitating a resolution.*

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**Key words:** mediation, genre, narrative, melodrama, tragedy.

## Narrative and Mediation

Most mediators, whether or not they practice the style of mediation known as narrative mediation (Winslade and Monk 2001), will recognize certain repetitive patterns in the many conflict stories to which they have been an audience. They will also acknowledge the potentially dysfunctional nature of many conflict stories and how these narratives themselves can perpetuate the conflict. Jerome Bruner writes that it is only “when we suspect we have the wrong story that we begin asking how a narrative may structure (or distort) our view of how things really are” (Bruner 2002: 24). In this

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article, I examine the typical genre of conflict stories in Western culture and ask how the dominant conflict narrative affects both individual conflicts and societal responses to them. I also consider how the situation of mediation constrains the possible genres that can be constructed in the process, and how mediators might encourage the construction of an alternative, and possibly more constructive, genre of conflict stories.

Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen (2006) have noted that, although many professional practices draw on narrative inquiry, few scholars have considered the ways in which narrative ideas function within practical settings. Charles Briggs (1996) points out how some of the assumptions that have presented obstacles to exploring the relationship between narrative and conflict have been challenged. And Sara Cobb suggests that “the ‘materialization’ of the storytelling metaphor, although it challenges core assumptions in mediation theory, affords both practitioners and researchers new ways to understand and intervene in conflict” (1994: 49).

Cobb defines the “second generation practice of conflict resolution” as practice in which “mediators interact with disputants so as to evolve the conflict stories, reformulate relationships, reframe the past, and rebuild the future” (Cobb 2000–2001: 1029). This kind of practice is now increasingly informed by knowledge about narrative. John Winslade and Gerald Monk’s model of narrative mediation (Winslade and Cotter 1997; Winslade and Monk 2001; Winslade 2006; Winslade, Monk, and Cotter 1998) and Cobb’s storytelling model of mediation are clearly founded on the premise that conflict is based on certain dysfunctional and self-perpetuating narratives that must be deconstructed in order to lead to a relational shift between the parties.

This recognition of the predominance of storytelling is not new. Many researchers have acknowledged that human beings are predisposed to the production of narratives as a way of making sense of the world (Bruner 1990). In particular, people like to tell stories in order to try to make sense of conflict in their lives. Gergen and Gergen write that “there is something particularly effective about listening to others’ narratives that crosses boundaries of meaning and brings people into a state of mutuality” (2006: 117).

Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith (2000) describe conflict stories as rituals designed to comfort the storyteller with their familiarity — familiarity provides a link between the concept of a story and the broader concept of a narrative. Often, what makes a conflict story familiar is that its foundation lies in a culturally recognizable narrative.

The concept of *story* differs from the concept of *narrative*. Jane Baron and Julia Epstein defined “story” to mean “an account of an event or set of events that unfolds over time and whose beginning, middle, and end are intended to resolve (or question the possibility of resolving) the problem set in motion at the start” (1994: 147). They define “narrative” as “a broader

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enterprise that encompasses the recounting (production) and receiving (reception) of stories . . . [that] organize[s] certain kinds of problems into a form that renders culturally meaningful both the problems and their possible resolution” (Baron and Epstein 1994: 147). In other words, a narrative reflects the cumulative effect of separate stories as their aggregate meaning comes to light. In conflict resolution, narratives are “recurring accounts of social interactions . . . made up of socially constructed meanings arising from the interaction of social, cognitive, and rhetorical forces” (Gilkerson 1992: 867). As Cloke and Goldsmith write, the “narrative structure of conflict stories is the framework on which storytellers hang their assumptions and expectations, arrange their metaphors, and set up their filters and lenses” (Cloke and Goldsmith 2000: 25).

Culturally typical narratives can promote mutuality, but they can also encourage the repetition of dysfunctional narratives. Conflict narratives in particular tend to defeat the promise of mutuality by their particular nature. As Cobb explains:

Conflict stories are notoriously rigid, readily re-enacted, and recalcitrant to change, not because the persons are unwilling to resolve conflicts but, rather, because the conflict stories themselves are self-perpetuating — they exhibit “closure” . . . and seal off alternative interpretations to themselves (Cobb 1994: 54).

Understanding the relationship between mediation and narrative requires considering not only the *content* of conflict stories but also the *process* in which those stories are told, deconstructed, and reconstructed. This approach is a post-structural one. Cobb writes that structuralist approaches have largely been used to examine and address narrative structures and features *as variables* of communication processes; in contrast, post-structural approaches have been used to examine storytelling as a practice. She further argues that a post-structural approach is most useful in studying storytelling in mediation because post-structural approaches enable the examination of the *practice* of storytelling as it functions reflexively to construct the context in which stories are told (Cobb 1994). I believe that genre provides a post-structural mechanism for examining both the stories that are told and the process of the storytelling.

## Defining Genre

Genre can be defined as a class of stories that share certain norms, tendencies, and expectations that are recognized by both the narrator or author and the audience (Frye 1957). But genre is more than just a method of classifying the content of certain stories. John Frow (2006) has drawn an analogy between genre and theorist Michel Foucault’s concept of “discourse.” He suggests that genres are:

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- practices: they carry out an action;
  - systematic: they are relatively coherent in the way they work; and
  - formative: they build a weight of meaning around the categories that they describe (e.g., whether a particular emotion is “good” or “bad”).

Frow explains that “what we learn in ‘doing’ genre (in performing and transforming it), is the values we share or don’t share with others and the means with which to challenge or defend them” (2006: 144).

Genre provides the rules and conventions by which narratives constrain narrators to normative meanings. It provides limits on what kinds of stories can be told in certain situations. As literary theorist Jacques Derrida wrote: “As soon as a genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Derrida 1992: 224–225). The norms invoked by genres are observable and can reveal the force of ideology behind them (Beebe 1994). Peter Goodrich argues that genres can be analyzed in order to identify the values, beliefs, and attitudes that stories told within that genre “are likely to adhere to, that are persuasive to it or that are of particular relevance for it” (1986: 177).

What is the relationship between genre and mediation? Genre can be a useful tool for examining the content of conflict stories and for identifying what Joseph Folger and Robert Baruch Bush (1994) call “an underlying orientation to conflict” and can provide a framework for exploring the ways in which these orientations are driven by broad ideologies about social relations and social intervention. Genre can also reveal the implicit narrative structure of conflict stories, including the interrelated component parts such as roles, plotline, themes. Genre further provides a set of rules for the construction of the “logical, causal linkages between actors, their actions, and outcomes defined as problematic” (Cobb 1994: 52) and demonstrates the way in which narratives position people in relation to one another (Winslade and Monk 2001). In this way, genre can be used to identify the ways in which a conflict narrative demonstrates coherence. This is particularly important because coherence provides stability and seals off the discourse that could be used to challenge the meaning that disputants have assigned to a particular conflict (Cobb 1994: 56).

Genre can also be used as a tool to examine the process of telling stories in the mediation context because stories representative of a particular genre may be told only in certain types of mediation situations, and certain situations seem to invoke the telling of a particular genre of stories. To fully explicate the content of a particular genre of story, one must also explore the context in which it is likely to be told, considering such factors as the status of the storyteller, the intended audience, and the purpose for which the story is told in those particular circumstances.

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## Melodrama and the Western Conflict Narrative

Examining a number of individual conflict stories is likely to reveal a typical underlying narrative. One way of analyzing narrative is to fit it into a classic literary form (Propp 1968; Burke 1969; Antaki 1994). Accordingly, once a typical conflict narrative is identified, it is possible to classify it within a classic literary genre and then to examine the genre's features and how they might affect the resolution of the conflict.

Cloke and Goldsmith (2000) describe the fundamental prototype of Western conflict stories as the fairy tale, in which the main characters are the princess, the dragon, and the prince. Many of the attributes of fairy tales that they identify, however, are also characteristic of the genre of classical melodrama, and it is this genre that I use in this article to examine the content of conflict stories and the process of telling them in mediation.

French playwright René-Charles Guilbert de Pixérécourt is commonly referred to as the "father of melodrama" as he, in effect, developed the genre (Marcoux 1992). His plays define the prototype of melodrama, with a strong moral message delivered via the actions of clearly virtuous or evil characters cast in the standard roles of heroine, villain, and judge or other authority figure. (The films of Hollywood director Douglas Sirk are more recent examples.) Pixérécourt's (1803) play *Coelina ou l'enfant du mystère* ("Coelina") is the play most often associated with the birth of French melodrama and the melodramatic genre. It tells the story of an orphaned girl, Coelina, who is in the care of her ward, Dufour, the brother of Coelina's supposed father. Coelina is in love with Dufour's son Stephany. But Truguelin, the brother of Coelina's deceased mother, is a wicked man who plots to gain control of Coelina's inheritance by arranging a marriage between her and his son. When Truguelin's plans are thwarted, he reveals that Dufour's brother was not, in fact, Coelina's father. As it turns out, her real father is Francisque, an impoverished mute man who has been sheltering at Dufour's house. At this news, Dufour declares Coelina a "child of adultery" and banishes her and Francisque from his home. For the remainder of the play Dufour, with the assistance of various other characters, particularly the reputable doctor Andrevon, attempts to unravel the confusion and uncover the truth about Coelina's parentage. Although Francisque knows all, he is mute and accordingly unable to explain matters without difficulty. The play concludes with the truth revealed, Coelina's virtue restored, her marriage to Stephany, and the villain's imprisonment.

Ben Singer writes that the term "melodrama" is notoriously ambiguous, suggesting that the most useful way to deal with its "generic slipperiness" is to define it as a "cluster concept" encompassing a number of elements (2001: 54) including moral polarization, overwrought emotion, pathos, nonclassical narrative mechanics, and sensationalism. The typical Western conflict narrative incorporates a combination of these elements. Moral

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polarization is demonstrated by the usual distinction between the storyteller (portrayed by himself or herself as a morally praiseworthy, innocent, and passive victim) and the other party (portrayed by the storyteller as someone of morally bad intentions and character who has actively caused the conflict). Most conflicts also involve a high level of emotion. Conflict stories also tend to demonstrate nonclassical narrative mechanics. Things happen with breathtaking peripety (a literary term for reversals of circumstances or turning points), and there is often not a logical and comprehensive sequence of events. Finally, conflict stories are sometimes overdramatized and even, on occasion, sensationalistic.

In a sense, I believe that people do not simply tell conflict stories that fit the genre of melodrama; rather, I argue that people can be “told” by the melodramatic conflict narrative. Humans are predisposed to finding meaning by telling stories, and the various narrative forms available to them are to some degree culturally determined. The Western melodramatic conflict narrative is produced and reinforced through storytelling as a social activity and has the effect of creating, not just describing, identities. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (1995) argue that these kinds of socially constructed narratives can be hegemonic because they articulate and reproduce existing ideologies and relationships of power and inequality. They assert that hegemonic narratives function as mechanisms of social control by:

- instructing listeners/readers about what behaviors are expected of them and warning them of the consequences of nonconformity, and
- hiding the grounds for their own plausibility, by seeming logical but diverting attention from the way in which that logic is constructed.

When people confront conflict, they have a ready-made and culturally acceptable narrative structure with which to explain and tell it, although this choice is likely not a conscious one. Thus, I argue that people can be captured by the melodramatic narrative rather than strategically choosing it as a way to achieve the desired outcome. Often, I believe, they are simply unaware of an alternative narrative structure that could be used to tell their story. And why should they consider alternatives, when such a culturally dominant narrative is readily at hand? In this way, the culturally recognized conflict narrative imposes itself on those in conflict, acting as an instrument of social power so subtle that people in conflict often fail to recognize its influence.

As a consequence of adopting the melodramatic narrative to describe conflict situations, individuals embroiled in these conflicts are, I believe, less able to see the complexity of their situations as well as plausible alternative explanations. They tend to arrive quickly at a preconceived notion of what a fair and appropriate outcome is, and find it difficult to step back and

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explore other options. Mediation, however, is particularly suitable for challenging this kind of hegemony, and for suggesting alternative and more constructive narratives.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the attributes of the genre of melodrama and how they might affect conflict stories can provide us with new perspectives about conflict. In particular, this examination can help identify underlying orientations to conflict and broad ideologies about social relations that affect conflict, character roles and positioning of the parties, and typical plotlines and themes, and how these work together to promote coherence and seal off discursive sites of contested meaning.

### ***The Melodramatic Orientation***

Examining different literary genres can reflect the different ideologies, values, and expectations that underlie them. Folger and Bush write that people have “conflict ideologies” that “carry implicit notions of what conflict is and expectations about what moves or responses are possible or required in specific contexts, what role third parties play, and what outcomes are desirable” (1994: 8). Exploring conflict narratives as a genre can reveal underlying orientations to conflict that frame the ways in which conflict stories and the interactions between people in conflict are constructed.

Examining the ideas and assumptions that underlie the genre of melodrama can provide insight into some of the important factors in conflict. For example, where conflict arises in a melodramatic narrative, it upsets the moral order (i.e., the normal or right state of the world). Thus, in melodrama the appropriate resolution to conflict is the restoration of the status quo. This entails a focus on the past and assumes that the way things *should be* is the way things *have been*, thus limiting discussion about the ways in which the status quo could be changed and even improved. This expectation of what Peter Brooks (1976) has called “dream justice,” a resolution in which the virtuous are rewarded, the villain is justifiably punished, and the world returns to its “normal” state (i.e., the status quo) has also been identified by Cloke and Goldsmith as an assumption present in all conflict stories: that things *should be* the way the protagonist expects them to be and that conflict stories will come to “magical conclusions that will relieve our pain, renew our lives, and revitalize our relationships with one another” (2000: 207). But the irony of dream justice as embodied in the typical conflict narrative is that, in reality, restoration of the status quo is generally unlikely or impossible and would not, in any case, lead to the promised catharsis (Brooks 1976). The melodramatic focus on dream justice as the one right outcome also cuts off a range of possible resolutions to the conflict. Melodramatic indignation is an instrument of manipulation, securing blind actions instead of scrutinizing options (Heilman 1968).

Melodramatic narratives achieve a fictional certainty by focusing on individuals and individual action rather than on the broader societal or

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contextual elements of the event (the conflict) in question. For example, in *Coelina*, Truguelin is portrayed as wholly responsible for Coelina's suffering by forcing Coelina's mother to undergo a second sham marriage and then concealing this fact. Although Truguelin is clearly blameworthy to some extent for these actions, it is overly simplistic to say that Coelina's subsequent difficulties are solely caused by him. There are other characters in the play who have the opportunity to avoid or at least ease her suffering, had they chosen to take certain actions. For example, it is arguable that Coelina's mother could have refused to go ahead with the second sham marriage in the first place. Or alternatively, she could have told Coelina the truth about her real father's identity before she died. Coelina's real father, Francisque, could also have disclosed what he knew at an earlier time. Coelina's guardian, Dufour, could have followed his heart and made further inquiries rather than initially taking Truguelin at his word.

Melodrama's focus on the villain also diverts attention from the larger societal context. For example, Coelina's suffering may be said to have been caused by society's mistreatment of children born out of wedlock or to arise from her dependence, as a woman, on her father/guardian or husband for her well-being. These systemic problems are obscured when blame focuses solely on the villain.

Melodramatic narratives convert the complex chain of events that typically lead to a conflict into a compact monocausal account focusing on individual action. This personification of moral evil simplifies the often complex question of who bears responsibility for causing suffering (Feigenson 1999–2000). Audiences can thus enjoy the seductive pleasures of melodramatic neatness without acknowledging alternatives or considering the effects on those that the narrative excludes (Smith 1973).

Accepting one single sufficient explanation for conflict at the expense of other possible (and possibly better) explanations can have negative consequences. In particular, this oversimplification can encourage us to view conflict in terms of personal rather than social or systemic responsibility, and a focus on villains can encourage the "blame game" and divert attention from the larger societal issues and mutual contributions that may underlie the conflict.

Narrative mediation, the mediation style developed by Winslade and Monk, is designed to work against the repression, oversimplification, and exaggeration that melodrama entails. Narrative mediation seeks to specifically address the impact of social and cultural norms and contexts that limit the parties' possibilities for resolving their conflict (Winslade and Monk 2001).

## **Melodramatic Positioning of the Parties**

Melodrama's characters are often stock types, stereotypes, and wooden abstractions (Rahill 1967). Melodrama depends on Manichean<sup>2</sup>



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dichotomies, and melodramatic characters represent extremes of good and evil. In order to emphasize this, the characters are monopathic in the sense that they are whole and undivided (Marcoux 1992), and within melodrama character complexity rarely develops.

In melodrama, characters are wholly good or wholly bad, and completely weak or completely strong (Heilman 1968). Whichever side of the moral coin the characters fall on, they are “notable for their integrity, their thorough exploitation of a way of being or of a critical conjuncture” (Brooks 1976: 36). They are either good or evil, and these character traits are highly personalized (Brooks 1976) and are depicted as essential to the person’s nature rather than occasional responses to contextual factors.

Sara Cobb’s description of a particular mediation provides a good example of how these typified characters can be portrayed. In her example, one party identifies the other one as the cause of the problem and presents her as a completely negative character:

Steve describes himself as helpless either to predict or affect Beth’s “emotional storms” which “toss him about,” and he feels “capsized.” Steve links events together in a way that construes Beth as irrational and in such a fashion that the consequences of her action could well bring about the demise of the firm that he worked so hard to build. The morality that emerges is one that heralds Steve’s sacrifice and hard work over the years, his rationality, and the overall goal of coherent leadership of the firm, toward not only its profitability, but also the maintenance of the sense of “family” that helps foster trust and good relations across staff and between staff and partners. This opening permitted Steve to elaborate his position as victim, as well as the moral frames that function as the platform for his legitimacy and Beth’s delegitimacy (she had not made similar sacrifices — in fact many “goodies” had come easy for her — she was not rational and she cared little for the long-term viability of the firm, much less the “family” environment) (Cobb 2000–2001: 1023).

Cloke and Goldsmith also described this phenomenon. They write that “a single characteristic is selected, isolated, and exaggerated while other characteristics that reveal a complex nature are suppressed, as are individual variations . . . [leading to a] one dimensional representation of a complex person” (2000: 28).

Melodrama focuses on *what* the characters do rather than *why* they do it (Marcoux 1992). Discussion thus focuses on impact rather than intent, which is assumed according to the character’s role within the story. Character development is subordinate to the story line (Booth 1965). Melodramatic characters are true to their superficial appearances and consistently think and behave in the same way (Brooks 1976). Characters are never indecisive and accordingly do not have to choose between alternative

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courses of action (Heilman 1968). The appropriate course of action is obvious because it is what a “good” or “evil” character would do.

Within melodrama, characters’ behavior is interpreted by their stock characterization (MacIntyre 1984). The genre eradicates “any characterological complexity, emotional entanglement, or sentiment in favor of a focus on physical action and violence” (Singer 2001: 53). Events are caused by individual human agency and actions are always explicable in terms of the individual’s characteristics (Feigenson 1999–2000: 745). Thus, bad characters perform despicable actions, and virtuous characters demonstrate only virtuous conduct.

Characters in their wholeness are also devoid of psychology — they have no inner conflict and display no self-doubt (Heilman 1968; Brooks 1976; Marcoux 1992). Any conflict is between the characters rather than internal (Heilman 1968). This kind of characterization leaves little room for a discussion of mutual contributions to the conflict or for real recognition of the other’s intentions and concerns.

The two main roles in a melodramatic conflict narrative are the victim and the villain. Cobb describes how, in the mediation I alluded to earlier, one party establishes his position as legitimate victim while simultaneously presenting his opponent as illegitimate (Cobb 2000–2001). When a party in conflict casts himself or herself as innocent victim and the other party as villain, the requirements of those roles constrain both parties and lead to particular conflict dynamics.

The binary opposition between virtue and vice is reinforced within melodrama by appeals to the audience’s emotions. Melodramatic narratives aim to trigger in the audience an agitation arising from observing extreme moral injustice (Singer 2001). In order to achieve this, these stories incite such negative emotions as hatred, fear, and vindictiveness toward the villain and such positive emotions as sympathy toward the hero or heroine.

In melodrama, the villain embodies evil and takes an active role to dissimulate, betray, and undo the moral order. He thinks, chooses, initiates action, alters his plans, makes new ones, and pursues his desires with relentless single-mindedness (Booth 1965). (In traditional melodrama, the villain was nearly always male. In the unusual situation in which there was a female villain, she demonstrated stereotypically masculine characteristics, or was the reluctant puppet of a more powerful man [Hyslop 1985].) Frank Rahill describes him as a “fomentor of conspiracies, deviser of snares, abductor of maidens, persecutor of innocence” (1967: 12) and “a superman of crime, tireless in iniquity, implacable in vengeance, inexhaustible in evil resource, ingenuity, energy, sublime persistence” (1967: 207). The villain’s motivation is usually inadequate to explain the quantity of villainy unleashed (Brooks 1976), and the disproportion between his motivation and actions encourages the audience to recognize the villain as truly evil:

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the less motivation he demonstrates, the more his actions appear volitional, and thus worthy of condemnation (Brooks 1976).

Virtue in melodrama is generally represented by a young heroine (Brooks 1976), an impregnable virtuous ingénue, and her virtue has iron-clad invincibility (Rahill 1967). Cloke and Goldsmith write that many conflict stories “contain an assumption that people can and should be perfect” and that people edit their conflict stories to omit everything that presents them in a less than perfect light (2000: 23). This is consistent with the requirement of a virtuous protagonist in melodrama.

Melodrama always involves a fight to recognize virtue (Brooks 1976). In melodramatic narratives, the recognition of the hero’s or heroine’s virtue is of primary importance and must be demonstrated before any resolution is possible. The story ends with public recognition of virtue and evil and the eradication of evil to reward the virtuous. Melodrama primarily reinforces the idea of the morally good by providing a very public representation and recognition of virtue (Brooks 1976).

Heroines in melodrama are usually passive, reactive characters. Evil reduces virtue to powerlessness (Brooks 1976). This can also be seen, according to Cloke and Goldsmith (2000), in conflict stories; they argue that the cause of failures is presented as being beyond the protagonist’s control and that this leads to an expectation of helplessness. Cobb refers to this as a “victim story” (2000–2001: 1022).

The innocent heroine under difficulty frequently succumbs to despair and a sense of hopelessness (Heilman 1968), which would not support an adaptive resolution to conflict and in a real-life conflict situation could lead to self-defeating behavior. Heilman describes melodrama as incorporating a sense of “innocence neurosis,” making one “always a victim who does not deserve his fate, and who finds it irrational and untimely” (1968: 114).

Melodramatic narratives focus on the heroine’s suffering (Feigenson 1999–2000) and ask the audience to suffer with her (Brooks 1976). Pathos is a quality that excites pity or sadness and comes from the Greek word meaning suffering. Singer quotes Aristotle’s definition of pity as “a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might imagine to happen to ourselves” (Singer 2001: 144).

This need to identify with the victim gives rise to a problem with which, Mark Mullen argues, melodrama is characteristically concerned: the problem of expressing the radical interiority and communication of an individual’s lived and felt experience, particularly that of the suffering heroine (Mullen 1998). In melodrama, the heroine’s suffering must be communicated to the father figure, another pivotal character in melodrama, in order that he may alleviate it.

Another premise of melodrama is that the heroine cannot resolve her own conflict. Justice is dispensed by an authoritarian father figure who

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recognizes and rewards the heroine's virtue and protects her, which reinforces her passivity and dependence on others and effectively limits her ability to demonstrate independence.

In melodrama, the responsibility for judging is that of "those who should rightfully be the protectors of virtue, especially the older generation of uncles, guardians and sovereigns" (Brooks 1976: 33). The father figure in melodrama is frequently the heroine's actual father or guardian, but sometimes a larger-scale patriarch, such as a king, military commander, or judge. (The role of the mediator as father figure is further discussed later.)

## Melodramatic Plotlines and Coherence

Melodramatic narratives have a very particular plot structure and demonstrate coherence by overly simplifying certain aspects of the storyline and character development. Melodrama deliberately conceals complexities in the causal linkages between the characters, their actions, and the problematic outcomes to ensure that the narrative is coherent, as many of the underlying complexities would risk undermining the convincing nature of the path to "dream justice."

Classical melodramatic plots usually consists of three acts: the first demonstrates the good characters in a state of virtue and happiness, the second involves the "primal scene" in which this state comes under threat due to the actions of the villain, and the final act is the scene of the trial, in which virtue and vice are recognized, the villain gets his comeuppance, and virtue is rewarded. But melodramatic plots do not follow a logical cause-and-effect structure and have great tolerance for outrageous coincidence and implausibility (Singer 2001). Lea Jacobs has suggested that the heart of melodrama is the element of "situation" (Singer 2001: 41). Singer defines situation as "a striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic tension" (Singer 2001: 41). The main instance of situation in melodrama is the event that causes the main virtuous character to suddenly plunge from extreme heights of happiness to extreme depths of despair (Brooks 1976). Singer points out, however, that situation in melodrama need not be a brief, climactic local instant of arrested action — it may be a much more diffuse condition of frustration or futility throughout the story (Singer 2001).

Melodrama also assumes that the conflict has a clear starting point, usually some action by the "bad guy" that further serves to overly simplify the depiction of conflict, which is depicted as something bad, caused solely by evil characters, and for which those characters should be punished (Folger and Bush 1994).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, blame is a fundamental sentiment in melodramatic narratives. Heilman suggests that "everyone wants to feel 'right,' and one of the ways of doing this is to put the finger on those who are wrong," in a melodramatic situation "it is total defense or attack"

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(Heilman 1968: 129). But blame provokes negative feelings, such as shame, guilt, anger, and defensiveness and can also hinder problem solving and exacerbate conflict. For example, Susan Walzer and Thomas Oles (2003) found that high levels of blame and feelings of victimization are correlated with high levels of conflict.

Where a person's conflict story is constrained by the melodramatic genre, the person's understanding and experience of the conflict is likely to be similarly limited. For example, the melodramatic genre encourages the storyteller to focus blame on the other party and discourages the storyteller from acknowledging how his or her own behavior might contribute to the conflict. Melodrama allows us to "identify all suffering with that which is due to external causes" (Heilman 1968: 105). Heilman argues that because all phenomenon in melodrama occurs outside the human character, we miss the inner action of sentience and responsibility: "If the disaster comes from human evil, it is the evil of others, not ourselves: we are innocent, and we can grieve, if we wish, instead of looking more steadily at ourselves" (1968: 35). We are without complicity in evil. We prefer finding external villains to blame rather than discovering inner flaws.

## **Melodrama and Process**

Despite mediation's promise as a method of conflict resolution by which the parties to the dispute are empowered to express what most concerns them and to resolve the conflict on their own terms, the process of mediation can still privilege certain stories and silence others in the same way as a purely "legal" dispute resolution process such as litigation. Charles Briggs stresses the importance of a "close study of who controls the processes by which stories are told and retold, as well as how they are interpreted, challenged and co-opted" (1996: 30). But discussion within the field about how to develop "a coherent theoretical frame for understanding and evaluating the storytelling process within mediation practice" (Cobb 1994: 49) has been limited.

Because genre is "a relationship between textual structures and the situations that occasion them" (Frow 2006: 13), it can be a useful tool for examining the process of telling stories about conflict in the situation of mediation. Genre affects what can be referred to and how, as well as the status and authority of what the speaker says (Goodrich 1986). To examine the process of storytelling from the perspective of genre, it is important first to define the "situation" that occasions the particular genre, and what the rules of storytelling are within that situation.

### ***Mediation as "Situation"***

The situation of mediation constrains the rhetorical actions that are performed in response to that frame. It provides a set of generic possibilities;

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conveys the purpose, aim, and direction of accompanying activities; and provides a constellation of meanings (made up of ongoing social activity, the role relationships involved, and the symbolic or rhetorical channel). It also sets the boundaries for what one can expect to happen at certain stages and what one can do if those expectations are not confirmed.

The mediation frame is set in a number of ways. The people who facilitate the process call themselves “mediators” and the mediation may happen at a “mediation center.” It may occur because of a statutory or contractual obligation to undertake the process known as “mediation.” Premediation or intake procedures set up certain expectations about the process. In the mediation itself, the mediator provides continuing cues about how to use discourse throughout the process.

The process includes established requirements for who participates, what authority they have to speak, (and for who is a relevant stakeholder in the conflict and who is not), and even where the parties and the mediators sit, as well as what kinds of furniture (e.g., white boards) they use. Depending on which mediation model is being used, certain things are seen to be relevant and others irrelevant.

Mediation has its own particular discursive qualities. The medium is largely verbal. Each disputant is the author of his or her own story, which is received by the other disputant and the mediator(s). Storytellers are assumed to have authority about the matters of which they speak and to speak with credibility.

The formal organization of mediation is based on a spoken, somewhat structured order of speech (more so in a facilitative model, less so in narrative/transformational models). The relationship between the authors of the stories told and reality is typically assumed to be honest, open, and “real.” Although the process assumes that the stories told within mediation are told truthfully, the process also anticipates that arguments will arise and thus that some behaviors will be defensive.

Mediation’s rhetorical structure is based on the expectations that senders and receivers of messages will speak in their own voices, but as part of the process, the disputants’ stories will sometimes be restated, and in that process, they will be reframed. The disputants are assumed to have equal power. Modality starts with a factual statement of affairs, moves toward possible states and expressions of preferences, and leads to possible negotiation and agreement.

Mediation also has its own thematic content and set of topics, including kinds of actors, recurrent types of conflicts, forms of argumentation, and resolutions, such as the stereotypically aggressive and unsympathetic insurance company representative, the unscrupulous landlord, the controlling lawyer, the endlessly repetitive neighborhood fence disputes, and the common resolution when parties are close to agreement about a financial issue: split the difference.

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### ***Competing Narratives***

Competing narratives are a feature of mediation. Cobb writes that typically in mediation the parties “tell their story, launching moral frames that provide the basis for their own legitimacy, while delegitimizing the Other. Paradoxically, mutual blame is the outcome.” This process of mutual blaming then leads to a situation in which “both sides refute the victimization of the Other in a struggle to occupy the place of the victim” (2000–2001: 1030).

The order in which each party tells his or her story seems also to have a significant impact on the mediation. Sara Cobb and Leonard Rifkin (1991) have argued that the first party to tell his or her story in mediation can be at an advantage. They have discussed how the first story told dominates both the first and then subsequent mediation sessions, and have examined the interaction between competing stories. They found that the response story tends to be a reaction or revision to the first story rather than a true alternative (Cobb and Rifkin 1991a, 1991b).

Using melodrama as a model, it is possible to hypothesize about how the response story in mediation can be a reaction to or revision of the first story. The first party’s telling of his story immediately casts the other party as the villain, preemptively challenging the latter’s right to be heard. Accordingly, the second storyteller must counter this before being able to tell her story. This is because, in a melodramatic narrative, resolution hinges on the victim’s moral legitimacy. Accordingly, the responding party is likely to try to cast doubt on the first storyteller’s morality. In addition, the responding party is likely to have been blamed, making her more likely to deflect blame back onto the first storyteller. In melodrama, the only two roles are victim and villain.

### ***The Mediator’s Role***

Folger and Bush (1994) have considered how underlying orientations to conflict shape expectations about third-party involvement. Cobb (1994) has also suggested that an understanding of the implicit narrative structure of conflict stories clarifies the mediator’s role. A focus on the melodramatic genre of conflict narratives, I believe, can provide insight into the parties’ likely response to and engagement with the mediator.

In melodrama, the opponent’s depiction as immoral and untrustworthy makes it impossible for the virtuous victim to reach agreement with the “bad guy,” so resolution must be imposed by a third party. It is thus the role of an authoritative father figure to clarify the facts and identify the truth, so that he can dispense dream justice. Given the importance of virtue in a melodramatic narrative, it is also likely that each storyteller who perceives himself or herself as the victim will promote his or her virtue to — and seek sympathy from — the mediator. Both of these things work directly against a process of transformative empowerment and are unlikely to help in the resolution of the conflict.

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## Resolving the Conflict

Clearly, conflict stories told in the melodramatic genre create myriad barriers to conflict resolution. The dysfunctional characteristics of the narrative tend to be self-perpetuating, which further exacerbates the problem. Cobb (2000–2001) argues that, by their nature, conflict narratives force participants into a cycle in which they repeatedly reinforce the coherence and integrity of their own stories.

Cobb's work on the storytelling model of mediation has much in common with Winslade and Monk's (2001) approach to narrative mediation. Both emphasize the importance of narrative and the role of the parties' conflict narratives. In particular, both also acknowledge such typically dysfunctional characteristics of conflict narratives as:

- how the parties are positioned in relation to each other (e.g., victim/villain),
- the oversimplification of complex situations,
- the frequency of themes based on notions of morality and cultural value systems, and
- their self-perpetuating nature.

Both models also focus on the step of destabilizing, deconstructing, or “opening up” the parties' conflict narratives. Winslade writes that “[t]he goal of mediation from a narrative perspective can be described as achieving some degree of deconstruction of the discourses at work in the production of the dispute, and of the relational positions offered to the participants within such discourses” (2006: 512). Cobb's (2000–2001) theory differs from Winslade and Monk's (2001) model in that she describes a structured process for destabilizing the parties' conflict narratives based on an analysis of research into turning points and positioning. She is precise about prescribing the order in which turning point shifts should be made in order to maximize the potential for a better formed story that will lead to a relational shift between the parties. She suggests that the deconstructive process will be most beneficial if it takes place in the following sequence:

- reduce the legitimacy of the speaker's construction of him or herself,
- increase the legitimacy of the speaker's construction of the other party, and then
- create a circular logic displaying the interdependence of the actors' actions.

Considering conflict narratives through the genre of melodrama supports the logic of Cobb's sequence of deconstruction. The melodramatic plot hinges on the heroine's virtue. Once this legitimacy is reduced, the



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narrative is opened up for examination, a process that also gives the party cast in the role of the villain some legitimacy and an opportunity to speak. Accepting the other party as a more complex and not entirely bad character should help improve the communication between the parties and divert attention from the mediator because the party originally cast as the heroine/victim will no longer be completely dependent on the father figure for resolution and will be empowered to communicate directly with the other party.

Walzer and Oles's findings from their study of ex-spouses in conflict also support such a process. They found that a process of story revision by which the parties recognized their own responsibility and developed more interactional explanations for their divorce led to decreased levels of conflict (Walzer and Oles 2003). They wrote that these divorce stories did not end happily ever after or achieve dream justice but that they could conclude more positively if the parties recognized that they were "in a new chapter, and one in which they [felt] perhaps less righteous, but more wise and in control of their fates" (Walzer and Oles 2003: 199)

Cobb's third step involves explicitly acknowledging the complexity of the situation and challenging simplistic attributions of blame. Winslade and Monk (2001) extend this argument further with their consideration of larger societal stories and their effect upon the stories of individuals in conflict. Melodrama diverts attention from larger systemic causes of conflict in order to individualize blame. Addressing such larger issues explicitly in the mediation can, I believe, lead to a more productive discussion about the possibilities of resolution.

### **An Alternative Genre?**

Winslade (2006) suggests three goals for a narrative mediator: to create the relational conditions for the growth of an alternative story, to build a story of relationship that is incompatible with the continuing dominance of the conflict, and to open space in which people can shift their discursive positions. Cobb (2000–2001) also argues that parties should construct a newly evolved story based on reformulated relationships, reframing the past, and rebuilding the future. Cheryl Picard and Kenneth Melchin (2007) suggest that this alternative story should be based on cooperation and mutual respect.

Given that I have argued that the genre of melodrama is a dysfunctional one for conflict stories, a logical question is what is a better genre for an alternative conflict narrative? In discussing the process of how to encourage relational shifts that would be likely to lead to a better story, Cobb (2006) refers to the use of tragic irony. This passing reference to the genre of tragedy deserves a more detailed examination because a story told in the tragic genre may, in fact, be a more productive conflict story.

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In everyday conversation, the term “tragedy” is used fairly loosely and often refers simply to the undesirable consequences of a particular event. Tragedy as a literary form, however, has a quite distinct meaning. One of its key characteristics is “dividedness” (Heilman 19687). Unlike the monopathic characters of melodrama, tragic characters are internally divided, giving rise to contradictions and inconsistencies and their actions are constrained by “different imperatives that correspond to different and perhaps irreconcilable needs and ideals” (Heilman 19689). These imperatives may take the form of an overriding obligation, some divine/moral/civil law, a duty, an honor, or simply conscience. An individual’s desires and ambitions may come into conflict with these broader systemic considerations, giving rise to “tragic tension” (Heilman 1968).

In tragedy, “division means choice: there are alternatives, and man must select one or the other” (Heilman 1968: 14) Choice requires strength and consciousness, however. The melodramatic heroine, who is fundamentally weak, unable to make choices, and resigned to her fate, is too weak to become a tragic figure (Heilman 1968).

Rather than affirming the social order, tragedy “countenances its contradictions and explores the possibility that conflicts may be neither resolved nor mediated” (Aristodemou 2000: 32) While melodrama insists on total victory or defeat, tragedy “defines life as the paradoxical union of the two” (Heilman 1968: 154). Tragic narratives “avoid easy classifications and facile resolutions” and go instead “beyond good and evil” (Aristodemou 2000: 65). The tragic hero is never simply a loser in a social conflict nor a simple victor over evil (Heilman 1968).

Tragedy involves the unsuccessful protagonist’s efforts to escape his destiny, and his acceptance of and growth through suffering (Heilman 1968). In the tragic view of reality, “man salvages, from the ruins of the present, the essential human powers on which continuity depends (a quite different thing from a melodramatic victory over an enemy). This may take place whether spiritual regeneration coexists with a new well-being in life . . . or man lives on in a paradoxical union of suffering and new wisdom . . . or comes to a new insight before dying” (Heilman 1968: 160). Unlike melodrama, which ends with total victory or total defeat, in the tragic narrative something vital is saved (Heilman 1968). Tragedy explores the nature and meaning of self-determination (Guay 2006).

Table One displays some of the main contrasting features of melodrama and tragedy that are relevant in the context of conflict narratives.

Mediation provides an opportunity for those in conflict to move away from the melodramatic conflict narrative and to evolve their conflict narrative into a story that is more tragic in style. Mediators can use a number of techniques to encourage such a shift.

Irony, according to Cobb, can be used to shift the parties’ views of themselves as one-dimensional and morally polarized to characterizations

**Table One**  
**Contrasting Features of Melodrama and Tragedy**

<b>Melodrama</b>	<b>Tragedy</b>
One-dimensional, morally polarized characters	Complex, internally divided characters
Focus on <i>what</i> the characters do and the impact of their actions	Focus on <i>why</i> the characters act as they do and their conflicting intentions
Individualized and externalized blame	Acknowledgment of conflicting imperatives, social and contextual factors, mutual contributions
Passive protagonist, dependent on others for resolution, submission to outcome	Active protagonist, capable of self-determination, interdependence, choices
Focus on the past and restoring the status quo, dream justice	Focus on the future and embracing change, paradoxical union of victory and defeat
Conflict upsets the moral order, suffering must be avoided / alleviated	Conflict is an opportunity for acceptance of and growth through suffering

that are more complex and internally divided (Cobb 2006). The mediator can ask questions that explore what Cobb calls the “underbelly” of those traits that a participant views positively (at least when that person possesses that trait herself), a process that can help destabilize that party’s position in the discourse, creating space for the other party to recognize and sympathize with the speaker.

For example, one party may see herself as “organized,” while the other may view her behavior as cold. A discussion of how one person’s organizational skills can be another person’s emotional distance can generate discussion about multiple meanings. Let us say, for another example, that the speaker described her efficiency as a response to a heavy workload, which left her little time for relationship building. The mediator could then draw attention to the speaker’s efforts to balance these two competing priorities, and ask questions about what this was like for the speaker and those impacted by her struggle, which could lead to an opportunity for both parties to recognize the complexity and conflict inherent in each other’s situation. This could also encourage the parties to explore each other’s intentions, rather than simply assume that they are based on the impact of the other’s actions. Finally, such a line of questioning could provide the impetus for parties to acknowledge their conflicting

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imperatives, as well as the social and contextual circumstances that drive them, rather than making judgments based on individualized and externalized blame. Questions such as “What are some of the things that affect your ability to be both efficient and caring?” could help “unpack” this feature of the parties’ competing narratives.

The mediator can also encourage a shift from a melodramatic to a tragic conflict narrative by identifying and drawing the parties’ attention to their opportunities to make choices, which encourage them to participate more actively in the resolution of the conflict and promote their sense of self-determination. For example, even when a party believes that she has little choice in taking a particular action, such as resigning from her employment, the mediator’s questions can help the party consider the reasons for making this choice as well as the consequences of other less attractive options (such as asking questions like “What will resigning mean for you? Why is resigning better than staying?”). Similarly, the mediator could alert the party to the choices still available to her. For example, asking her how she plans to resign could help her identify a variety of options within that course of action: the party may choose to resign orally or in writing, right away or at a later date, with a short or long notice period, and providing more or less information about reasons for leaving. The mediator can also help the parties explore ways in which they can act and make decisions together, which fosters a sense of shared responsibility.

A mediator could also discourage typical melodramatic patterns of conflict avoidance as well as the disputants’ fixations on the past. If parties can understand and accept what has happened, they can begin to look forward and focus on opportunities for growth. The mediator can support this redirection process by helping the parties to identify what they have learned about themselves and each other through the mediation. Helping them to acknowledge their own suffering (and each other’s) without blame and to see possible positive outcomes can also be beneficial.

## Conclusion

The structure of the typical conflict narrative in Western society has many similarities with stories in the genre of melodrama. An analysis of the characteristics of melodrama reveals insights into how individuals make sense of conflict, as well as how the mediation process can both reinforce and undermine some of the dysfunctional aspects of the melodramatic conflict narrative. An understanding of genre can help the parties to construct a new conflict story more conducive to a satisfactory resolution. Tragedy, I believe, is a more effective genre for understanding conflict stories. The mediation process is particularly appropriate for challenging the hegemonic melodramatic conflict narrative by transforming it into the more complex and productive genre of tragedy.

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The role of genre in the production and deconstruction of conflict narratives is worthy of further research and analysis. In particular, it would be interesting to examine in greater depth *why* Western conflict narratives seem to be so melodramatic and whether other cultures tell their conflict stories differently. The relationship between the process of mediation and the genres of the stories told within that process also deserves further examination.

## NOTES

1. I acknowledge and thank the anonymous reviewer of my article for these insights into mediation's role in challenging hegemonic narratives.
2. Manichaeism refers to a religious system of the third-fifth centuries, representing Satan in a state of everlasting conflict with God; a dualist system of extreme good against extreme evil.
3. This is consistent with Folger and Bush's (1994) analysis of the predominant orientation to conflict problem solving based on a prevailing ideology of individualism.

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