Three-Way Mirror:  
*Imitation of Life*  
Lucy Fischer

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**Introduction: Magnificent Obsession**

_The most important tool of my trade was a mirror. I always had a three-way full-length mirror placed outside my trailer door so that I could check my appearance before I went on the set._

—Lana Turner

_The mirror is the imitation of life. What is interesting about a mirror is that it does not show yourself as you are, it shows you your own opposite._

—Douglas Sirk

It seems safe to say (some thirty years after its release), that *Imitation of Life* (1959) is a text that fascinates us—that constitutes a Magnificent Obsession. Although Sirk scholarship of the seventies failed to privilege the film, the eighties addressed it with compensatory preoccupation.¹ Thus, analyses of

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Given such collective captivation, we are urged to fathom the critical phenomenon. Why has *Imitation* haunted us? Why has it resurfaced like an academic *idée fixe*? Put simply, *Imitation* compels us because it marks the intersection of numerous powerful cultural forces that define the postwar era and the place of cinema within it.

Some of these factors involve the history of the film. *Imitation* was released during the decline of the classical cinema and the birth of the modernist movement. On the American scene, the era saw the creation of such radical works as Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) that pushed traditional film to its limits. (Sirk recalls its being shot on a contiguous sound stage to *Tarnished Angels*.) On the international front, 1959 heralded the inception of the French New Wave—the debut of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, François Truffaut's *The Four Hundred Blows*, and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. *Imitation*, with its exaggerated generic codes, embraced the art film's ironic stance toward transparent style. As Sirk's last Hollywood work, it assumed iconic status.

*Imitation* was also a star vehicle—a "comeback" for Lana Turner, a glamour queen whose personal and professional life was in crisis. The film was a box-office smash, investing it with the imprimatur of commercial success. Furthermore, it gained referential resonance as a Hollywood remake of a film shot by John Stahl in 1934.

The appeal of *Imitation* is also linked to the trajectory of film scholarship. The


sixties saw the continued ascendancy of French auteurist theory—and Sirk was an early inductee into the artistic pantheon. His self-reflexive bent marked imitation (a work set in the theater) an exemplary text within his canon. With the emergence of genre studies, melodrama captured center stage. Sirk’s films were viewed as both typical and unique—taking pedestrian sentimentality to its sublime extreme.

Imitation also profited from the currency of ideological criticism. Its inclusion of dominant black characters in a period of heightened racial awareness attracted writers concerned with color and class. Its status as a “woman’s picture” (focusing on the struggles of two single working mothers) made it ripe for feminist investigation. That it was based on a popular Fannie Hurst novel assured its relevance to the field. The book was even republished in 1990, disjunctively illustrated with stills from the Sirk film depicting characters “mismatched” with the printed narrative.4

Thus, Imitation is a cinematic prism (like the transparent, faceted beads that fall during its credits)—one capable of breaking a social/intellectual “spectrum” into its component parts. Some of these elements have been thoroughly examined: the film’s status as remake, its inscription of authorial style, its parodic self-consciousness, its melodramatic imagination, its psycho-dramatic patterning, its ideological thrust. I will table these for fear of imitation of (the discourse on) Imitation of Life.

But while the film has been assiduously studied, its treatment has displayed a certain hermeticism, one, perhaps, indicative of a genre with its heart in the home.5 (As Thomas Elsaesser has noted: “Melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois household.”)6 Imitation’s formal and narrative structures have been favored at the expense of its links to the social terrain. I will seek to expand the “interior monologue” that has explained it by conjoining the lessons of textual and cultural inquiry to overcome a certain critical “agoraphobia.”

In particular, I will highlight three aspects of the Sirkian drama that most emphatically evoke the film’s contemporaneous public scene: (1) the question of women and work, (2) the issue of race, (3) the matter of star biography. By executing a cultural analysis (which intercuts diegetic and extradiegetic space), I

4. Fannie Hurst, Imitation of Life (1933; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1990). In the novel the heroine’s name is Bea Pullman, for example, and in Sirk’s film it is Lora Meredith. In the novel, her daughter’s name is Jessie, while in the film it is Susie.
5. Jackie Louise Byars (“Gender Representation”) examines women and work in her excellent dissertation chapter on Imitation, but does not include much concrete social history. Marina Neung (“What’s the Matter?”) brings to bear crucial information on the circumstances of black domestics in her work on the film.
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will cast *Imitation* not only as a vibrant fiction but as a cinematic “afterimage” of personal and collective consciousness. (As Marcia Landy writes, “the seemingly escapist aspects of melodrama are intimately tied to pressing social concerns.”)7

Lana Turner’s most valuable professional aid was a three-way mirror used to scrutinize her appearance. In a sense, it will be my tool as well—shifted from the realm of ego to that of history—utilized to monitor a tripaneled vision of *Imitation*’s political milieu. A looking glass, however, does not return an unmediated picture. Rather, as Sirk notes, its imagery can bend, deflect, invert, or oppose.

Panel One: Working Girls

*The economically and rhetorically enforced allocation and division of productive and reproductive roles according to gender reached the peak of its social installation in the United States between the end of World War Two and the beginning of the American Women’s Movement.*

—Janet Walker8

*Imitation of Life* recounts a decade in the life of Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), a young widow struggling to raise her child, Susie. Though, in the early years, Lora holds a variety of odd jobs, she eventually becomes an actress, achieving fame as a Broadway star. Her success is made possible by her association with Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), a black single mother whom Lora encounters on a New York City beach. Annie moves into the Meredith apartment (with her daughter, Sarah Jane), and assumes the roles of nanny and housekeeper. While Annie has no suitors, Lora is courted by a photographer, Steve Archer (John Gavin), who wants her to marry and settle down. During the years of the women’s liaison, both endure parental conflicts, and maternal angst is at the core of the melodrama: Sarah Jane attempts to “pass” (which causes Annie to die of heartache); Susie falls in love with her mother’s beau. Though Lora initially rejects Steve’s proposal in favor of her career, her emotional world seems vacant. By the end of the drama, she wonders if she has been living an imitation of life.

The film was released in 1959, but that is not its only historical marker. Rather, we must take a cue from the time-line of the narrative, and consider the late 1940s when the tale begins. The chronology hits us forcefully in the opening sequence, set at Coney Island. As Lora frantically searches for her lost daughter, she passes a boardwalk sign advertising the 1947 Mardi Gras. Thus, the story is situated in the immediate postwar era, a period of drastic change for American

women. A later montage (chronicling Lora's success as an actress) takes us explicitly from 1948 to 1958. This decade witnessed shifts in female employment and its relation to domestic responsibilities. For Lora (a single parent, the sole support of her child), this career-family tension constitutes the crux of the drama.

William Chafe charts how the war years saw female employment grow by over 50 percent—the largest gains coming for older married women. While such developments were salutary, others were troubling: women's wages trailed men's; females were discouraged from joining unions; inadequate child care plagued parent-workers; delinquency and teenage marriage rose. Upon the end of the war there was a sharp decrease in the ranks of women workers, as returning soldiers were given priority. Contrary to clichés, most women seeking jobs were eventually rehired. By 1955, the proportion of women employed exceeded the highest levels of wartime. By 1956, 22 million worked—and half were wives. Two documents of the era testify to this metamorphosis. In 1957, the National Manpower Council published Womanpower, a study of female employment. In 1958, Work in the Lives of Married Women, its domestic companion piece, was released.

Though females made professional strides, their advancements were qualified by restrictive attitudes. The feminist movement suffered a period of public eclipse in the fifties. Furthermore, retrograde views surfaced about women and work. When the men were in combat, female employees were seen as patriotic; when the soldiers returned, women were viewed as competitive. When wartime quotas were paramount, use of day care was encouraged; it was criticized when the emergency was lifted.

Though this ideological shift could not deter lower-class women (in dire need of jobs), it did discourage middle-class wives for whom employment was economically "optional." They came to need a new excuse to work—and rising inflation provided them one. As Chafe observes, these women "sought jobs, not careers—an extra pay check for the family." Working was sanctioned primarily for women over thirty-five, whose child-care duties were generally completed.

Clearly, women in the fifties were given mixed signals: "More women than

ever were working outside the home in a society which continued to endorse the traditional . . . roles of wife, mother and homemaker.”15 By mid-decade, a strain was apparent in society’s conception of the female: in December 1956, Life magazine dedicated a double-issue to “The American Woman: Her Achievements and Troubles.”

In that magazine issue, Robert Coughlan blamed the female in all her varied incarnations. He critiqued the erotic woman who “demands and needs sexual gratification” from a man—a posture which denied her “full release.”16 He was also suspicious of the “New York Career Woman”: a “bright, well-educated, ambitious” wife in her mid-thirties who abandoned feminine tasks to pursue outside work. In his stance he evoked Ferdinard Lundberg and Marynia Farnham’s Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947), which lambasted the equal rights movement for leading woman astray.17 While Life acknowledged an increased number of working women, it regarded careers as secondary. Mrs. Peter Marshall remarked: “Ask any thoughtful, honest woman what the most satisfying moments of her life have been and she will never mention the day she got her first job.”18

Coughlan also chastized the housewife who succumbed to the “suburban syndrome”—becoming “morbidly depressed.”19 It is this woman who Betty Friedan later described sympathetically in The Feminine Mystique (1963) as experiencing “The Problem That Has No Name”: “Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. . . . She was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—‘Is this all?’”20

The era was also rife with ambivalence toward the mother. Coughlan attacked her for embracing her role “with a vengeance,” becoming an “overwhelming” parent. Here, he echoed Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers (1942) which configured mom as a predatory leech weakening her children’s will to maturation and separation: “The spectacle of the female devouring her young in the firm belief that it is for their own good is too old in man’s legends to be overlooked.”21

Lora Meredith’s saga begins in 1947, the year Modern Woman was published. It ends in 1958, the release date of Work in the Lives of Married Women. Both volumes cast their intertextual shadows upon the screen in a wash of contradiction: the former as a caution to the working mother, the latter as a tribute to the professional woman.

Three-Way Mirror

Upstairs/Downstairs

There are two kinds of females in this country—colored women and white ladies. Colored women are maids, cooks . . . crossing guards . . . welfare recipients . . . and the only time they become ladies is when they are cleaning ladies.

—Louise Stone

Louise Stone describes the difference in America between “colored women” and “white ladies.” The above discussion of female employment has presumed the latter—the category favored by traditional research. As one reads Womanpower or Work in the Lives of Married Women, few sections pertain to the “Negro”; the baseline is Caucasian. Given the prominence of black working women in Imitation (Annie and Sarah Jane), it is imperative to investigate their status in the forties and fifties.

One finds that black women were more likely to be employed than white, due to their marginal economic situations. A greater number of black female workers were married, given “the heavy responsibility . . . Negro women . . . carry for the support of children and other dependents.” Most black women were engaged in the service sector, predominantly as private household help. Traditionally, the “ideal” female domestic was configured as single and between the ages of twenty and twenty-five:

Married women take away food for the support of their families; married women have so many responsibilities and problems in their own home they often than not go out to work with a weary body and a disturbed mind; married women find it difficult to live and sleep on employers’ premises.

The percentage of black women engaged in private service steadily decreased from 1890 on as opportunities arose in factories, laundries, offices, and stores. Work in the Lives of Married Women reports that “Negro women . . . [were] increasingly able to move up and out of the lowest paid jobs.” Thus, scholars speak of the profession’s “passing,” its “disappearance,” its “decline.” The occupation also experienced progressively higher rates of turnover.

23. See Heung, ”What’s the Matter?”
World War II saw a shortage of household help as women of color found jobs in shipyards, aircraft plants, arsenals, and foundries. In \textit{Black Metropolis} (1945), St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton note that “middle-class white housewives . . . began to complain about ‘the servant problem’ as Negro women . . . headed for the war plants.”\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Newsweek} of 1949 claimed that domestic workers decreased by 500,000 while the female work force increased by 4,500,000.\textsuperscript{30} Though the international conflict temporarily expanded opportunities for blacks, Gunnar Myrdal found the long-term gains less dramatic than during World War I; by 1947, many advances had entirely evaporated.\textsuperscript{31} Significantly, \textit{Newsweek} reported the revival of urban, cornerside “slave markets” in 1949, where white housewives bartered for black household help.\textsuperscript{32}

At the turn of the century, many maids “lived in”; by the forties and fifties this arrangement was exceptional. In 1949, \textit{Newsweek} noted that: “Almost universally, houseworkers do not want to ‘sleep in.’ They want work by the day or hour that will leave them masters of their own time in the evenings and on the weekends.”\textsuperscript{33} Drake and Cayton saw this as creating a greater distance between employer and employee:

Most Negro domestic servants work for ordinary middle-class white families and do not have the intimate personal ties which characterize the few situations where the white family can afford a permanent retainer who lives on the premises and is almost a member of the family.\textsuperscript{34}

While maids tended white children, their progeny were watched by sitters, relatives, or friends—part of what Harriette Pipes McAdoo called the black “kin-help exchange network.”\textsuperscript{35}

Throughout its history, domestic service has been riddled with discontent. “[I]t is almost universally defined as a problem, but generally from the employer’s perspective.”\textsuperscript{36} The oppressed, however, are the workers, plagued by monotony, low pay, long hours, isolation, vague standards, inadequate equipment, invasion of privacy, the stress of deference, the absence of unionization.\textsuperscript{37} In particular,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} “The Servant Problem,” p. 48.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Drake and Cayton, \textit{Black Metropolis}, pp. 244–245.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Chaplin, “Domestic Service,” p. 529.
employees experience difficulties separating the professional from the personal, a byproduct of work in a private home. Often, maids suffer an "over-identification with management," especially when they care for the family’s children.38

For these reasons, black women have generally considered domestic service the least desirable occupation, a "social stigma."39 Drake and Cayton found that servants hoped their offspring would locate other employment. This is not to deny the potentially redemptive aspects of domestic service: friendship with one's employer; economic and political fringe benefits; middle- or upper-class role models.

The sense of housework as a disgrace (as an occupational "scar of shame") was exacerbated, however, in the forties and fifties by the false promise of the war years and the hopes of the burgeoning civil rights movement. Rhoda Lois Blumberg noted the following revolutionary events occurring between 1953 and 1958, years which overlap the time-line of *Imitation Of Life*. In June 1953, a successful bus boycott took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In May 1954, the United States Supreme Court (in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*) found segregation in public schools to be inherently unequal. In 1955, *Brown II* mandated desegregation "with all deliberate speed." In the same year, the Interstate Commerce Commission outlawed segregated buses and waiting rooms for passengers crossing state lines. Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi. After Rosa Parks was arrested in Alabama for violating bus segregation, a boycott was launched and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. On 21 December, the buses were integrated. In January of 1956, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded. Later that year, the Supreme Court ordered the University of Alabama to admit a black woman for graduate study. Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act in eighteen-two years. Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called out the National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering a Little Rock high school; a court order required the militia to be withdrawn. In July, blacks in Tuskegee, Alabama, organized a boycott against white merchants in order to protest a redistricting move to exclude black voters. The year 1958 witnessed a successful voter registration drive in Tennessee which led to severe economic reprisals.40

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Blacks’ rejection of domestic service might also have been spurred by the feminist movement, which reconfigured homemaking as drudgery. (As early as 1949, Edith Stern had deemed women “household slaves” who led the “kind of life that theoretically became passé with the Emancipation Proclamation.”)⁴¹ In 1970, for the first time, domestic labor failed to represent the largest segment of the female African American occupational force.⁴² Carolyn Reed, a maid interviewed for Robert Hamburger’s oral history, recalled:

. . . the sixties . . . was . . . [the] point that I began to be politically aware. It was during the time of the civil rights movement, and then you knew exactly where you stood. . . . One of my biggest educations was when [my employer] planned a party on the day of the March on Washington. . . . I was just grouchy, really grouchy all day long, because I knew that I was supposed to be in Washington.⁴³

It is within this cultural context that Annie Johnson performs domestic labor for Lora Meredith. We wonder how she remains so content with her imitation of life.

Annie’s forbearance leads us to her status as literary creation—her roots in the imagination of Fannie Hurst. For while Sirk’s film alters the context of the novel (where the maid concocts a pancake recipe that hurlles her employer to success as a restaurateur), the women’s relationship is largely the same. They are configured as friends, and racial and class tensions are minimized.

It is intriguing to juxtapose the portrayal of Annie with an aspect of Hurst’s biography.⁴⁴ On 1 May, 1925, she met author Zora Neale Hurston at an awards dinner for Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life. The magazine had published Hurston’s story, “Spunk,” which garnered second prize; Hurst was one of the judges. Known for her sympathy to black causes, she had spoken on race relations to the Circle for Negro Belief, the New York Urban League, and the City-Wide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem.

Hurston had been born to a large Florida family and had worked as a maid for white people, “failing more often than not because she not only refused to act humble but also refused the sexual advances of her male employers. Too, she was more interested in reading than in dusting and dishwashing.”⁴⁵ She had attended Howard University and Barnard College and had authored several literary works.

⁴⁴ I am indebted to Peter Wollen who first mentioned to me that Zora Neale Hurston had worked for Fannie Hurst.
⁴⁵ Lillie P. Howard, Zora Neale Hurston (Boston: Twayne, 1980) p. 16.
Impressed by Hurston, Hurst hired her as a live-in assistant:

[Zora] walked into my study one day by telephone appointment, carelessly, a big-boned, good-boned young woman, handsome and light yellow, with no show of desire for the position of secretary for which she was applying. . . . As Zora expressed it, we "took a shine" to one another and I engaged her on the spot as my live-in secretary.

But the very independence that attracted Hurst made Hurston unsuited to office work:

Her shorthand was short on legibility, her typing hit or miss, mostly the latter, her filing, a game of find-the-thimble. Her mind ran ahead of my thoughts and she would interject with an impatient suggestion or clarification of what I wanted to say. If dictation bored her she would interrupt, stretch wide her arms and yawn: "Let's get out the car . . . ."

Exasperated, Hurst released Hurston from clerical chores, and asked her to stay on as "companion and chauffeur." 46

Despite their hierarchal positioning, the women became confidantes and Hurston regarded Hurst as a friend and ally. In Hurston's autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, she selects Hurst as one of "Two Women in Particular" that most influenced her life (the other being Ethel Waters). The two writers often discussed their respective projects while tooling around in Hurst's car. 47

Given Hurston's status as an ex-maid, as Hurst's cherished live-in secretary/companion/chauffeur, one wonders if the author formulated the beloved figure of Delilah (in Imitation) with Hurston partially in mind. To some degree this might explain Hurst's focus on intimacy versus work. Though Hurst's memoirs of Hurston reveal no passive, idealized employee/saint, they configure her as somewhat stoical.

Hurst felt that Hurston had "very little indignation for the imposed status of her race." 48 In the women's journeys together, they often encountered "the ogre of discrimination":

At hotels, Zora was either assigned to servants' quarters or informed that they were full up. When I also refused accommodations, Zora's attitude was swift and adamant: "If you are going to take that stand, it will be impossible for us to travel together. This is the way it is and I can take care of myself as I have all my life." 49

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Hurston's own words in 1942 attest to her apparent tolerance: "I have no race prejudice of any kind... So I give you all my right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you." 50 Hurston's generosity extended to Hurst's novel. In a 1940 letter to Hurst (from North Carolina), she wrote: "You have a grand set of admirers in this part of the world because of Imitation of Life." 51 Clearly, Hurston was among them.

Panel Two: Simulation of Strife

I want to be honest with you, darling. I want more—everything! Maybe too much.

—Lora Meredith to Steve Archer

Seems to me, Miss Meredith, I'm just right for you. You wouldn't have to pay no wages. Just let me come and do for you.

—Annie Johnson to Lora Meredith

Having sketched the social scene faced by the postwar working woman, how does this off-screen space inflect the melodramatic tableau?

Given the specter of world combat, it seems significant that Lora Meredith has no husband—as though the narrative must replay the situation of men away. (At one point, Steve even mentions his military service.) David Rodowick finds male absence common in films of the period, where the father "functioned solely to throw the system into turmoil by his... death or desertion." 52 The patriarchal void allows Lora to work without conflict: "When [my husband] died," she tells Steve, "I had to make a living doing something." Thus, originally, her professional orientation is justified and contained.

But Lora harbors grandiose yearnings (like Friedan's housewives who sought more than "husband... children and... home"). 53 She reveals she wants nothing "but the stage," hastily adding "except Susie" (as though reminded that maternal concern should be paramount). Lora further undercuts her aspirations with the taint of libidinal excess—wondering whether she is after "too much." Her theatrical ambitions are partly rationalized by her deceased spouse's occupation as director; thus, she is dutifully following in his footsteps. Nowhere in her agony is there any sense that achievement might make her a superior parent. Yet, Work in the Lives of Married Women had stated that: "Women... often find in

53. Friedan, Feminine Mystique, p. 27.
at least part-time work release from tension so that their maternal energy is
renewed." Many employed mothers are gratified to provide a higher standard of
living. "We are the good [parents]," they declare.\footnote{34}

When Lora transcends poverty and becomes an established performer, profes-
sional tensions surface. (Her "success montage" blazons her face on the cover of
a 1953 Newsweek—one of many magazines then documenting the problem of
working mothers.) Lora earns enough to quit: the economic rationale for employ-
ment is eliminated. Her occupational ambivalence is complicated by her affair
with Steve, who prods her toward domesticity. When he proposes marriage, he
claims that he wants to "give her a home" and "take care" of her. When a famous
playwright wishes to audition her, Steve pressures Lora to refuse. "I’m not ask-
ing you . . . I’m telling you," he shouts, arguing that his love should be
"enough." In his posture, we are reminded of Life’s dramatization of an average
husband evaluating a career-woman partner:

He admires her as a person but does not think she is much of a wife. She
dislikes housework, she never learned how to cook, she turned the children
over to nurses as soon as she could. She gives them presents but doesn’t give
much of herself to them. She never gives much of herself to him. He wishes
she would do more of the things that women are supposed to do. He wishes
she were more of a woman.

Significantly, this Life article is illustrated by a photograph of Mrs. Martha
Robinson, an actress "who gave up a promising future to be full-time mother and
wife." Captioned "At Hearthside," it shows her reviewing old theater clippings
with her daughters, while her husband reads in a corner. "When wives work,"
she says, "somebody gets neglected along the line." She assures us that she has
"never regretted her decision."\footnote{35}

In this respect, Sirk’s film offers no imitation of Life. For Lora would find little
consolation in skimming antique stage reviews. This vignette also signals that
there is more than an accidental linkage of Lora’s status as a working mother
and her role as an actress. For the ideology of the fifties cast all working mothers as
performers, dissembling their maternal functions.\footnote{36}

In Lora’s assertion of career and artistry she rivals male ambition. While she
has lofty goals, Steve compromises—placing him in a subordinate stance. Early
on, he confesses that he wants his photographs hung in the Museum of Modern
Art, claiming that he “believe[s] in chasing rainbows.” When he later sells a
photo for a beer advertisement, Lora mocks his “idea of achieving something.”
As though to counter him, she retorts: “I’m going up and up—and nobody’s

\footnote{34} National Manpower Council, \textit{Work in the Lives}, pp. 113, 137.
\footnote{35} Coughlan, "Modern Marriage," pp. 110, 118.
\footnote{36} Lucy Fischer, \textit{Shot/Countershoot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema} (Princeton, N.J.: Prince-
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going to pull me down!" Thus, she assumes the site of power, and he the locus of passivity: she remain true to herself while he leads the imitation of life. Peter Biskind notes a "feminization of men and . . . masculinization of women" in films of the fifties.57 Significantly, an illustration in the 1956 Life shows male and female faces blended—like the macabre feminine visages in Ingmar Bergman's Persona (1966).58

The more Lora scales the ladder of success, the more she displaces her traditional role of homemaker/mother; the more a chasm opens within her domestic space. This lack is aggravated by the absence of a husband who might share household responsibilities. Work in the Lives of Married Women argued that female employment did not always mean familial deprivation: "The father who takes the laundry to the laundromat, or dries the dishes in the evening . . . is just a good father and a decent partner doing his share . . . [and] may often represent an asset for children."59

Instead, Lora's domestic gap is filled by Annie Johnson—the second heroine of the drama. Clearly, she does not have the luxury to ponder the propriety of employment: her color, her poverty, her parenthood, her educational level dictate her occupational fate. On one level, Annie represents Lora's other psychic half—the conventional lobe that she must stifle to reach her goal. Annie seems the good mother to Lora's bad, the nurturant woman to her egotistical, the natural female to her synthetic, the "janitorial" self to her professional. This depiction is mediated by the discourse of race, which configure the Negro madonna as "mammy." Annie Johnson was not alone in this media portrayal; the stereotype had been revived in the television show Beulah (1950–1953) as well as in the film The Member of the Wedding (1952).60

In a 1947 "feminist" article, Della Cyrus justified the professional woman's exodus from home by asserting the maternal superiority of the lower-caste caretaker: "Could it be that the much maligned, 'dumb' nursemaid had her points after all, when she was easygoing, relaxed, unambitious, foolishly contented, and childlike with her young charges?"61 Thus, the dichotomy Annie/Lora is both symbolically and literally black and white.62 Annie's maternal depiction also draws on the experience of actual domestics. Bonnie Thornton Dill reported

62. For previous discussions of the issue of race, see Butler, "Imitation of Life," Byars "Gender Representation," Flitterman-Lewis "Imitation(s) of Life," Heung, "What's the Matter?". Heung, especially, raises issues of social history related to questions of race—in particular, the status of domestic labor. I see my work in this section as building upon and extending her excellent insights.
that "the women . . . who had child care responsibilities talked about themselves as being 'like a mother' to their employer's children."63

As a composite whole, Annie/Lora represents postwar woman in her unseemly disjunction, in her attempts to have and do it all. (As Friedan observes, "the image of American woman . . . suffered a schizophrenic split" in this era.)64 That Imitation surfaces the rift serves a progressive purpose, for as Fredric Jameson writes, "we cannot fully do justice to the ideological function of works . . . unless we are willing to concede the presence within them of a more positive function . . . their utopian or transcendent potential."65

But, ultimately, Imitation settles tensions by means of a conservative denouement—resolving what Friedan has called "the new feminine morality story" by "exorcising of the forbidden career dream . . . of independence."66 Read from this perspective, Imitation is a drama of cleft female consciousness in which the regressive triumphs over the revolutionary self. By the end of the narrative, Lora doubts her theatrical success and is haunted by her lapses as a parent. Any pride in her work emerges only by default—as a defense against Susie's accusations. "Why, you give me credit for nothing," Lora screams, countering her daughter's charges of neglect. "Yes, I'm ambitious—perhaps too ambitious—but it's been for your sake as well as mine!" While Lora is chastened, Annie is dead, leading us to wonder whether any vision of womanhood survives this cultural bifurcation. The women's equalization seems figured in the choreography of the mise-en-scène. In shots of Lora framed in a mirror, she is frequently joined or supplanted by Annie.67 This underscores Sirk's notion that the looking glass both reveals one's self and "[one's] own opposite."68

While many aspects of Imitation seem to reflect the surrounding societal scene, others warp the view. Annie is not only a symbolic part of Lora but her practical supplement—the duplicate underclass clone a "New York Career Woman" needs to survive. From this vantage point, the film provides white females a wish fulfillment fantasy of a double who appears at the door, offering, gratis, the custodial services they require. Moreover, Annie performs them with a sense of contentment unknown to postwar black women, for whom domestic work was a "last resort."69 (Equally apocryphal is Lora's hiring additional servants to tend the ailing Annie, keeping her on as a costly member of the family.)

Ironically, though middle-class housewives could afford maids in the 1950s, a struggling single parent (like the early Lora Meredith) was unlikely to do so.

64. Friedan, Feminine Mystique, p. 40.
67. Lauren Berlant first mentioned this dynamic to me. It occurs, for example, in shots 174 and 339 of the continuity.
68. Halliday, Sirk on Sirk, p. 48.
That Annie would live in violates the era’s statistical patterns. And nowhere in
the literature is there mention of maids residing on premises with a child. Furthermore,
Annie’s accidental encounter with Lora (at a public beach), seems a
sanitized version of the street corner “slave markets,” reappearing in urban cen-
ters around 1947. It was far likelier that the homeless Annie would be taken in by
the black “kin-help exchange network,” than by a poor white stranger like Lora
Meredith.\(^\text{70}\) The erasure of Annie’s communal world is foregrounded near the
end of the film when Annie makes her plans for an elaborate mass funeral. “It
never occurred to me that you had many friends,” Lora blankly remarks.

While Lora’s need of child care is blamed on her job, many middle-class, stay-
at-home moms of the era had equal assistance. Life described a housewife
(“home manager, mother, hostess and useful civic worker”) who has full-time
help.\(^\text{71}\) Similarly, the 1958 Manpower report noted a conventional homemaker
with the following schedule:

[The family’s] early breakfast was prepared by the housekeeper, who saw the
children off to school while the mother prepared for her day’s activities.
Active in PTA and civic and women’s groups . . . she returned home too
‘exhausted to dine with three bickering girls,’ who were fed by the
housekeeper.\(^\text{72}\)

Thus a false opposition is established in the film between salaried work and
adequate mothering—volunteerism being sanctioned.

Despite Annie’s remedial presence, anxieties surface within the Meredith/
Johnson household, and circulate around the women’s offspring. As though to
replicate wartime concerns with juvenile delinquency and teenage marriage,
Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) plans to runaway and elope, and Susie (Sandra Dee)
falls for Steve. Postwar consciousness hovers at the cinematic borders: while
direct reference to the civil rights movement is avoided, its spirit materializes at
certain narrative junctures. Sarah Jane’s attempt to “pass” at school reminds us of
the struggles around Brown vs. the Board of Education; her rejection of a black
doll invokes research on children’s racial identification; her anger with her
mother bespeaks her generation’s rejection of domestic work; her affair with a
white man reminds us of loosening prohibitions against screen miscegenation;\(^\text{73}\)

73. Heung, “What’s the Matter?” pp. 39–40; Kenneth B. Clark, Prejudice and Your Child (Boston:
Beacon, 1955), pp. 44–46; Mary Ellen Goodman, Race Awareness in Young Children (New York:
Collier, 1952), pp. 55, 256; Biskind, Seeing Is Believing, p. 291; According to Peter Biskind, 1956
marked the year that prohibitions against miscegenation were removed from the Hollywood Production
Code. Other films in the era that deal with interracial sexual relationships are Pinky (1949),
Island in the Sun (1957), and Night of the Quarter Moon (1959). Donald Bogle (Blacks in American
Films and Television: An Encyclopedia [New York: Garland, 1988]), however, makes the point that
often the threat of this issue was defused by having one of the couple a light-skinned black, played by
Mahalia Jackson’s presence at Annie’s funeral sparks associations to the singer’s participation in civil rights demonstrations, and her role in mainstreaming of black gospel music.74

Ultimately, *Imitation* offers woman little way out—leaves her caught within a conundrum. Lora, the careerist (who abdicates home) is a female manquée. Annie, the traditional woman (whose *job* is domesticity), is similarly condemned. To the extent that she is configured as a black *working woman*, she fails at raising her daughter. (This crisis is crystallized in Sarah Jane’s mockery of her mother’s role: a parody of slave servility performed for Lora’s company.) To the degree that Annie is seen as a *devoted parent*, she is penalized for her dedication. Ultimately, she is cast as an overbearing mother who demands racial bonding from her daughter, suffocating the resistant Sarah Jane. (Rainer Werner Fassbinder even calls her “terroristic” and “brutal.”)75 On her deathbed, Annie indulges in self-reproach: “I know I was selfish and . . . loved . . . too much.”

Both Annie and Lora are variations on Lundberg and Farnham’s *lost sex*—a theme that is woven through the film. It is significant that *Imitation* opens with a scene of Susie *lost* at the beach, and immediately presents Lora as a confused (or “*lost*”) parent. When, in the tumult, she meets Steve, he plays the role of her irate husband. He tells an onlooker: “she not only spoils” the children—but “goes around *losing* them.” Susie is, of course, *found* by Annie, who, initially, seems an ideal caretaker, refusing to be separated from her own child. By the narrative’s end, however, Sarah Jane is as *lost* as Susie—having shunned her mother’s influence and affection. Thus, the drama articulates a discourse of the *lost and found* as relayed between mothers and daughters.

The women’s sole escape is toward theater—the realm of Luce Irigaray’s female mimicry—where they can “play with *mimesis* . . . to try to recover the place of exploitation by discourse, without allowing [themselves] to be simply reduced to it.”76 This motif emerges at the film’s opening, with its reference to the Coney Island Mardi Gras.

Lora is literally an actress who finds her salvation on stage, and her maternal activities seem contaminated by her dramatic role. (Susie even tells her: “Please don’t play the martyr.”) Susie, however, is Lora’s Electra understudy, standing in for her in a romance with Steve. (She even considers borrowing her mother’s coat to meet him with an aura of costume.) Sarah Jane pretends to be white and works as a showgirl; she mimics a slave when serving Lora and her

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guests; Annie pretends to be Sarah Jane’s “mammy”; but in her real domestic site, masks her employment in a charade of “friendship,” a fact that replicates servants’ over-identification with management. Finally, she scripts her demise in the mise-en-scène of a funereal production number.

While the women seem marked by theatrical blame, male characters dissemble as well—but their lapses are comical or opaque. David Edwards fakes burning the only copy of his new play when Lora refuses to star in it. Lora’s agent, Allen Loomis (Robert Alda), modulates his support for her, depending on how her career is going. Steve champions artistic integrity, but settles for hack work in an ad agency. He nonetheless assumes the right to judge Lora, continually reminding “her (and the audience) of the falseness of her success.”

On one level the ubiquity of illusion in *Imitation* supports Elizabeth Burns’s claim that:

ordinary social conduct at its most routine or informal . . . is composed and contrived. Each person tries to produce himself in his own drama, to hand out parts to others, and to make sure that some of them act the part of spectators.

On the other hand, the fact that the drama positions theatricality as a greater problem for women modifies its progressive, “universal” thrust.

While the women are plagued by “the discrepancy of seeming and being,” a similar charge might be aimed at the film—whose dissonant blend of mawkishness and satire elaborates a thematic masquerade. (As Annie lies dying, she utters [in maudlin tones], words whose sardonic implications are clear: “Our weddin’ day—and the day we die—are the great events of life.”) Brandon French sees duplicity in numerous works of the period:

On the surface, fifties films promoted women’s domesticity and inequality and sought easy, optimistic conclusions to any problems their fictions treated. But a significant number of movies simultaneously reflected, unconsciously or otherwise, the malaise of domesticity and untenably narrow boundaries of the female role.

Thus, while the term “passing” attaches to Sarah Jane’s racial identification, it also applies to the film, which postures (alternately) as a recuperative melodrama and subversive parody. The word is also metaphorical for the position of women in postwar society, who, having achieved freedoms in the forties, later suffer a

“give-back,” and are asked to remain content with the sacrifice. Black women must “pass” for satisfied domestics and white ladies for happy housewives. (Ironically, Loomis [in evaluating Lora’s appearance] tells her: “Your face will pass.”) Even Coughlan acknowledges a contradiction: “Between the ideal [of womanhood] and reality something is urgently wrong.”  

In The Feminine Mystique, Friedan noted a McCall’s piece, published in the mid-fifties, that encapsulated the Zeitgeist of the times:

the bored editors . . . ran a little article called “The Mother Who Ran Away.” To their amazement, it brought the highest readership of any article they had ever run. “It was our moment of truth,” said a former editor. “We suddenly realized that all those women at home with their three and a half children were miserably unhappy.”

In other words, they had been acting, role-playing as much as Sirk’s protagonists. While McCall’s heroine fled into the night (“lost” herself in a way that Lundberg and Farnham failed to imagine) McCall’s readers escaped into fantasy—into literary and celluloid imitations of life.

Panel Three: Hollywood Mythos/Imitation of Hype

The one “career woman” who was always welcome in the pages of women’s magazines was the actress. . . . you wrote about her as a housewife. You never showed her doing or enjoying her work . . . unless she eventually paid for it by losing her husband or her child, or otherwise admitting failure as a woman.

—Betty Friedan

Annie Johnson and Lora Meredith are both working women, enacted by two female screen professionals: Juanita Moore and Lana Turner. Though the former delivered an inspiring performance (simultaneously wrenching and restrained), her career subsequently faltered. After receiving the Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress in 1959, she found only minor roles in films like Walk on the Wild Side (1962), and The Singing Nun (1966). In an era when the black film scene was dominated by Sidney Poitier, few significant parts were conceived for women. Those available were offered to light-skinned beauties like Dorothy Dandridge or (in a mode of racial inversion) to white actresses passing for black or mulatto (Julie London in Night of the Quarter Moon [1959], Susan Kohner in Imitation of Life.)  

The audience of 1959 preferred more mythic racial

83. Friedan, Feminine Mystique, p. 44.
84. In the 1934 version of Imitation of Life by John Stahl, Fredi Washington, a light-skinned black woman, played Peola, the character who is the equivalent of Sirk’s Sarah Jane. Born in 1903, Washington was regarded as the “mulatto ideal” who became typecast as a woman trying “to cross the
characterizations: Black Orpheus received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, and Dandridge starred in Porgy and Bess. Juanita Moore’s career seemed as limited as Annie Johnson’s.

The situation was different for Lana Turner, a Hollywood star with a high public profile. In addition to playing a working parent, she was one: an actress/mother like the persona she inhabits. Furthermore, her string of unstable marriages left her a single parent. Thus, Turner’s life revealed numerous parallels to Imitation, illustrating Richard Dyer’s point that celebrity images “correspond to novelistic notions of character.” Like the ghost of postwar social history, the specter of Turner’s legend stalks the text—which seems a “remake” of the conditions that sustained it.

If the maternal dyad is central to Imitation, it is the linchpin of Turner’s private narrative; she dedicates her autobiography to her “beloved mother”. She was raised by Mildred Turner after her father deserted them when she was a young child. Mildred was poor, and toiled as a beautician to support the family. On several occasions, Lana was sent to live with virtual strangers, and “longed to be with [her] mother.” Lana retrospectively admires Mildred’s accomplishments, and describes her situation in histrionic terms: “My mother did her best to insulate me from the anxieties that must have tormented her in those lean times... a woman alone, with a child to support (my italics). After Lana was “discovered” in Hollywood at fifteen, Mildred played an important supervisory role in her daughter’s career, joining the ranks of Hollywood “stage mothers.”

The maternal drama occupied the foreground as Turner’s life developed. After wedding Stephen Crane in 1942, she learned that his first marriage was still binding; the Turner/Crane nuptials were annulled. Lana soon found herself pregnant: “Here I was expecting the child of a man who wasn’t my husband.” Crane and Turner wed again in 1943, but their reunion was short-lived.

The birth of their daughter, Cheryl, was the stuff of tear-jerkers, since mother and child had incompatible Rh factors. (Mildred’s mother had died in childbirth from a similar medical syndrome.) As Turner mused: “It’s one of life’s bitter ironies that I, who wanted a big family, could bear only one child. Eventually I lost three babies... [and] it took a miracle just to save [Cheryl’s] life.” Extending maternal pathos, Lana confessed that she had already aborted a child by her first husband, Artie Shaw, and would terminate a pregnancy by a lover, Tyrone Power.

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color line” (Bogle, Blacks in American Films, p. 478). In truth, she refused to “pass” even though theater colleagues urged her to do so to enjoy a more successful stage career. Ironically, she ran into problems as an openly black actress. Playing opposite Paul Robeson in The Emperor Jones (1933), she had her skin darkened with pancake make-up in order to make it clear that she was Negro, and that miscegenation was not involved (Ibid., p. 80).

87. Ibid., p. 84.
88. Ibid., pp. 90, 64, 119.
As Cheryl grew, Turner experienced radical conflicts about parenthood—which was counterposed to her job as an actress. "I adored [the child] but because I worked so often and late, she usually saw more of my mother and Nana than she did of me." Turner was also aware of the disparity between fan magazine coverage and pallid reality:

I [can] remember well the first time I gave Cheryl a bath. She must have been close to a year old... It was... Nana’s day off. The house was empty, and it was the first time I had been absolutely alone with my baby. So I was surprised to read the romanticized account that appeared in *Photoplay* in December 1943, many months before I actually bathed Cheryl: ‘... My name is Cheryl Christina Crane. ... There’s my grandmother, and Daddy and Mother, and two maids, and my nurse and me. Only sometimes I wonder what the nurse is for—because Mother likes to do everything for me.’

Throughout this period, Turner tried to “maintain the image of a woman who had combined a satisfying marriage with a successful film career.” Her deception was assisted by the discourse of journalism which negated cinema as labor. Dyer cites news features that depict “Stars off the Set,” or “Hollywood at Play”: “what is suppressed... in these articles is that making films is work.” Production interviews were frequently illustrated with stills of the leads’ sumptuous dressing rooms: “Even on the shop-floor, stars [were] not shown... making films.”

Thus, the audience might well have believed that Turner could be both exemplary movie queen and superior parent.

Crane’s recollections of childhood support the picture of maternal absence, of a stark contrast between publicity hype and daily life:

What I cannot bring back from the mist of those first postwar years is memory of Mother herself. I have seen all the posed press photos from that era... but they inspire in me no sense of memory whatsoever, no recollection of the warmth of a cuddle or the softness of a kiss. Most of the time Mother was off somewhere making movies or on holiday.

Despite her pain, Crane was aware of her mother’s position, and comprehended that Turner’s behavior was “standard [Hollywood] operating procedure”:

There was nothing unusual about a star mother being uninvolved with her children. Until the 1950s... cinema goddesses kept murderous work schedules, often making as many as three pictures a year. Most stars had little time and less inclination to take on the extra job of raising children. The task was usually turned over to hired help.

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In Cheryl’s case, the surrogate caregivers were her grandmother and myriad nurses. Following Hollywood custom, Turner hired European women; there is no indication that Cheryl’s nannies were ever black.

When Lana was home, her daughter found her unavailable, a “perfect dream of golden beauty, unattainable, beyond reach.” The child quickly learned the alienating rules of the game: “As I was handed up [to Mother] for a careful hug and peck, lips never touched lips, skin hardly touched skin. It was for show.” Ironically, a fan sent Cheryl a three-foot Turner replica, which she deemed her “Mommy doll.” Because it was so precious, she was forbidden to play with it—just as she was with her parent. In recent years, Crane has come to empathize with her mother’s plight. Life had simply “miscast her in the role.”

In this characterization of Turner’s drama, we find echoes of Imitation: the sentimental tone, the struggle of women alone, the focus on mothers and daughters, the conflict between work and family, the question of theatrical role-playing, the reliance on surrogate caregivers, the charges of abuse and neglect. Some of these themes were perennial in Turner’s media coverage. (As Dyer remarks, the star system relishes a sense of the “dream soured.”) The press had chronicled Turner’s numerous truncated marriages—envisioning her as unlucky in love. Her daughter had experienced a series of publicized problems: trouble in school, runaway episodes. But there was one occurrence, prior to Imitation’s release, that entirely structured its reading and reception: Cheryl Crane’s stabbing of Turner’s lover, Johnny Stompanato. (As David Rodowick has noted: “The melodramatic text forces the equation of sexuality and violence.”)

The event took place on 4 April 1958—Good Friday—when the three principals were alone in the house. Crane, then fifteen (the age her mother was “discovered”), overheard a fight between Turner and Stompanato, and was alarmed when he threatened physical violence. Crane obtained a knife from the kitchen and stood outside the entrance to her mother’s pink bedroom. When Turner opened the door, Crane thought she saw Stompanato lunging and jabbed him in the chest. During the ensuing weeks, the scandal received constant media focus. The world followed the inquest and Turner’s testimony. Eventually, the court ruled justifiable homicide, but Crane was removed from her parents’ custody and placed in her grandmother’s charge. Thus, in the lurid lifestyle of the rich and famous, Turner’s status as an “unfit mother” was broadcast, and her battles with gigolos and recalcitrant children were charted. Rumors circulated that exacerbated the situation: Lana had murdered her lover and blamed Cheryl; the girl had been sexually involved with Stompanato.

It was within this context that Imitation was made and released. Clearly, its narrative of mother/daughter tension, of the failures of the professional woman,

92. Ibid., pp. 77–78.
had particular resonance for the movie-viewing public of 1959—steepled in the
Feminine Mystique and the Turner Mythos. Even the news reports of the crime
made snide connections between the actress’s personal and cinematic incarnations.
A Time column was entitled “The Bad & the Beautiful,” a reference to a
1952 film in which Turner appeared. Its opening line mockingly compared her
life to soap opera: “Can a simple girl from a mining town in Idaho find happiness
as a glamorous movie queen?” Later, in the essay’s description of the hearing, it
called Turner’s deposition a “performance” which “rang true.” The piece also
described the proceedings in theatrical terms: “At the Los Angeles Hall of Rec-
ords, onlookers crowded the corridors to get a glimpse of the drama, oded and
ahed as the principles threaded into the courtroom.”

In a similar vein, Life counterposed pictures of Turner on the stand with stills
from her cinematic courtroom scenes: The Postman Always Rings Twice (1947),
Cass Timberlane (1948), and Peyton Place (1957). It also implied that her testi-
mony was contrived: “Lana had been nominated for an Academy Award . . . but
this was a dramatic, personal triumph far beyond anything she had achieved as an
actress.” Peyton Place experienced a 20 percent box-office surge: Turner was
cast there as a witness at the homicide trial of her daughter’s friend.

It is a common belief that the production of Imitation capitalized on the Stom-
panato scandal. Though the narrative skirts the subject of murder, it concerns the
life of a performer and invokes maternal neglect, mother/daughter strife, and
incestuous rivalry over a man. Turner herself recognized the association between
life and art. In discussing the offer to do the film, she remarked:

One element of the story spooked me. It was the relationship of the actress
and her teenage daughter, to whom she had given every advantage but love
and attention, the only important ones. I knew that painful comparisons
would inevitably be made. “No, I can’t do it,” I said. “I’m frightened.”

Later, she rationalized her affirmative decision by finding “the role . . . the per-
fect way to show people that [she] could rise above the tragedy.”

The parallels between fact and fiction were not lost on Cheryl Crane, who
suspected that Turner had always “liked to play real life scenes . . . that showed
special maternal concern.” (Crane called these occasions “nice cinematic mo-
moment[s].”) At the premiere of Peyton Place, she watched Turner and her screen
daughter, concluding that “the techniques Mother used to intimidate and control
me came not from a well of feeling but from her bag of actress tricks.”

Given the circumstances of April 1958, Crane’s reaction to Imitation was more
severe. She vividly recalls visiting the set and being appalled to find the crew

98. Turner, Lana, p. 256.
shooting at a school she had attended: "I sensed I would never be part of any graduation ceremony, mock or real, but there I stood getting my diploma in the person of actress Sandra Dee." Crane (who regretted not resembling her mother) found that Dee ("pert, pretty and blond"), looked "more like Mother's daughter" than she.

When Crane finally viewed *Imitation*, she was shocked more profoundly: "When I saw . . . how much it borrowed from our lives—the amorous star who spoils and ignores her daughter, the pink bedroom, my actual junior high school, the graduation present of a horse—well, it all made me feel used." In particular, Crane felt "a shiver of recognition" as Sandra Dee spoke the lines: "Oh, Mama, stop acting," or complained of receiving love only "by telephone, by postcard, by magazine interview."

Crane later acknowledged the pressures on Turner to accept the role, given her financial debt and career slump. Furthermore, Lana was thirty-nine, a difficult age for a Hollywood glamour queen forced to negotiate the role shift from ingenue to matron. As Christian Viviani notes, "any star worth her salt gave in at least once in her career to the ritual of maternal suffering . . . it assured her that the public was ready to accept her ageing." Again, this situation is doubled in *Imitation*. Though more middle-aged women than ever were working, much is made of Lora's advanced years. When Steve first learns of her career ambitions, he inquires: "Aren't you a little late getting started?" Allen Loomis tells her that "time isn't on your side."

While Crane saw ties between her own life and the Merediths, Turner also identified with the Johnsons. The hardest scene for her to shoot was Annie's funeral:

I most dreaded the part when Annie's repentant daughter would throw herself on the casket, reminding the star of her troubled relationship with her own daughter. . . . When I heard the first strains of that [funeral] song in my rehearsal, I simply broke down. Images of my own life, my own dark fears flooded my mind.

She recalled that she "dissolved in tears," and "fled"—perhaps like *McCall's* Mother Who Ran Away.

A poster for *Imitation* underscores the links between its promotional address and the Stompanato affair. In tying the film to its literary source (written in 1932), the ad mentions "Fannie Hurst’s best selling novel of today's tormented generation" (my italics). This temporal move displaces the distanced setting of

100. Ibid., p. 261.
temporal move displaces the distanced setting of the 1930s in favor of the sensational scene of the 1950s. Similarly, the film trailers highlight themes relevant to Turner’s romantic and parental struggles. On-screen graphics announce: “What a mother says to a daughter” and “What a daughter says to a mother.” Clips reiterate the damning lines (spoken by Sandra Dee) that Crane most dreads. A narrator’s voice promises that Turner will play a “great stage star,” with countless “men in her life.” (During the scandal, Time ran a Hedda Hopper quote which read: “To [Turner] men are like new dresses, to be . . . doffed at her pleasure.”)

Clearly, Turner’s personal tragedy was utilized to sell Imitation, and contributed to its commercial success. Just as Steve aestheticized Lora’s Coney Island trauma (in a photograph he entitled “Mother in Distress”), so Universal narrativized Turner’s tabloid scandal. Imitation proved one of the studio’s largest box-office hits and (despite the ethics of her complicity), Turner grew rich on the deal: having forfeited a large fee, she earned a major share of the work’s profits. Thus, while Hollywood used her, she manipulated it—in a reciprocal orgy of public and private exploitation. If the newspapers taunted her, she got the better of them, laughing all the way to the bank.

**Epilogue: Fatal Attraction**

*Obsession: Compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea or unwanted feeling or emotion, often with symptoms of anxiety.*

I began by querying our collective enchantment with Imitation of Life and configured it a chiasma for myriad compelling cultural forces. In particular, I conjured three social scenes—women and work, race relations, star mythology—and envisioned the text a tripaneled “mirror” that constituted, transposed, and reflected these worlds.

In the stories of Lora Meredith and Annie Johnson, we found a veiled saga of the postwar American woman: her unresolved tensions between job, family, and romance; her struggles with upward mobility; her conflicts between employment and motherhood; her need for social services; her status as an older worker. In Lora, the film initially imagines a resistant heroine who avoids the Happy Housewife Syndrome, rejecting the comforts of bourgeois marriage for a risky career. Eventually, she is bridled—united with her daughter and lover in an instant of defeat and regret. (Sirk admits that, in melodrama, “there is no real solution to the predicament . . . just the deus ex machina which is . . . called ‘the happy end.’”) In Annie, the movie conceives a transcendent madonna and domestic servant. Although at first she is favored over the rebellious woman, the two heroines are leveled: both are failed parents and disillusioned workers who question their choices and fate.