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"What's the Matter with Sara Jane?": Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life*

*by Marina Heung*

Even at casual glance, Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959) has considerable importance in the history of the Hollywood film. Fannie Hurst’s novel had already been adapted into film in 1934 by John Stahl, but Sirk’s version achieved far greater commercial success than did its predecessor, earning it status as one of Universal’s highest grossing films in history. Also, as Sirk’s last work before his voluntary retirement, the film represents the culminating achievement of an important career. And, with the waning of the woman’s film genre in the late fifties (to await its revival, with new inflections, in the early seventies), the release of *Imitation* in 1959 and its subsequent phenomenal success seem in retrospect to be a fitting summation of the genre, or, as Molly Haskell has said, one of its “glorious—and subversive—last gasps.” Yet, beyond its immediate historical context, *Imitation* has unique relevance to film criticism and feminist scholarship in the mid-eighites.

Recent writings about the woman’s film have drawn on the notion that, given the inherently patriarchal outlook of the typical Hollywood product, this particular genre represents a body of work that at least purports to assume a feminine point of view and to address the conflicts and aspirations of a predominantly female audience. As a sub-genre of the woman’s film, the maternal melodrama, in particular, has received much attention. Finding in it a treatment of a topic often ignored in other genres (namely, the relationship between mothers and daughters), critics have been seeking further insight into the way the patriarchal code typically positions women in relation to the institution of the family. In light of its concern with mother-daughter relationships, and with woman’s work and woman’s place, *Imitation* is obviously a pertinent example. Its unique story structure is a rarity, even within the context of the woman’s film, in that it explicitly develops a parallel between its two female protagonists, one white and one black. As a result, a discourse on race becomes a crucial complication of the prototypical themes of the woman’s film. By juxtaposing Lora Meredith (Lana Turner), a white actress, with Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), her black maid, and by counterposing the two women’s relationships with their daughters, the film offers an opportunity to observe an unusual and revealing intersection of the issues of race, class, and gender. Ultimately, an analysis of the film in these terms yields an understanding of how the woman’s

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film expresses ideologies about issues as diverse as woman's work and woman's suffering, mother-daughter relationships, bonding between black and white women, and the possibility of women's resistance to the social order.

In her essay "When Women Wept," Jeanine Basinger suggests that, as the "core of women's films," the sub-genre of the "rise-to-power" film has a plot which "usually reflected the conventional wisdom that the woman who rose to power, either economic or sexual, was going to be an unhappy woman." In this mode, the subtext of films such as Blonde Venus and Mildred Pierce is a discourse on the "woman's sphere"; in them, worldly success for women usually necessitates failure as wives and mothers. In the balance between domestic happiness and career success, then, the issue is usually decided in favor of the former, since each film typically ends by reinscribing women within the home and family. Thus, Douglas Sirk's avowed aversion for the American cliché of success (as in his saying, "Success is not interesting to me") aptly converges with the overt theme of his version of Imitation of Life, in which Lora Meredith's hunger for theatrical fame is shown to be a hollow dream. The title of the film comments on Lora's aspirations, and its point is reiterated early in the film just before her discovery by David Edwards, a well-known director, when her beau Steve Archer (John Gavin), pleads with her, saying, "Most of the time you're out there fighting to get somewhere—breaking your heart trying to do for yourself and Susie and I want to do for you . . . . I want to give you a home, take care of you . . . . What you're after isn't real . . . ." This pivotal scene ends on a note of doom as Lora, having rejected Steve's offer after a phone call from her agent, runs out alone into the snowy night. This foreshadowing is soon confirmed when, a Broadway star at last, Lora wistfully tells her maid Annie about her director's disappointment with success and, in so doing, implicitly voices her own disillusionment: "He can't stop [his frenetic activities]—if he did, he'd be sure to find out how sad he really is. And I know that feeling. Funny—isn't it? After all this time, struggling, and heartache, you find out it doesn't seem worth it—something is missing."

Lora's wistful admission proves Steve right about the hollowness of her ambitions; more importantly, it is part of her punishment for choosing success and renown over a happy home. Peter Biskind has noted (paraphrasing Betty Friedan): "The career woman had replaced the vamp as the femme fatale of the fifties; the scarlet letter stood for ambition, not adultery." In Imitation, Lora's transgression exacts a punishment that explicitly highlights her violations of her maternal role; here, the theme of the "rise-to-power" film converges with that of the maternal melodrama, in which, as suggested by Linda Williams, the themes of idealization and punishment coincide as a result of the "device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood . . . ." Lora's punishment, like that of so many mothers in the maternal melodrama, is the loss of her daughter's love and respect. Yet, unlike Mildred Pierce and Stella Dallas, both of whom illustrate how "good" maternal love incurs humiliation and rejection when it becomes fanatical, Lora exemplifies the opposite
type of the “bad” mother, implicitly winning for herself the scarlet letter “A” for ambition.

Lora’s fate as a mother is foreshadowed in the opening shot of the film, which shows her on the boardwalk on Coney Island frantically looking for her missing daughter. Steve Archer takes a picture of her plight and later dubs the photograph “mother in distress.” Throughout the film, Lora’s neglect of her daughter, for which she attempts compensation by giving her “everything [she herself] missed,” leads irrevocably to their confrontation near the end of the film, when, in answer to Lora’s defense that “It’s only because of my ambition that you’ve had the best of everything—and that’s a solid achievement that any mother can be proud of,” Susie (Sandra Dee) retorts by asking, “And what about a mother’s love?” She adds that Lora has never given her love except “by telephone, by postcard, by magazine interview—you’ve given me everything but yourself!” As in Mildred Pierce, Susie’s indictment of her mother takes the form of sexual rivalry; just as Veda finally marries Mildred’s lover, so Susie falls in love with Steve. The perversity of her choice of a love object implies that Lora’s emotional abandonment of her has created this monstrous inversion of roles and affections.

The ideological project of Sirk’s film, to discredit the maternal type represented in Lora, comes into even sharper relief when we compare it to the original novel and to the first adaptation. In both the novel and earlier film, the Lora Meredith character is Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert in the film), a widow of a maple syrup salesman in Atlantic City. To support herself and her young daughter, Bea takes over her late husband’s business and builds it into a multi-million dollar enterprise with the help of Delilah, her black maid (Louise Beavers in the film), who also has a daughter. Both earlier versions highlight a typical theme of the maternal melodrama, succinctly described by Christian Viviani as “an apologia for total renunciation, total sacrifice, total self-abnegation.”

In the novel, Bea’s rise to wealth and fame makes her an emblem of women who are succeeding in business for the first time. Indeed, the novel is meant as a cautionary tale on the price of success, a notion condensed in the headline of a magazine article that Bea writes, entitled “What Price Business Career to a Woman?” Delilah echoes this point by admonishing her mistress: “Outta all dem men down dar in Wall Street, supportin’ and lovin’ deir wimmin, you ain’t one of ’em... I want some lovin’ for you, honey—some man-lovin’. . . . You ain’t nevah had your share.” Eventually, Bea falls in love with her business manager, Flake, but on the last page of the novel, she discovers her fiancé in an embrace with her daughter and thus realizes that he is going to become her son-in-law instead. Unlike Susie’s infatuation with Steve in the Sirk film, however, this denouement in the novel is not depicted as a daughter’s retaliation against a negligent mother. In fact, the surprise ending follows the daughter’s return from school to declare that her mother is the “darlingest person in the world.” Thus, Bea loses her lover and her hopes for a traditional home and romantic bliss, but she does not lose her daughter’s love. As the narrator comments near the end
of the film, “She had built a colossus, when all she had ever wanted was a home-life behind Swiss curtains of her own hemming, with a man who had awakened her as Flake had.”

The novel is about the price of success; the 1934 film is about the price of motherhood. Stahl’s film sympathetically depicts Bea’s determination and shrewdness in building a pancake empire, and success is shown to have laudable rewards—affluence, renown, social position, and domestic happiness. Furthermore, far from jeopardizing her maternal role, we see that Bea’s business actually enables her to be a more attentive mother: once she sets up her pancake shop on the boardwalk, Bea integrates her spheres of work and family by putting the family quarters in the back of the restaurant, so that she simply has to use a connecting door to gain access to either. At the same time, departing from the novel, success is shown not to preclude romance; indeed, the appearance of the dashing and wordly Stephen Archer (Warren Williams) at Bea’s evening party is like the crowning touch of Bea’s achievements. When her daughter develops a teenage crush on Stephen, however, Bea resolves to send her lover away, realizing that only his absence will enable her daughter to outgrow her infatuation. Thus, while the novel emphasizes the incompatibility of personal happiness and material success, the Stahl film defines renunciation as concomitant to noble motherhood, choosing to valorize Bea for her willingness to give up her devoted lover for her daughter’s sake. As Linda Williams has noted, the dominant emotion in the woman’s film is “joy in pain, pleasure in sacrifice.” The ideology of such a film is fundamentally patriarchal, validating (again to quote Williams) “what patriarchy has claimed to know all along: that it is not possible to combine womanly desire with motherly duty.”

The film opens to show Bea bathing her infant daughter. Its closing line of dialogue alludes to a toy rubber duck in the opening scene. But when Bea repeats the childish prattle, “I want my quack-quack! I want my quack-quack!” this rather absurd refrain nevertheless speaks to a “good” mother’s awareness of inevitable deprivation and unfulfilled desire as her accepted lot.

In Sirk’s Imitation, it is Annie, Lora’s black maid, who exemplifies the prototype of the sacrificial mother ennobled through suffering and self-denial. When, from her sick bed, Annie tells Lora that Susie is in love with Steve, the ensuing exchange between them is Annie’s implicit indictment of Lora as a “bad” mother:

Lora: Why don’t I know about it [Susie’s problem]? Why didn’t she come to me?
Annie: Maybe because you weren’t around.
Lora: You mean . . . I . . . haven’t been a good mother.
Annie: I know you meant to be a good mother—the best kind of mother. But look—I meant to be a good one too, but I failed.

Annie’s suggestion that she, too, failed as a good mother is not meant to be taken seriously, for her lack of personal ambition, stoical devotion to her daughter, and unquestioning acceptance of her social status all make her a corrective to Lora’s
maternal failures. Through Annie, the film celebrates a specific maternal ideal while denigrating the type Lora represents. To underscore this point, Annie effectively becomes a surrogate mother for Susie, reading her and her own daughter Christmas stories while Lora is rehearsing stage lines, and acting as confidante and advisor to the teenaged Susie. Aptly enough, in the first scene of the film, Lora, the “mother in distress,” runs down the boardwalk steps and encounters Annie (whom she has yet to meet) coming up the same steps with two hot-dogs in hand, one for her daughter, and one for Lora’s. The transference of maternal roles prefigured here is directly stated in Susie’s later accusation of Lora: “Let’s face it, mother: Annie’s always been more like a real mother to me—you never had time for me.”

In explaining why Annie’s portrayal in his film departs so drastically from her earlier incarnations, Sirk stated: “Maybe it would have been all right for Stahl’s time, but nowadays a Negro woman who got rich could buy a house, and wouldn’t be dependent to such a degree on the white woman. . . . So I had to change the axis of the film and make the Negro woman just the typical Negro, a servant, without much she could call her own but the friendship, love, and charity of a white mistress.” However, despite Sirk’s seemingly neutral appeal to historical plausibility, the differences in Annie’s portrayal have wide-ranging ideological implications. In the two earlier versions, Delilah is an indispensable collaborator in Bea’s business. It is her pancake recipe that Bea markets so successfully. In the novel, since the business is named after Delilah (“Delilah Delights”), Delilah herself becomes a well-known public icon, and she also plays an active role in training “corps of Negro women” to staff the various restaurants around the country. In the Stahl film, Delilah has similar importance in the business venture, her prominence expressed visually in the gigantic billboard (seen twice in the film) showing her likeness above the slogan, “32 million packages sold last year”; Bea also acknowledges her contribution by offering her a 20 percent share in the company. In this film, the underlying theme of the two women’s lives is that sacrifice and suffering are a mother’s lot regardless of her achievements in the public sphere. Indeed, in learning this lesson, Bea is a direct beneficiary of Delilah’s example, so that after she sees the heartbroken and dying Delilah, she says to her daughter, “I’ve seen such a tragedy. . . . Poor Delilah. . . . Darling, if anything should ever come between us, it would kill me. . . .” And so, Bea concludes that she, too, must sacrifice her own happiness to avoid Delilah’s fate.

Actually, all three versions of *Imitation of Life* support the basic polemics of the rise-to-power film, while ringing individual changes on specific themes. Distinctive in the 1959 version is the depiction of Annie as a maid with no direct involvement in Lora’s career, through which Sirk sharpens the contrast between the two spheres of work that the two women occupy, effectively validating one while discrediting the other. As a result, this portrayal of Annie as a black domestic seen in contrast to Lora, a white career woman, touches on the issues of gender, class, and race in ways that the other two versions do not. However, while this
difference makes Sirk’s version the most interesting of the three, a scrutiny of his film also reveals a systematic suppression and displacement of these issues through recourse to the ready-made ideology of the maternal melodrama. This is to say that Sirk has Annie function as a foil to Lora in order to reinforce the polemics of the maternal melodrama and of the woman’s film, and, conversely, the generic framework used in his film makes possible a masking and distortion of the issues of race, class, and gender that are raised by Annie’s portrayal as a black domestic.

Actually, Annie’s role in Sirk’s film is based on an inescapable irony, which is that Annie is, herself, a working woman. Yet, remarkably, Annie’s working status is constructed so as to allow her to function as Lora’s foil without calling this fundamental contradiction into question. This fact inevitably raises the issue of Annie’s ideological significance in the Sirk film, especially because of her greater prominence in this film as compared to the two earlier versions of the story. In fact, Rainer Werner Fassbinder has remarked on how *Imitation* “starts as a film about the Lana Turner character and turns imperceptibly into a film about Annie...”18 As Fassbinder recognizes, the emotional weight of the film falls heavily on Annie’s relationship with Sara Jane (Susan Kohner). Thus, Annie’s heightened importance and the contradictions embedded in her characterization conspire, as we shall see, to introduce a series of disturbances in the film that exceed its basic polemical operations. We therefore must agree with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith’s conclusion that the “importance of the melodrama... lies in its ideological failures.”19

The depiction of Annie cannot be an ideologically neutral one, since, as black domestic, she occupies the sphere of work that has become identified in this century with black women as a group; as sociologists have shown, black domestic service is an exemplary case for demonstrating the intersection of class, race, and patriarchy.20 At the same time, the use of the parallel story structure in *Imitation* potentially offers a promising instance of a fictional treatment of a black domestic’s relationship to her white mistress, a subject that has also concerned some researchers recently.21 However, as I intend to show, the film seeks to mask the nature of the employer/employee relationship between Lora and Annie, and also to displace the potential conflict between mistress/maid and black/white onto the framework of a mother/child conflict, the prototypical theme of the maternal melodrama.

To start, Annie’s status as Lora’s maid is clearly established in the film. Annie addresses Lora as “Mis’ Meredith” or “Mis’ Lora,” and she often appears in a black uniform and a white apron. When during their first meeting, Lora wistfully expresses the wish for “someone to look after Susie,” Annie eagerly chimes in: “A maid to live in? Someone to take care of your little girl? A strong, healthy, settled-down woman who eats like a bird and doesn’t care if she gets no time off and will work real cheap?” Here, Annie is clearly offering herself as Lora’s maid. Yet, contrast this episode with Delilah’s arrival at Bea’s house in the Stahl film, in which Delilah has found the wrong house in answer to an
ad for a maid. When Delilah stays on, we understand that she has managed to persuade Bea to hire her. As Sirk shows it, however, Lora invites Annie to stay overnight at her apartment, but there is no hint of any agreement between them, only a display of benevolence freely given and gratefully received. The next morning, seeing her underwear hung up to dry, Lora tells Annie with embarrassment, “You shouldn’t have done my laundry.” Then, as both women sit and address pay envelopes, Annie talks about putting their earnings into “our kitty,” to which Lora wryly responds, “‘Our’ kitty? Seems like you intend to stay....” A similar impression, that Annie chooses to stay on strictly out of her own initiative, is conveyed about Annie’s performance of her chores: when Lora admonishes her for doing her laundry, Annie’s reply is, “I like to take care of pretty things.” And, when Lora moves everyone into a country mansion, she gently reminds Annie, “You know you can have anyone you want in here to help you”—an odd suggestion indeed, implying that, as a servant, Annie would be in a position to bring in help for herself. This scene is altogether a strange one, for it has Annie asking Lora, as the movers unload elaborate furnishings, “Do you think we can really afford all this?” This remark suggests, if only for comic effect, her co-ownership of the new habitat. To sum up, Annie’s ambiguous depiction as a servant is reflected in the placement of her bedroom. In the Stahl film, Delilah sleeps downstairs and Bea upstairs; in this film, however, Sara Jane emphatically lives upstairs with Lora and Susie, and, as we gather from the scene in which Susie looks down from Annie’s room to see her mother kissing Steve in front of the house, so does Annie.

Two incidents in particular illustrate how the film obfuscates Annie’s working status. In the first, Annie’s success in getting a delivery out of the milkman prompts Lora to muse ironically, “He thought you were my maid. Now he thinks I’m rich.” In the second example, Lora bluffs her way in to see Allen Loomis, her agent, by pretending to be a Hollywood star. When Loomis dials her home number, Annie unwittingly protracts Lora’s deception by answering, “Mis’ Meredith’s residence....” Half embarrassed, half triumphant, Lora reaches for the phone, saying smugly, “That’ll be Annie, my maid—I’ll talk to her.” In explicitly addressing the issue of Annie’s relationship to Lora, these two incidents are anomalies in the film. However, they also vehemently deny Annie’s servant status even while invoking it, for both play on the implicit premise that the milkman and Loomis are wrong in assuming Annie to be Lora’s maid. Thus, while neither scene clarifies what Annie’s true status is, both lead the audience to conclude that seeing Annie as a maid would be an error.

To examine the black female domestic as she exists in historical fact and cultural myth helps to highlight the strategies used in *Imitation* to construct Annie along specific ideological lines. On one level, Annie fulfills the archetypal image of the southern mammy. Indeed, Annie has almost all of these qualities listed by Jessie W. Parkhurst in her essay, “The Black Mammy in the Plantation Household”: “She was considered self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate,
fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, competent, possessed with a temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile."23 By portraying Annie in this fashion, the film essentially reaches back to an image of domestic servitude derived on one hand, from the southern plantation, and on the other, from an outdated model. So, when Lora tells Annie that she can bring in extra help if she needs it, her reference to "help" is based on an archaic view of domestic service that is earlier echoed by Annie's offer to her: "You wouldn't have to pay no wages. Just let me come and do for you." The notion of "help" defines domestic service as a quasi-familial, fluidly defined relationship between employer and employee, established through casual recruitment, bound by a loose verbal agreement to exchange labor for a home, and sustained through personal loyalty.24 This personalized view of domestic service has prompted David Katzman and Judith Rollins to isolate it as a crucial factor in promoting the exploitation of the domestic.25 In the same vein, Faye E. Dudden suggests that the nostalgia for "help" is often a longing harking back to the early-nineteenth-century desire for a "perfectly good understanding and good feeling" between master and servant.26 Thus, although the figuration of domestic service as "help" could only have existed as just such a nostalgic memory in the late fifties, Imitation renders it as an unremarkable contemporary phenomenon. Furthermore, historically speaking, the black woman was instrumental in shifting the trend of domestic service from live-in to live-out status,27 her quintessential struggle always being to choose between her taking care of her employer's family or her own.28 Sirk's film, however, creates a fantasy situation in which Annie's adoption into Lora's home as a live-in maid, far from separating her from her daughter, actually makes it possible for Sara Jane to be properly "mothered" while gaining access to a luxurious life-style.

To pursue the issue of how the film constructs the idea of work, there is yet another curiosity, noted by Fassbinder, which is our uncertainty over whether or not Lora is a good actress.29 In answering Fassbinder, one concludes that the film is actually indifferent to the question of Lora's talent. Rather, Lora's work is treated as an abstraction, first because Lora is condemned simply for choosing to work outside the home, and second, she does the kind of work that brings her affluence, celebrity, and independence (fatally associated with impersonation or "imitation"). Fassbinder, however, might just as well have noted the film's representation of Annie's work: its status as work for pay is systematically denied, and it is depicted throughout as voluntary help done out of devotion and choice. As Dudden notes, "help" denotes "less an occupation than an activity,"30 and as such, Annie's full-time commitment to labor is presented as unproblematic and invisible. Thus, the ease with which the audience accepts this impression only testifies to the prevalent cultural prejudices concerning white women's and black women's work. For white women, work is viewed as a problem, a matter of
weighing crucial alternatives, while for black women, it is a natural signifier of their assumed status in white society.

In studying the black household worker, Bonnie Thornton Dill concludes that “class origins, racial discrimination, and social conceptions of women and women’s work came together during the first half of the twentieth century to limit work options and affect family roles and the self-perceptions of one group of Afro-American women born between 1896 and 1915.” The release of Imitation in 1959, therefore, coincided with the time when this generation of women would have been in their maturity as working women. However, failing to recognize the multiplicity of factors converging to dictate Annie’s social status, the film chooses rather to isolate, as a central dynamic in her characterization, only her race. For Annie, this theme is primarily realized through her conflict with her daughter, Sara Jane. Sirk describes Sara Jane’s thematic function in the film, as “the Negro girl trying to escape her condition, sacrificing to her status in society her bonds of friendship, family, etc., and trying to vanish into the imitation world of vaudeville. The imitation of life is not the real life. Lana Turner’s life is a very cheap imitation. The girl... is choosing the imitation of life instead of being a Negro. The picture is a piece of social criticism—of both white and black.” In her way, Annie becomes Sirk’s spokesman in the film by telling Sara Jane, “It’s a sin to be ashamed of what you are—and it’s even worse to pretend, to lie.” A “bad” daughter to Lora’s “bad” mother, Sara Jane’s refusal to accept her racial identity leads her to reject her mother and, indirectly, to cause her mother’s death. The prominence of the theme of race, however, also turns out to be one operation by which the film dilutes or disguises the issue of class; namely, by transposing situations with a class component into racial terms. Thus, while Sara Jane’s extreme behavior could easily signify her objections to her mother’s working status, the dramaturgy of particular episodes guides us toward a racially weighted interpretation of her actions. For instance, when she and her mother are shown their room in Lora’s apartment, she protests, “I don’t want to live in the back—why do we always have to live in the back?” On face value, her objections potentially reflect a class awareness, but meanwhile the camera chooses to dwell, with obvious implications, on a shot of the black doll she discards on the floor as the scene ends. Later, the teen-aged Sara Jane is outraged at Lora’s suggestions that she is dating Hawkins, the son of a chauffeur, and she is further incensed immediately afterward when Annie suggests that she attend a church party, where all she’ll meet are “busboys, cooks, chauffeurs—like Hawkins...!” But here, too, the meaning of Sara Jane’s ire is slanted by the way she chooses to exact her revenge against Lora and Annie, by walking in on Lora’s guests with swaying hips, a tray on her head, and a southern drawl—all in imitation of a plantation slave.

Such strategies in Imitation illustrate D. N. Rodowick’s point about the “eloquent silences’ of the domestic melodrama which map out the network of resistances in which its narratives fail.” What is at stake in this film, I would argue, is the need to suppress the true location of potential conflict: that between
white mistress and black servant. The purpose is, in fact, to render invisible Annie's working status and to make her relationship to Lora seem simply personal, and consequently unproblematic. Where the issue of race is concerned, the basic strategy is to transpose the issue onto the framework of the maternal melodrama, so that the site of conflict is between a black woman and her white-skinned daughter, rather than between a black domestic and her white mistress. Seizing on the built-in theme of mother/daughter conflict in the maternal melodrama, the film is able, by a sleight of hand, to formulate the issue of race as familial rather than social. As a result, it is mother and daughter who are each other's antagonists, not two black women and a racist society. Annie dies, more or less because of her daughter's treatment of her, not because of the innumerable hardships typically suffered by domestics. Throughout the film, Sara Jane's revulsion at her own blackness is directed almost exclusively against her mother. For instance, after Annie inadvertently exposes Sara Jane's color to her classmates at school, Sara Jane turns on her mother to demand, "Why did you have to be my mother? Why?" Other characters, too, focus on Sara Jane's blackness as a maternal issue, so that when Frankie, Sara Jane's white boyfriend, discovers her color, his fury takes the form of this demand: "Just tell me one thing—is it true? Is your mother a nigger?" After arriving home from Frankie's assault, Sara Jane's rage is predictably vented against her mother: "[Frankie] found out I'm not white—'cos you keep telling the world I'm your daughter." In all of this, Annie, as Sara Jane's mother, becomes a symbol of the blackness that Sara Jane considers her curse. At the same time, one notes that the strategy of framing the racial issue as a maternal conflict depends on the expedient of making Sara Jane a black woman who looks white, rather than a black woman who will not accept the consequences of being (and looking) black. In the latter instance, Sara Jane's rebelliousness would constitute a statement about racial injustice. As depicted in the film, however, Sara Jane's whiteness is crucial in dictating our view of her as having a problem, that is to say, a neurosis compounded of identity confusion, a daughter's unreasonable rejection of her mother, and an opportunistic exploitation of an accident of nature to defraud society.

In discussing Imitation, Michael Stern argues that the film reflects Sirk's awareness of how his use of melodrama limits his treatment of larger social problems. Actually, I would argue the opposite point—that the film is symptomatic of this limitation, for, as we have seen, easier explanations are arrived at by drawing upon the ideologies embedded in generic conventions. Indeed, Annie's question—"How do you tell your daughter that she was born to be hurt?"—seems to acknowledge the central proposition of the maternal melodrama, that women, especially mothers, are "born to be hurt." By appealing to this belief, the film lends credence to Annie's resignation to her suffering, while demanding that the audience assent to its inevitability. By the same logic, we can see that one of Lora's sins is her sustained refusal to suffer. Her theatrical triumphs have fitting titles like "Happiness," "Always Laughter," and "Born to Laugh." It is her decision to star in a film called "No More Laughter" that
precipitates the events leading to her realization of guilt. For Annie, however, who is only too prepared to suffer, any questions about the rationale for her victimization are dissolved into the general propositions about women’s suffering embedded in the genre. In this way, the conundrum made of her fate exemplifies what Thomas Elsaesser has identified as the failings of melodrama, its refusal “to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms [and] a lamentable ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions of these changes and their causality [which have] encouraged increasingly escapist forms of mass entertainment.”

The preceding discussion has shown the strategies in Imitation of Life operating to promote certain ideologies about woman’s place in relation to gender, class, and race. Yet the film might be less worthy of this lengthy analysis if it did not offer the possibility of a subversive reading that provides a corrective to, although it may not undermine, the dominant ideologies of the film. This alternative reading reveals Sara Jane, rather than Lora or Annie, to be the center of disturbance in this film. In Sara Jane, the dominant discourses in the film converge: like Lora, she resists confinement within the home, and unlike Annie, she transgresses the limitations placed on her by class and race structures. More important, she has the ability to activate the themes suppressed in the film and is thus the vehicle for what Tania Modleski has termed (in another context) “an outlet for the repressed feminine voice.” So, while the film falls short of consciously commenting on its own limitations, it does, through Sara Jane, allow for a reading that goes against the grain of its basic ideological formulations. Indeed, Sirk himself seems to have intimated Sara Jane’s unexpected importance in the film by saying that “the supporting part is the more interesting and the better acting part. The better part for the director, too; he can make more out of it. Susan Kohner, a complete beginner in pictures, steps forward, putting Turner and Gavin in the shade.”

Pamela Cook notes that in Mildred Pierce, Mildred’s daughter Veda is “the threat of chaos, the excess of which Mildred’s discourse calls into being and which it cannot resolve.” In Imitation, Sara Jane likewise presents the threat of chaos because she has the catalytic ability to activate the themes that are otherwise suppressed in the film. Ironically, this power in Sara Jane often derives from her willingness to role-play and mimic—in other words, to “imitate.” For instance, she parades in front of Lora’s guests in an exaggerated parody of a slave, drawling in a mock-servile accent: “Fetch y’awl a mess of crawdaddies, Mis’ Lora, fo’ y’awl and yo’ friends.” When Lora comments coldly on her “trick,” she continues, “Ah learned it from mah mammy, ’nd she learned it from her ol’ mastah ’fo she ’longed to you.” The shock value of Sara Jane’s performance here comes from the exact targeting of her resentment while she acts it out. It is directed at Annie for her servility and at Lora, whom she now exposes not as Annie’s benefactress, but as an owner of servants. Near the end of the film, there is another instance in which Sara Jane’s role-playing indirectly illuminates the
true positioning of herself and others. When the dying Annie goes to see Sara Jane in a motel, their encounter is interrupted by the appearance of one of Sara Jane's girlfriends. Mother and daughter then act out the pretense that Annie is simply Sara Jane's childhood mammy, with Annie explaining to the friend, "I used to take care of her." When, after Annie's departure, the friend says to Sara Jane in mock glee, "So—honey chile, you had a mammy," Sara Jane, stricken with guilt, pretends to agree, sobbing, "Yes—all my life!" The pathos of this scene makes it one of the emotional highpoints of the film. Its ironic power, however, derives from its exposure of a dynamic suppressed in the film, which is that Annie has indeed played the role of mammy for Lora and Susie. Thus, through a particularly cruel transference, it now seems appropriate for her to agree to enact a similar role for her own daughter. In this scene, the substitution of "mammy" for "mother," a degrading insult to Annie, makes explicit the mislabeling of roles that has persisted throughout, whereby Annie's working role as a servant has been systematically disguised as a personal and familial one instead.

Even in her misguided self-destructiveness, Sara Jane's refusal to accept socially imposed strictures helps to illuminate her social positioning in ways that her mother's acquiescence does not. By performing in a tawdry nightclub, she displays herself as a sexual object for her clientele, and by trying to pass for white, she incurs physical assault from Frankie, her white boyfriend. Yet, the fact that Sara Jane's nightclub act is obviously a pathetic imitation of Lora's theatrical success impels us to understand, if not to condone, her smoldering frustration with the constraints relegateing her to such demeaning means for satisfying her aspirations. Similarly, although Frankie's attack on her seems an inevitable punishment for her masquerading as white, his violence nevertheless gives credence to Sara Jane's fear and rejection of a social system that renders her victim of such chastisement.

A subversive reading of the film, therefore, sees Sara Jane in a posture of justified rebellion against her mother's powerlessness and servility. Judith Rollins (speaking, aptly enough, of why domestics might identify with their mistresses) has said that identification is "a mode of coping with a situation of powerlessness that precludes overt attack against those with power." In this light, Sara Jane's view of her connection to Annie as her curse, and her resulting refusal to identify with her mother, signify her unspoken recognition of the root of Annie's powerlessness. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has concluded, the cause of women's "suffering and impotence" in melodrama is "the failure to be male"—only here in Annie's case, hers is the failure to be both male and white. Sara Jane's problem of identity is, as D. N. Rodowick suggests, typical of how the domestic melodrama portrays social conflict as "crises of identification": "The forward thrust of narrative is not accomplished through external conflict and the accumulation of significant actions, but rather through the internalization of conflict in a crisis of identification: the difficulty which individual characters find in their attempts to accept or conform to the set of symbolic positions around which the network of social relations adhere and where they can both be..."
In *Imitation*, daughters punish mothers by exhibiting neuroses that exemplify such crises. Thus, Susie punishes Lora essentially by committing an error in sexual identification that leads her to fall in love with her mother’s lover. Lora’s career success supplies Sara Jane with a model of behavior defined in professional terms (but one that also has overt sexual connotations, as Sara Jane’s lascivious nightclub act makes clear). In this context, Lora, as an object of false identification, is again the culprit, and her functioning in this respect gives the mirror motif, for which Sirk is renowned, further significance: as the falsely seductive mirror in which Susie and Sara Jane see themselves, Lora becomes the site on which the “normal” and “healthy” identification processes between mothers and daughters are played out according to a sinister and perverted scenario.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has argued that the melodrama differs from tragedy in that in the former the “locus of power is the family and individual power” rather than social power, so that “the question of law or legitimacy, so central to tragedy, is turned inward from ‘Has this man a right to rule (over us)?’ to ‘Has this man a right to rule a family (like ours)?’” This question, Nowell-Smith continues, can be expressed in terms of the underlying question in the family romance, which asks, “Whose child am I?” Accordingly, Sara Jane’s rejection of Annie and her implicit modeling of herself after Lora addresses the issue of parentage, and so illustrates E. Ann Kaplan’s point that “feminism was in part a reaction against our mothers, who had tried to inculcate the patriarchal ‘feminine’ in us, much to our anger.” Identifying with Lora, Sara Jane allies herself with a woman who, in her own way, has risked transgression; at the same time, her choice of symbolic parentage leads her to commit not only a fundamental violation of familial relationships—disownment of her mother—but also, by implication, perhaps the most heinous of familial crimes, matricide, as suggested by Sara Jane’s public admission over Annie’s coffin, “I killed my mother!”

On a more subtle, but no less significant, level, Sara Jane’s selective identification with parental figures is taken one step further—through her identification with her father. Sara Jane’s father (briefly mentioned only once and never seen in the film) is, empirically speaking, entirely peripheral to the dramatic plot. However, as the sole father and husband in the film, and also as the patriarchal ideal to whom Sara Jane traces her lineage, he has a significant place in the family plot crystallized in the film’s question, “Whose child am I?” Throughout the film, by insisting on her own whiteness, Sara Jane repeatedly invokes her bond to her father who, in Annie’s words, was “practically white.” By defining herself in terms of her patrimony, Sara Jane instinctively casts her allegiance with a figure that to her represents power, both as a male and as a black man who can pass for white. (In the same vein, it might also be significant that Sara Jane as child claims affinity to Jesus Christ, haughtily saying, “He was white—like me,” and thereby proclaims her identification with one of the archetypal patriarchal figures in the Christian pantheon.)

Sara Jane’s father is a contradictory figure in this film, and not only in his appearance as a black man who looks white. On one hand, he can be seen to...
exemplify the absent father who, as D. N. Rodowick has noted, “in the 1950’s [melodrama] . . . functioned solely to throw the system into turmoil by his absences through death or desertion, his weaknesses, his neglects, etc.” On the other hand, Sara Jane’s father has a distinguishing attribute placing him in a posture of resistance to the patriarchal system that his absence could otherwise be seen to validate. The exact racial identity of Sara Jane’s father is in doubt. Annie’s explanation that “he was practically white” could mean that his ancestry was predominantly white, or that he was a black man with very light skin. It is this fundamental ambiguity in his racial identity that gives Sara Jane’s father his symbolic power in the film. Portrayed as an individual with no name, no history, and no fixed racial identity, he can be seen as a man who passes a tragic flaw down to his daughter, or alternately, as a man who can resist social categorization and therefore social control. In his ambiguity, he has access to the “different kind of representation [escaping] rigidity of fixed identity” that Linda Williams imagines might offer the promise of transcending the “dialectic between the maternal unrepresentable and the paternal already-represented.”

Imitation, however, reverses Williams’s dialectic (adapted from Jane Gallop and Julia Kristeva): in the film, it is the maternal figure, Annie, who represents the already represented, and the father figure, Annie’s husband, who is the unrepresentable. As that which is unrepresentable, Sara Jane’s father has the power to resist the strictures of social and racial stratification, and this freedom is what Sara Jane chooses to exploit in identifying with him. She tells Susie at one point, “[My mother] can’t help her color, but I can—and I will.” Argued this way, Sara Jane’s father can be seen as an approximation of the end product of the project, described by Marianne Hirsch, of “dismantling the sameness and unity of the symbolic order that has excluded woman, of creating a discourse of plurality [which] depends on a redefinition of the individual subject . . . .”

As a catalytic force in the film, Sara Jane dismantles the film’s basic strategy of displacement and obfuscation by opening up the site where the issues of social hegemony converge. Through her identification with a symbolic figure who is paternal, male, and white, Sara Jane provides a recognition of the alignment of forces in society that act to oppress her and to relegate her and her mother to a subordinate position. While the ingrained ideology of the maternal melodrama solicits our consent to seeing Sara Jane’s defiance as structured around her conflict with her mother, the insertion of the theme of the father nevertheless offers the possibility of locating the conflict properly within the realm of the family and of society as institutions of power. Thus, although the overriding structure of the maternal melodrama would couch the question of woman’s suffering in terms of a dialectic between good mothers and bad mothers, Sara Jane ruptures this reading by illuminating the issues of authority and social control and thus calls into question the closure of the melodramatic framework. In the final analysis, of course, Sara Jane’s declaration of allegiance to her father is self-defeating, for this figure who offers hopes of resistance can do so, within the terms of the
narrative, only by operating as a negative force and by remaining an imaginary and ill-defined entity.

Sirk's work has always had a special place in the debate over whether melodrama is an inherently conservative or subversive form. For instance, Paul Willemen has proposed that "Sirk's position in the history of the American cinema closely parallels Tolstoy's position in the history of Soviet literature, . . . [because like Tolstoy] he depicted a society which appeared to be strong and healthy, but which in fact was exhausted and torn apart by collective neuroses." Or, as Laura Mulvey suggests in her essay on Sirk while the "view of melodrama as a safety valve for ideological contradictions centered on sex and the family seems to deprive it of possible redemption as progressive, it also places it in the context of wider problems." At the same time, the issue of "narrative rupture," particularly that which results from the imposition of an arbitrarily neat and happy ending, has further occasioned the claim made by various critics for the inherent conservatism of the genre. Thus, E. Ann Kaplan describes the "need [in melodrama] to re-inscribe the feminine in its location as defined by patriarchy [so that even though] the narrative may allow brief expressions of female resistance to that positioning, and glimpses of other possibilities for women . . . the ‘correct’ family order must be re-established by the end of the film." With a different emphasis, while recognizing the inevitable tension between contradictions in ideological content and their forced resolution, Mulvey nevertheless argues that "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes." Here again, Sirk's own well-documented uneasiness with the requirement of the happy ending makes him both an exemplary case and a thoughtful commentator. In fact, he has specifically addressed this issue in relation to *Imitation*, saying:

> you don't believe the happy end, and you're not really supposed to. . . . By just drawing out the characters you certainly could get a story—along the lines of hopelessness, of course. You could just go on. Lana will forget about her daughter again, and go back to the theatre and continue as the kind of actress she has been before. Gavin will go off with some other woman. Susan Kohner will go back to the escape world of vaudeville. Sandra Dee will marry a decent guy. The circle will be closed. But the point is you don't have to do this. And if you did, you would get a picture that the studio would have abhorred.

However, although Sirk's deliberate use of irony may be typical of his other work, *Imitation* stands out among his films in that the conservative thrust of its ending predominates over whatever ironic subtext Sirk might have intended. Thus, while it remains to be seen whether, in the context of Sirk's *oeuvre*, *Imitation* is the exception that proves the rule, and while it might be no more than speculative to relate this aspect of the film to its tremendous commercial success, the film would seem to demand a qualification of Laura Mulvey's point that the strength of melodrama lies in its ability to resist the blandishments of the happy
ending. In this, Sirk’s last film, the sheer emotional power of its final scene, along with the symbolic weight of its mise-en-scene, finally operates to lay to rest the subversive energy of Sara Jane and to reinstate Annie, in her death, as the emotional and ideological center of the film.

Throughout the film, as a foil for Lora, Annie is notably devoid of ambition and accepting of her servile status. Apparently, though, Annie’s desire for an elaborate funeral is one ambition she has. Before her death, she tells Lora, “I’m getting on, and [a big funeral is] the one thing I’ve always wanted to splurge on. I really want it elegant . . . ,” adding that she wants “four white horses, and a band playing, no mourning, but proud, and high-steppin’ horses like I was going to glory.” In requesting the staging for her “going to glory,” Annie seems to be visualizing it as an occasion for a public spectacle rivaling one of Lora’s theatrical triumphs, at which “all the friends” she has will be in attendance. At her funeral, it seems, Annie can enjoy the glory denied her in life. Accordingly, her funeral symbolically reverses the conditions of her working life: where she labored in anonymity and isolation, she is now honored in public by a community of friends (and, it appears, of total strangers as well); where her life-style was humble and her work seemingly without monetary value, the sheer ostentation of the occasion testifies to the tangible recompense for such a life; and where she served whites without complaint, now she is among her own—the scene is designed to be pervaded with black, Annie’s color, so that even Lora’s blondness and habitual white attire are doused by the color of mourning.

The pageantry of the scene suggest Annie’s unspoken craving for recognition. Its climactic moment comes when Sara Jane, in full view of a gathering of blacks and whites, finally “recognizes” her mother by declaring, “It’s my mother!” Given Annie’s contentment with living and working in oblivion, the inscription of recognition as a central motif in the scene of her funeral must be significant. The fundamental irony, though, lies in the suggestion that for Annie, her anihilation is the prerequisite for recognition, and that only in death can she declare publicly that she has a family, a community, and deserved compensation for her life of servitude. Without directly addressing its ironic implications, Michael Stern notes how, during her funeral, Annie “has been transformed into an object—the flower-draped coffin—like so many objects in Sirk’s films, unassailable by the characters.”55 In the same vein, we can make sense of a detail in the scene that has puzzled some critics: two long shots, intercut with the exterior shots of the funeral procession, taken from inside a store to frame the cortege within the storefront window. The radical shift in physical distance and vantage point effected by these two seemingly unmotivated shots signifies that, as an icon, Annie has entered the realm of public and communal consciousness, here represented by a removed and anonymous point of view like that of a stranger looking on.

In discussing the ending of Stella Dallas, Linda Williams has noted how the “final scene functions to efface Stella even as it glorifies her sacrificial act of motherly love [because] Stella loses both her daughter and [herself] to become
an abstract (and absent) ideal of motherly sacrifice. Just such a simultaneous eradication and glorification of Annie occurs in the last scene of *Imitation*. Yet a comparison of this ending with those in Sirk’s other films suggests a departure from Sirk’s usual strategy. Christopher Orr, for instance, comments on the ironic happy endings in films like *Magnificent Obsession* and *All That Heaven Allows*, saying that in them “Sirk’s mise-en-scene undermines [their] sentimental and complicit content. . . .” In *Imitation*, however, while the irony is not far beneath the surface, the primary drive of its ending is toward closure and ideological containment, rather than open-ended and subversive interrogation. In discussing the conclusion of *Written on the Wind*, Orr further suggests that its “epilogue calls attention to contradictions within the film’s ideological project [because an epilogue is] something added on, a site for information not integrated by the narrative. . . .” If, ideologically speaking, the ending of *Written* is a “mistake” (Orr’s characterization), then, in contrast, *Imitation* represents Sirk’s much more successful attempt to avoid concluding his film on such an overt note of contradiction and disjunction.

Appropriately enough, the success of *Imitation* in its drive toward closure hinges on the clustering of its *mise-en-scene* and symbolism around the central metaphor of the film, that of imitation. As already noted, Annie’s funeral as a public spectacle parallels the various performances by Lora and Sara Jane seen throughout the film. However, unlike the anonymous audiences at Lora’s stage appearances and the shadowed male caricatures at Sara Jane’s cabaret acts, Annie’s audience is seen more frontally and at closer range. Not only are members of the congregation during the funeral service individually identified (including, for example, Annie’s minister; Lora’s agent, Loomis; the director, David Edwards; and even the milkman from the old cold-water flat, Mr. McKenny, but this entire audience also collectively assumes a distinct identity as Annie’s community, and even more specifically, as Annie’s black community. Thus, the various bystanders who salute Annie’s passing cortege have a concrete dimension lacking in the other audiences seen in the film. Also, in a film in which most of the scenes take place indoors, the opening out of the final scene into the outdoors, combined with the use of objective extreme long shots and panoramic high camera angles, contributes to its pseudo-documentary effect. The use of an exterior location has even further significance: throughout the film, the characters are continually seen through narrow doorways and corridors, or framed within windows and mirror frames, so the progression of Annie’s cortege through an unconfined exterior terrain provides a retrospective commentary on the “unreal” and confined existence of the other characters while suggesting Annie’s own liberation into a more authentic space. In this light, the two shots taken from inside a store, discussed above, take on more meaning. In contrast to the rest of the film, in which the characters are portrayed as surrogates or mirror reflections of each other and in which the visual motif of the mirror recurs, these two shots allow a view of the world through glass rather than as a mirrored reflection. Finally, even the appearance of Mahalia Jackson plays a role in marking this scene off

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as something other than an “imitation.” The lack of explanation of Jackson’s relationship to any of the characters in the film gives her singing at Annie’s funeral the semblance of a documentary performance within a fictional film.\(^5\)

Annie has been represented as the only main character who does not fall victim to false identification and role-playing. Therefore, Jackson’s appearance at Annie’s funeral in her own guise as a professional singer both duplicates and authenticates the meaning of Annie’s life, so that her unmediated performance and Annie’s unassuming stance collaborate to lend the lie to the inauthentic work performed by Lora and Sara Jane.

As we might expect, Sara Jane’s function in this scene is illuminating. At Annie’s funeral, Sara Jane makes her most public and her most humiliating appearance, but with a significant twist. When she weeps over her mother’s coffin, we are all convinced that at least this time she is not performing. The public spectacle that she makes of herself, then, is paradoxically, the one that both redeems her and implicitly repudiates her previous performances in the film, as when she humiliates Lora in front of her guests or when she forces Annie to pretend to be her mammy. After Sara Jane’s tearful recognition of her mother, she, with Lora and Susie, are ushered into a waiting limousine. In this concrete image, we see the remaining protagonists removed from the public gaze just when Annie becomes the cynosure of the same gathered audience. Here, too, we observe the process by which the three women are reconstituted into the semblance of a nuclear family, complete with a father-figure, Steve Archer, who occupies the front seat of the limousine. As Steve turns to look back at the women, his look is ambiguous in its import, bespeaking reassurance, protectiveness, or punitive satisfaction. This aspect of the ending, in fact, echoes that in Mildred Pierce, when, after Mildred has been cleared of the murder of Monty, she walks off with Bert, her estranged husband who has been absent for much of the film. As Pamela Cook comments, “Mildred’s take-over of the place of the father has brought about the collapse of all social and moral order in her world. . . . In the face of impending chaos and confusion the patriarchal order is called upon to reassert itself and take the Law back into its own hands, divesting women completely of any power they may have gained while the patriarchal order was temporarily impaired.”\(^6\)

Finally, perhaps the uniquely insidious aspect of Imitation is suggested visually by the elongating distance between Annie’s hearse, carrying her off into glorious oblivion, and the limousine containing Lora. This image makes concrete yet another area of silence in the film. Whereas several critics have seen the depiction of close mother-daughter relationships in the maternal melodrama as a subversive gesture in itself,\(^6\) Imitation potentially explores another dimension still by explicitly addressing the issue of bonding between black and white women. Unfortunately, in actual practice, this promise is, as we have seen, negated through the film’s refusal to recognize potential conflict between Lora and Annie or subsumed to the polarization of Lora and Annie as “good” and “bad” mothers. Nowhere is there an attempt to establish a basis for seeing these two women as

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the product of individual histories and social conditions. But without this, there can be no insightful revelation of what may ultimately bind them. As Bonnie Thornton Dill reminds us, "The structures of race and class generate important economic, ideological, and experimental cleavages among women. These lead to differences in perception of self and their place in society... Thus, I would argue for the abandonment of the concept of sisterhood as a global construct based on examined assumptions about similarities, and I would substitute a more pluralistic approach that recognizes and accepts the objective differences between women." Reinforcing Dill's argument, Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis titled their study of shared issues between black and white women Common Differences to signal their commitment "to actually examine side by side, dynamically, those very differences and conflicting visions" that must form the groundwork of true dialogue. Underlying the work of Dill and of Joseph and Lewis is the belief that the first step toward true bonding is the acknowledgment of unique differences, and perhaps potential conflict, between individuals. Thus, although the possibility of cooperation between black and white women is a powerful fantasy in Imitation, the film tellingly ends with the image of final separation between its two protagonists, whose relationship with each other remains the deepest level of silence in the film.

And so it seems that Sirk's Imitation of Life is fantasy, although perhaps bogus fantasy, on many levels. However, it is perhaps also fantasy with an even more serious agenda than we have recognized thus far. In his essay on John Ford's The Searchers (1956), Brian Henderson suggests a reading of the film that considers its historical context, specifically, of its release two years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954) that sought to end public school desegregation in America. Initially wondering why this film has continued to exert so much power over its audience through the years, Henderson notes the treatment of "the questions of kinship, race, marriage, and the relations between tribes [Indian and white]," and, by seeing the idea of adoption as a metaphor for racial desegregation, he concludes that the film is "a myth about non-whites by and for whites... and a manual for non-whites adopted by white society, telling them what they may expect and what is expected of them." Taking inspiration from Henderson, we see that Sirk's film, released five years after Brown, coincided with a period when the issue of desegregation was still controversial. It too deals with issues of kinship and adoption; in fact, itforegrounds the themes of interracial relationships, miscegenation, and the adoption of blacks into white families. Quite obviously, unlike The Searchers, the treatment of race is overt, not disguised. Interestingly, Henderson's analysis is based on a "de-centering" of the character of Ethan (John Wayne) in order to promote the centrality of Martin (Jeffrey Hunter), a half-breed. In discussing Imitation, we too have seen how Sara Jane, a black woman who looks white, is the catalytic character whose presence in the film convulses many of its unspoken themes.

In this perspective, Imitation of Life can be read not only as an incipient

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attempt to offer a convincing picture of black-white bonding, but also a film that programmatically propounds the conditions for the assimilation of blacks into the American "family." In this light, Sara Jane's crisis of identification must be understood as a struggle to test the limits of her power both in her adopted family and, by extension, in the larger social scheme. In the melodrama, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has said, "what is at stake . . . is the survival of the family unit and the possibility for individuals of acquiring an identity which is also a place within the system, a place in which they can both be 'themselves' and 'at home,' in which they can simultaneously enter, without contradiction, the symbolic order and bourgeois society." In analyzing The Searchers, Henderson argues that the film teaches non-whites that they must agree to act according to white man's laws if they are to be accepted in white society. The message of Imitation of Life is no less sobering and peremptory. Indeed, the lesson that Sara Jane learns is clear: although her appearance and her upbringing may give her the desire and the ability to pass for white, she must not forget who and what she is. In the final analysis, Sara Jane's mistake is to insist that adoption means assimilation; her transgression is to resist her own contingent status. Here, the theme of racial integration intersects with that of domestic service, for the vigilant but invisible presence of the servant within the sanctified privacy of her employer's home is an analogue in miniature of the contradictory terms by which blacks like Annie and Sara Jane can remain as adopted members of the American family: invited, even appreciated, but intrinsically alien.

Notes

1. Fannie Hurst, Imitation of Life (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1933).
2. Sirk claims that the film was Universal's "biggest money-maker of all time." Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 183. Similarly, the short biography of Sirk in Douglas Sirk, ed. Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday, states that the film was "Universal's largest ever box-office success" (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972), 109.
5. Sirk on Sirk, 119.
9. Hurst, Imitation, 277.
10. Ibid., 220.
11. Ibid., 346.
12. Ibid., 318.
13. It is interesting to note that Lora makes an identical offer to Susie, only to have this scornful response from her daughter: "Oh, mama, stop acting . . . stop trying to shift people around as if they were pawns on a stage. Oh, don't worry, I'll get over Steve,
but please, don’t play the martyr….” There is also a difference (between the two films) in why the two daughters fall in love with their mothers’ lovers: in the earlier film, it is because Bea goes off with Delilah to look for Delilah’s daughter, who has run away to work as a cashier in a restaurant; in Sirk’s version, it is because Lora is too involved with her career.

15. Ibid., 15.
16. Sirk on Sirk, 129.
17. Hurst, Imitation, 176.
20. Judith Rollins, for example, has suggested that “examining the relationship between black female domestics and their white female employers does, indeed, afford an extraordinary opportunity: the exploration of a situation in which the three structures of power in the United States today—that is, the capitalist class structure, the patriarchal sex hierarchy, and the racial division of labor—interact.” Judith Rollins, Between Women: Domestics and Their Employers (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 7. See also Bonnie Thornton Dill’s observations based on her study of black domestic workers, in “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood,” Feminist Studies 9 (Spring 1983): 140-45.
22. Elsewhere in Stahl’s film, there are reminders of Delilah’s status. At one point, Delilah says that her dream is to be in a situation where she “wouldn’t have to do housework for anyone.” Later, when Bea offers her a 20 percent interest in the company, Delilah recoils from the offer, protesting, “I want to stay your maid.”
25. Judith Rollins has declared, “What makes domestic service as an occupation more profoundly exploitive than other comparable occupations grows out of the precise element that makes it unique. the personal relationship between employer and employee.” Rollins, Between Women, 156. See also Katzman, Seven Days a Week, viii.
27. See Dudden, Serving Women, 224; Katzman, Seven Days a Week, 199.
31. Dill, “Race, Class, and Gender,” 140.
32. Sirk on Sirk, 130.
34. These are listed in chapter 1 of Katzman's *Seven Days a Week*; see 3-43.
38. *Sirk on Sirk*, 130.
42. Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology," 42.
45. Rodowick, "Madness, Authority and Ideology," 44.
46. In the novel, Delilah makes it clear that her husband was black, describing him as "a white nigger" who "didn't leave [his daughter] nothin' but some blue-white blood a-flowin' in her little veins..." She also states that he was born of two "Virginia darkies," with a strong suggestion that both he and his daughter look white only through an accident of nature. In the Stahl film, Delilah says of her husband: "[He] was a very light-colored man."
47. Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother," 11-12.
52. Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," 54.
54. *Sirk on Sirk*, 132; see also p. 52. Sirk's comments on his ironic intentions in this ending are quoted by James Harvey in "Sirkumstantial Evidence," *Film Comment* 14 (July-Aug. 1978): 55-57.
56. Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother," 16.
59. The closing credits of the film state that Mahalia Jackson appears as a "choir soloist." However, the credits included in *Sirk on Sirk* indicate that Jackson appears in the film as "herself"; see p. 171.
60. Cook, "Duplicity in Mildred Pierce," 75.

42 *Cinema Journal* 26, No. 3, Spring 1987