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African American Character Types

1. Tragic Mulatto

The tragic mulatto is a character type made obvious by their white-passing complexion and mannerisms who, no matter how hard they try, cannot truly fit in with the white crowd, while typically disowning their own black heritage in the process. *Pinky,* directed by Elia Kazan, has the namesake character portray the tragic mulatto type, visiting her black family after passing as white at a university up north as she practiced nursing. Her character type shines through when she is talking to her grandmother in her bedroom and her grandmother asks her “what you say when they asked you about your’s [Kinfolk]? You tell ‘em who your granny is?”, and all Pinky can do is run to her Grandmother, hug her, and say nothing in a shameful manner in an attempt to gain forgiveness (Kazan, 7:00). In addition, Pinky’s clothing juxtaposed against not only her grandmother’s clothes, but the setting at large, emphasizes Pinky’s attempt to pass as white and therefore her betrayal of her own identity. This is most evident in the woods on the porch, before Pinky even enters the house, as the grandmother goes out to wash her clothes. Pinky is in what could only be described as business clothes, wearing a white button-down blouse and a long black skirt, dabbing the sweat off her face and neck, while the grandmother is wearing dirty work clothes reminiscent of wartime-era maids, with a durag around her head to keep the sweat out of her face (Kazan, 2:50). This example shows Pinky’s attempt to adopt white culture, while the first example shows her disownment of her black upbringing.

1. The Uncle Tom

The uncle tom character type is used to describe African American characters who have an unwavering loyalty to their religion and the white family they belong to (either explicitly through the slave-master dynamic or implicitly through other means). In addition, uncle toms are known to almost always have a cheerful outlook and an affinity for performing (in order to please the whites). In *The Littlest Rebel,* directed by David Butler, Uncle Billy is seen to play the uncle tom type. His loyalty to his white family is evident the second he runs into the house to warn his master that the Union soldiers are approaching to capture him (Butler, 42:12). Later, Uncle Billy and Virgie Cary distract the Union soldiers with a tap dancing routine, where both actors are seen to have over-the-top smiles on their faces, leaning into the spectacle of their performance (Butler, 43:05-44:00). Uncle Billy’s cheerful performance directly reflects the tropes of the uncle tom type in this way.

1. The Buck

The buck is characterized by an African American acting in an unorderly, violent way. The buck is often shown attempting to rape white women, and the eventual defeat of the buck is used to reassure white audiences. *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by David Griffith, sees Walter Long dressed in blackface playing the role of the buck, Gus. Gus approaches a girl alone in the woods, asks her to marry him, and gets smacked (Griffith, 2:16:20). This results in Gus chasing the girl through the woods for an extended period of time, threatening violence (and rape by extension) if he catches up to her. Eventually, the girl runs out of energy at the top of a cliff, and ends up jumping and killing herself instead of letting Gus get to her (Griffith, 2:16:45-2:20:03). Gus’s stamina, violence, and sexual fixation on the white woman are all indicative of the buck type, and is used to portray African Americans at large in this primitive way.

Bibliography

Butler, David, director. *The Littlest Rebel*. Twentieth Century Fox Production Company, 1935.

Griffith, David, director. *The Birth of a Nation.* Epoch Producing Company, 1915.

Kazan, Elia, director. *Pinky*. Twentieth Century Fox Production Company, 1949.