

A Statement in Excess

Exploring Melodrama through Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*

By: Naomi Noir

The Hollywood melodrama is a genre of inclusions and exclusions. By appealing to emotion above intellect, it operates by taking a messy life situation and restoring things to a balanced state. It does this by separating types, good vs. evil, and exposing them for what they are so that good can always prevail. Melodrama deals with that which is taboo, especially within the private sectors of people's lives, such as the home. According to John Belton these "threats to domestic space" come from forces that are produced "by an increasingly impersonal and hostile mass society" (*American Cinema, American Culture*, 146). By signaling social distress in the larger society outside of the film, melodrama in turn seeks to internalize that social crisis by offering up an example of a stable common order. In the end a consensus must always be formed.

In Douglas Sirk's, *Imitation of Life*, the genre of melodrama is utilized by the telling of a story in which the unnatural state of a two female run household, the incestuous love of a girl toward a man that has been her father figure, and the passing off as a white by a young woman who breaks the conventions of the "one drop rule" with her every defiant action, is set right. *Imitation of Life* presents us with disorder on various levels. Like most Hollywood melodrama, Sirk brings conflict directly into the home, in this case the imbalance of a woman-centered home in which Annie takes on the role of the housewife, and Laura that of the bread-winning husband. But underneath the surface

tension, there are much deeper issues, such as the true role of Annie as a servant, a throwback to the time of plantation owners and slaves, with Laura taking on the role of master.

Sirk also conforms to the conventions of this genre by utilizing stereotypes so as to separate characters as good or bad. He stereotypes women as having big loud emotions and as being naive, the single mother as sacrificing family for success. Here Laura is reminiscent of the “new woman” in F.W. Murnau’s *Sunrise*. “A product of the times” (American cinema, American Culture, 146) her desire to lead a “modern” liberated lifestyle is depicted as unnatural. Sirk also stereotypes African-Americans as being subservient and willing to please. Here it is Laura who becomes rich, who is allowed to succeed, while Annie, as black, remains a servant up until her dying breath. Likewise, Laura is portrayed as sexy and glamorous, while Annie is the nurturing mammy, almost a virgin Mary figure or motherly sacrifice. Yet Annie is not a virgin. In fact, her declaration that Sarah-Jane’s daddy was “practically white” reveals the trauma of Sarah-Jane’s African-American identity as the real trauma of white slave owners raping their black female slaves. Even this seemingly complex character is a stereotype of the mulatto as untrustworthy, deceptive, and sexually predatorial, harking back to D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. Yet it is the world that she’s living in that is making her feel ashamed of her “blackness,” sexuality is simply the way that she acts out.

The ending of *Imitation of Life*, also conforms to the Hollywood genre of melodrama by taking the first image of the film, literally a picture of a distressed single mother looking for her child, and rectifying the situation by showing her in the last image of the film as a mother no longer in distress, who has found her children and her husband.

All of the characters may have ended up together in the car in the end, but the reunion seems forced. It took someone to die to bring them all together, and not just anyone, the ever subservient Annie, who even in her death was serving a purpose for Laura. What if she hadn't died? Where would Annie fit into this picture if Laura really did go ahead and marry Steve? Likewise, where does Sarah Jane fit in now? Will she ever be accepted as one of Laura's children, a "black" child in a white nuclear family? Or will she take up Annie's vacant role of servant?

Sirk seems to be challenging the very conventions of this Hollywood genre within the false sense of resolution in this last scene. Here Steve represents Hollywood, the artistic sell out who succeeds in dominating the minorities in the end. Steve is portrayed as a photographer, the one who creates the "correct image" at the end of the film, the nuclear family, that is as false as it is absurd that he would accept Sarah Jane as his daughter. The excessiveness of Sirk's style from the falling of diamonds in the opening credits, the elaborate costumes and sets, the grossly exaggerated theatrical performances, the long drawn out death of Annie to the over the top funeral at the end, all seem to be screaming 'it is absurd to be this excessive!' According to Stephen Crofts in his essay *Authorship and Hollywood*, this makes Sirk's film a category E movie which seems to "be under the sway of the dominant ideology," but which "seizes the ideology and *plays it back against itself*, allowing its limits to be seen at the same time as transgressing them." In other words Sirk is critiquing the conventions of Hollywood as in "the insistently obtrusive grilles, blinds, and paintings in *Imitation of Life*" (American Cinema and Hollywood, 91).

Sirk is thus proclaiming that melodrama can't really form a normalization that it claims to be able to, that these problems are too big to be solved by a quick fix and a happy ending. His ending may create a feel good sense, but there is also a sense that things are not quite right, that should keep the audience thinking about the issues raised in the film. Sirk wouldn't have been able to make the movie if he did not use the form of melodrama and wrapped it up brightly, but that doesn't mean that there aren't real issues raised behind the flash of diamonds and the sparkle of Laura's flashy jewelry. *Imitation of Life* is a story about Annie and Sarah Jane disguised by the Laura and Suzie story. The glamour and excessiveness of Laura and innocent beauty of Suzie may distract from the underlying message, but Sirk still manages to question American society: our racism, sexism, and preoccupation with glamour while ignoring social problems such as questions of race. Through his very first image of diamonds falling, Sirk seems to be raining Universal Studio's self-image. Through this display of extreme extravagance, Sirk is critiquing the bigness of the film itself.