**1. Carefully argued explanation about ways that Mildred Pierce undermined historical assumptions about traditional femininity and women social roles in postwar America. Discuss how both the film’s stylistic/aesthetic elements (e.g., plot, genre, acting, costume design, production design, cinematography) and the historical context in which it was released contribute to its contradictory, complex portrait about women’s social role in postwar America.**

The ways in which *Mildred Pierce* subvert traditional femininity can be observed by the combination of both theoretical and historical lenses, as Julie Weiss suggests, by portraying a character who resists Victorian ideals and embodies postwar America's complex views on women's roles. Taking into account the longer historical context of this film, Weiss notes how Mildred’s economic success simultaneously celebrates the financial independence women gained during WWII and reflects their long-term historical struggles for gender authority during the Great Depression. She reflects the protofeminist spirit of WWII by embodying a woman who, like “Rosie the Riveter,” finds financial and thus sexual independence in a traditionally male-dominated workplace and world. Weiss notes how the film echos underlying fears of women's independence permanently disrupting male authority, a concern that grew especially potent after the Great Depression’s economic hardships undermined many men’s family roles as breadwinners and after the war when men returned home needing jobs.

At the same time, the films plot and stylistic elements also confirm Mildred's undermining of victorian women roles that often find themselves in film. As Benshoff and Griffin's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema Actions" states, womens roles were often limited to hindering rather than driving forward the plot by either looking pretty or being femme fatales who weaponized their sexuality. This notion is usually challenged by the domestic plots of melodramas starring women protagonists, and *Mildred Pierce* does the same but in a masculine-centered noir style and plot. The film switches between traditional melodrama plot and lighting elements and strikingly noir aesthetics—low-key lighting, stark contrasts especially on faces, and a plot thickened by an urban criminal underworld traditionally in male-dominated narratives. By framing Mildred with elements of this traditionally masculine genre, the film highlights her transgressive rejection of purely domestic, Victorian femininity. She is neither a fully empowered, modern woman nor a passive, self-sacrificing Victorian mother. The film’s storytelling reinforces this tension, positioning her simultaneously as an active agent and narrator and a helpless witness being interrogated and corrected repeatedly by the police.

*Mildred Pierce* reflects the political “unconscious” of the 1940s and postwar America, capturing anxieties about women’s newfound wartime independence without completely endorsing or condemning it. The setting’s vague historical cues—wartime references and societal echoes of the Depression through Ida—reinforce this, linking Mildred’s financial ambition with broader fears that women’s independence threatened the male "breadwinner" role. Her economic success isn't celebrated like the working women during WWII, which further reflect the postwar sentiments of womens' economic independence. Her successful restaurant, a symbol of her economic freedom, grants her newfound sexual freedom which is immediately juxtaposed with the death of her younger daughter, suggesting that her break from traditional femininity - as Weiss puts it, the "grotesque caricature of delinquent motherhood" - comes at a severe cost (Weiss, 84). The plot portrays both sides of the condemning of motherhood - "mom-bashing" - which was prevalent at the time; punishing her for "neglecting" her younger daughter while being sexually "deviant" and punishing her for coddling her older daughter with yet more personal tragedies.

Ultimately, *Mildred Pierce* portrays Mildred in a constant struggle with traditional gender roles, embodying America’s complex view of women’s autonomy, and reflects both the progress and limitations of postwar feminist consciousness. The film uses both melodrama and noir elements to depict Mildred’s rebellion against traditional expectations while framing her independence as both empowering and dangerous. By weaving in broader historical anxieties—about economic autonomy, shifting family dynamics, and female sexuality—*Mildred Pierce* captures the societal unease surrounding the postwar woman who defies simple categorization.

2. Carefully argued explanation about how Douglas Sirk’s film melodrama, Imitation of Life (1959) updated the 1934 version by critiquing not just sexism but racism in the U.S. Consider how the film’s stylistic/aesthetic elements (e.g., plot, genre, acting, costume design, production design, cinematography) and the historical context in which it was released contributed to this contradictory, complex portrait of both sexism and racism in the late 1950s. You may want to consider the arguments made in David Halberstam’s The Fifties: Let’s Play House and Betty Friedan’s book, The Feminine Mystique (1963) in portraying/contesting these conventions regarding gender/race.

Douglas Sirk’s 1959 *Imitation of Life* critiques not only the sexism of mid-century American society but also the deeply entrenched racism that shaped the lived experiences of both black and white Americans. By combining the changes in the book and 1934 version's plot from a collaborative food business to the glamor of NYC showbusiness with Sirk's signature cinematic style—lush, glossy, and emotionally charged—he masterfully crafts a pointed critique of American ideologies of success, race, and identity.

One of Sirk’s central achievements in *Imitation of Life* was his ability to maintain a delicate balance between compelling realism and thematically important audience alienation within the narrative limits of the melodrama genre to make a compelling critique of American social structures. Unlike many melodramas of the time, which aimed to reflect real life as faithfully as possible, Sirk employed highly stylized techniques that often subverted the viewer’s expectations of realism. The use of artificial lighting, set design, and framing emphasized the film's nature as a tale. As Thomas Schatz discusses in his analysis of Sirk’s work, this deliberate artifice was a way for the director to signal the gap between the idealized, glossy image of American life with neat narrative resolutions and the harsh realities that lie beneath.

Unlike the original 1934 film, which focused more on the dynamics of the food business and Lora’s rise to fame, the 1959 remake repositions the story within the glamorous world of theater and film, highlighting the racial stratifications present even in spaces associated with success and glamour by restricting Annie to work in the shadows. Kennedy’s analysis notes that Sirk’s adaptation foregrounds the tension between Lora’s success as an actress and Annie’s subservient role as a domestic worker, even though the two women share a deep bond of friendship. This social division is made all the more poignant by the fact that, while Lora’s career gives her the financial freedom to provide for her daughter, it also leads to the emotional estrangement between them. Annie, on the other hand, suffers in silence, constrained by both her race and her socioeconomic position, yet it is only after her death that the full depth of her sacrifice and the realities of racial inequality are made apparent.

Sirk’s film also resonates with the historical context of the late 1950s, a period of significant cultural tension. The ending of Imitation of Life aligns with Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in its critique of the restrictive roles placed on women in the 50s, particularly the pressure to choose between career success and fulfilling relationships. Lora’s realization that success is “worthless without love” echoes Friedan’s argument that the idealized role of wife and mother leaves many women unfulfilled. Similarly, Sara Jane’s belief that love is worthless without success and success means the rejection of her Black heritage for racial privilege which critiques the societal pressure to conform for racial privilege. Sirk’s film diverges from Friedan’s more optimistic call for social change by presenting an intentionally artificial happy ending that emphasizes the reality of women in America. While Friedan advocates for women to break free from the feminine mystique and seek their own paths, Sirk’s film suggests that these struggles are fraught with deep emotional costs and may not have easy solutions, especially in the racially and socially divided reality.

By using the artifice of Hollywood’s glossy visual language to painfully expose the underlying social reality of American life, Sirk’s film remains a potent exploration of the limits of the American Dream for women and the historical context's inescapable realities of race and class.

Works Cited

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