Between The American dream and reality.
American race melodrama: an analysis of Imitation of Life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT
This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of certain people. Therefore, I would like to thank them for all their support and advise. First, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Ilka Saal for her dedication and guidance. I have learned a lot from her tips and were very important in the process of my dissertation. Furthermore, I would like to thank the people who have supported me time and again and are as much responsible for this dissertation as I am. My thanks go out to Nick Van Praet and Michiel de Wit who were there to reread my dissertation and point out my sometimes rather stupid mistakes. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family, my brother and Ruben for their listening ear when times got rough and I needed a helping hand.

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Thomas Elsaesser defines melodrama as “a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects (Elsaesser 70).” The term melodrama is often used to describe a certain range of narratives. These stories are very diverse, ranging from novels of adventures to ‘drawing room melodrama’s, Hollywood films and soap operas. As a result, the term ‘melodrama’ serves as an Omni-functional concept, making it impossible to distinct certain characteristic. As McWilliam illustrates, the large range of the term melodrama can be considered as a problem:

The uses of melodrama by historians have become so elastic that almost any form of modern culture is said to have a melodramatic dimension. Unfortunately this has led to the term ‘melodrama’ being drained of its explanatory power and hence of its utility (Mc William 58).

Though we have to keep the danger McWilliam addresses in mind, the term melodrama is still frequently used in the literary field. The melodramatic mode does not contain one specific genre, but serves as a modality covering a large range of stories. Campbell refers to melodrama as an “organizing modality, an aesthetic register or form that is fluid across a range of genres (Campbell 201)”. In this dissertation, I will also address melodrama as a modality intertwining in different genres. This new definition of melodrama as a modality allows a collaboration between melodrama and the form of realism. As Gledhill shows, melodrama is grounded in the conflict and troubles of the everyday contemporary reality; it seizes upon social problems as illegitimacy, slavery and racism (qtd. in Williams 1998; 53).

Talking about American history of Melodrama starts with the troubles of race. W.E.B. Dubois states that “The problem of the twentieth century is that of the color-line” (qtd. In Gillman 4). Thomas Schatz argues that melodrama was applied to popular romances that depict a virtues individual or couple, victimized by repressive and inequitable social circumstances, particularly involving marriage, occupation and the nuclear family (Schatz 148). However, melodrama has been used to talk about important subjects that were often considered as taboo. Smith describes melodrama as a medium to get a grip on life. Brooks argument follows the same thinking course. He defines melodrama as “a
sense-making system”: as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience (Brooks Xvii). He sees melodrama as a vehicle to make certain social situations discussable. American race melodrama has been the fundamental mode by which American culture has dealt with the problem of ‘moral legibility’. Race and ethnicity present a primary and enduring moral dilemma of American culture, so the importance of investigating racial melodrama becomes clear. Thus, race melodrama refers to the irreducible historical identity of race itself as melodrama in the United States.

This dissertation is centered around the novel “Imitation of life” (1933) and its two film adaptations. Fannie Hurst, the author of the novel, was a well known author in the literary field in the first half of the twentieth century. The editor, Edward O’Brien, claimed that Hurst’s stories ” may prove to be the most essential literary documents of our city life to the inquiring literary historian of another century”(Itzkovitz 9). Her main focus was to capture the everyday life of ordinary women. She had always been fascinated by the various subgroups living in society; as a matter of fact, she had a close relationship with the colored writer Zora Neale Hurston, who inspired her to write this novel. A year after the novel’s release, the narrative was used as a screenplay for a film. Donald Bogles describes John Stahl’s adaptation as one of the first important black films of the nineteen thirties. (Itzkovitz 33) The fact that Douglas Sirk, a well known name in the world of melodrama, decided to do a remake in the 1950s, illustrates the importance of this narrative, concerning the situation of African Americans in the society at that time. It served as a fascinating counterexample to the problem films of the 1950s, which also took on social issues as racism, with a straightforward an well-intentioned earnestness.

In this dissertation I would like to compare the three versions of “Imitation of Life”. All these treatments can be made in the tradition of melodrama. Very often stories characterized by a high emotionality and morality are brought down as secondary or inferior narrative. However, via my analysis, I would like to demonstrate that melodrama does have the capacity to criticize society and
plead for social changes. Therefore, I will compare all three versions. I would like to attain a plausible answer to the central statement by solving the following side questions. How do all treatments approach the conflict of race? And exactly how do these three texts plead for social change? Because of the lapse of twenty years, can we see an influence of the changing times?

As melodrama covers many ranges of stories, it was necessary to outline my field of investigation. Therefore, the first part of my dissertation treats the tradition of melodrama and its effect on the subject of race. I will start with a theoretical description of melodrama, more precisely the melodramatic mode. Secondly I will address how the melodramatic mode succeeds in dealing with such social issues as race. Melodrama can rely on two of its important characteristics: morality and emotionality.

The second part lays the emphasis on a comparative analysis of the narratives, based on three themes. The first theme deals with the trope of the tragic mulatto. In this chapter I will take a look at how the tragic mulatto embodies the conflict of race. The second theme is built around the trope of motherhood. Here I will focus on the conflict of racial identity. The final theme is the trope of invisibility and the mise-en-scène. Here I will demonstrate how

The choice of my field of investigation was stimulated by the seminar “Algemene Literatuurwetenschap” by Professor Keunen in my third bachelor. For this, I formulated with two fellow students a genre profile for the melodramatic tradition of the nineteenth century. I was caught up by the subject, that I decided to focus on this thematic for my bachelor paper. This academic year, I followed a course that centered around the tradition of melodrama. During one class we analyzed All that heaven allows, a film by Douglas Sirk. I was caught by his unique styling and decided to do my dissertation around one of his films. There have already been some analyses concerning his oeuvre, but I noticed that the notion of race was left out. So I decided that ‘race’ would be the focus of my own investigation.
Part I : Positioning

1. Melodrama and race
Hearing the term melodrama automatically triggers a linkage to the sentimental novel tradition of Austen and the Brontë-sisters or contemporary soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. However, melodrama contains more than “crime, guns and violence; [they meant] heroines in peril; [they meant] action, tension and suspense; [and they meant] villains who in ‘cheap melodrama’, at any rate, could masquerade as ‘apparently harmless’ fellows, thus thwarting the hero, evading justice, and sustaining suspense until the last minute (Neale 179).” Think of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a novel expressing the author’s sense of deeply felt social wrongs but described through melodramatic aesthetics. Or Haynes’ sentimental view on the racial conflict in *Far From Heaven*. In this chapter I would like to explore the nexus between melodrama and the sociological tag of race. How does this rather complex subject apply to the aesthetics and politics of a form which has been considered to be a representative of the popular culture? Is Linda Williams right when she argues that racial problems in American history found their most powerful expression in melodrama?

As the examples above illustrate, melodrama finds expression in a variety of context, style and media (Langford 32). For Christine Gledhill, melodrama as a genre is a cultural hybrid which is not only found within textual reflections or at the site of production, but as a mimetic copying and shifting (qtd. in Campbell 201). These observations illustrate how the form refuses any singular or original definition. Melodrama can be considered as one of the most amorphous phenomena. Altman refers to the form as a phenomenon having a syntax but lacking a clear semantic dimension (qtd. in Langford 31). Linda William’s ambiguous definition of melodrama in the filmic world demonstrates the trouble scholars have categorizing the form:

Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures. It is not a specific genre like the western or horror film; it is not a ‘deviation’ of the classical realistic narrative; it cannot be located primarily in woman’s film, ‘weepies’ or family melodramas – though it includes them. Rather melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks
dramatic revelation or moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood film (Williams 1998; 42).

Academics preferably refer to melodrama as ‘a pervasive aesthetic and epistemological mode’ (Gledhill 6). Gledhill adds that this organizing modality contains “an aesthetic register or form that is fluid across a range of genre, across historical moments and across spatial geographies such as national cultures (qtd. in Campbell 201)”. I agree in this dissertation with the previously made statements. Melodrama is not a genre but a mode or modality that ‘suck up other genres’, as Jan Campbell puts it, and can also be found in other generic forms. The works of Henry James or Balzac are a good example. As Peter Brooks attempts to demonstrate in his groundbreaking work The Melodramatic Imagination (1976), realistic writers such as the two mentioned above intertwine their novels with melodramatic elements. Although The Turn of The Screw by James is considered to be a ghost story, a closer analysis reveals the narrative’s melodramatic features. Understanding the difference between melodrama as a genre and as a mode is important when we take a look how this tendency has been influenced by realism.

Already throughout the 19th century the melodramatic mode served various artists for the depiction of a variety of themes and social phenomena. Melodrama was, and still is, a form which carried its own values and traditions. Even though its sentimentality or typical situations were completely unlike anything in real life, playwrights and filmmakers knew how to adopt melodramatic techniques to fit their material (Elsaesser 49). While European melodrama focused on the class oppositions, the American adaptation had to transform its theme due to the different socio-political conditions (Gledhill 24). According to Frank Rahill, genuine American melodrama emerged only in the 1880s discussing issues of national identity and ethnicity (qtd. in Gledhill 25). Williams notes that the issues of race and ethnicity represent a primary and enduring moral dilemma of American culture (Williams 2001; 43). Already from the mid-nineteenth century melodrama had been the primary way in which mainstream American culture has dealt with the moral dilemma of having first enslaved and then
withheld equal rights to generations of African Americans. Thus, melodrama has been the medium with which white supremacist American culture turned its deepest guilt into a testament of virtue (Williams 2001; 43-44). However, some of the American racial melodramas tried to reorganize the world in such a way that the black heritage is rewarded over the white dominating society (Gaines 331).

A reasonable explanation as to why melodrama suited to address particular social phenomena like issues of race is foremost the link the melodramatic mode has with realism. In his article ‘From ‘Melodrama’ to ‘Realism: The Suspect History of American Drama’ (1996) Postlewait describes the history of both forms in American drama. The common genealogy narrates the development of drama into its maturity by the 1920’s. The twentieth century era became the period of “complex and ambitious drama, dedicated artists, and challenging plays about the human condition (Postlewait 42)”. Nineteenth-century entertainment- popular, romantic, sentimental, and essentially melodramatic- gives way to a progressive shift to realism. The transformation is seen as a step-by-step alteration or a difficult struggle between the two forms (Postlewait 39). Melodrama was seen as the bête noir of realism. Some playwrights and critics set up melodrama as the Other, a blocking force which realism had to resist. However, Postlewait contradicts this universally accepted process. Both forms should not be seen as separate tendencies opposing each other in every aspect but they both should be viewed as modes with numerous joining of melodramatic and realistic forms and functions. In other words, both tendencies were influenced by one another, “they shared and traded traits, forms and practices (Postlewait 54).” Gledhill, following Postlewait, explains that “as realism offers up new areas of representation, so the terms and material of the world melodrama seeks to melodramatise will shift. What realism uncovers becomes new material for the melodramatic project (Gledhill 31).”

As critics have observed, melodrama has become increasingly realist but it remained influenced by melodramatic excess in representing the social world. Campbell defines the melodrama as a world
“characterized by emotional extremity and moral polarity, dramatic plots of good and evil and heightened tension (Campbell 28).” This definition emphasizes two important aspects of the melodramatic mode which have correspondences in the world view of the American race melodramas: emotional and moral teleology. Williams mentions how the core emotions of the ‘big’ melodramas of the racially beset victims is that of suffering and trauma (Williams 2001; 43). Berlant’s further investigation illustrates that it is “the capacity for suffering and trauma” which leads the racial victims into the accepted society (qtd. in Williams 2001; 43). The second characteristic typical for the melodramatic register, that of morality, has the ability to restore the order. According to Gillman, the “unequivocal conflict between good and evil” and the triumph of the former over the latter can also be found in race melodramas, but it is less conclusively than in family melodrama, for instance (Gillman 13). In what follows, I will highlight these aspects more thoroughly concerning their relationship to the thematic of race. But first, I would like to discuss briefly why melodrama seems to be a more suitable mode than the dominating classical realist text to express issues of race.

1.1 Melodrama vs. Realism

As the introduction mentions melodrama and realism are not opposed to one another. Instead, we have to see them both in a dialectical relationship. As realism can be understood as “a modality that makes a claim on the real”, so can melodrama (Campbell 203). The latter is always grounded in what is a strong element of realism. As Gledhill argues, “taking its stands in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and representation, it proceeds to force into aesthetic presence of identity, value and plenitude of meaning (Gledhill 38).” In other words, she shows that melodrama feeds on conflicts and troubles of everyday, contemporary reality. Following Gledhill, Williams adds that it seizes upon problems like illegitimacy, slavery, racism, class division, disease etc. (Williams 1998; 53). However, Gledhill also
emphasizes that although both modalities resemble one another, they do have different purposes and deploy different strategies, aesthetics and politics.

Gledhill points out that both melodrama and realism attempt to organize the terrain in which different classes and social groups meet and find an identity, however, they diverge in the ways of seeing and being in the world. Byars defines the realistic world view as a reproduction of “the bourgeois ideology” implicating “the spectator in a single point of view onto a coherent, hierarchically ordered representation of the world, in which social contradictions are concealed and ultimately resolved through mechanisms of displacement and substitution (Byars 15).” It depends on the assumption that the social world can be explained adequately enough and that a satisfactory representation is possible. This modality ignores the existence of contradictions and eventually marginalizes any resistance to the dominant ideologies (Byars 15). Gledhill, drawing on the finding of Brooks¹, states that melodrama, on the other hand, “both insists on the realities of life in bourgeois democracy (…) and, in an implicit recognition of the limitations of the conventions of representation – of their repressiveness- proceeds to insist on, force into an aesthetic presence, desires for identity, value, and fullness of signification beyond the powers of language to supply ( qtd. in Williams 1998; 48).” As the realistic mode refuses to deal with these social challenges, and modernism is too eager to survey them, melodrama provides the perfect strategy for negotiation. Melodrama roots itself in the everyday, like realism does, but at the same time exploits excessive uses of representational conventions to express that which cannot be said, that which language alone is incapable of expressing as there are irrational forces controlling the world (Byars 11). Melodrama therefore draws on articulated gestures and the technique of the mise-en-scène. Style, colors, lighting, all are used to express that which cannot be said. As chapter 4 of the analysis of *Imitation of Life* will show the mise-en-scènes support the underlying themes and unveil things which are invisible.

¹ Gledhill described three responses to the epistemological gap pointed out by Brooks: realism, modernism and melodrama. Each has a different purpose and deploys different strategies. While realism ignores the gap (as mentioned), modernism deliberately exposes it. Melodrama, however, strikes the golden mean.
The urge to lay bare the contradictions in this world is in fact a consequence of the turbulent period in which melodrama developed. Brooks places the birth of melodrama in the context of the French Revolution, a time that violently threw truth and ethics into question and sacralized the law itself. The state was now instituted as moral authority. Melodrama then functioned to reveal and clarify the ‘truths’ of this new established order. It contributed to divulge the myth of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society that had been shattered and the institutions of the Church and the Monarchy which had lost its credibility (Byars 10). A complex and dynamic social structure, continues Byars, must deal with its internal contradictions in a nonviolent manner (Byars 11). Utilizing the realistic mode would be problematic as it does not offer its reader/spectator a way out. Byars gives the example of the female figure who in a realist mode is always inevitably shown and infallibly positioned as an object for masculine desire and as the threat of castration (Byars 15). Using the realistic text for a racially beset narrative would automatically resolve in a re-establishment of the dominating society. A renunciation of the prevailing order of things in a white American society where the discovery of black blood meant sudden reversal in fortune, social exclusion or banishment would not be possible (Gaines 331). Harriet Stowe, for example, tried to illustrate the situation for African Americans in period of slavery but at the same time pleaded for a social change. Opposed to realism, melodrama shows how things are and, most importantly, how things should be (Williams 1998; 48).

To come to this state of affairs, the melodramatic mode focuses on two of its significant aspects, that of the moral and emotional teleology. In what follows, I will thoroughly discuss their characteristics and their relations to the mode of the race melodrama.

1.1.1 Morality
The strive for closure and return to a state of innocence is a facet of melodrama which can also be found in the American race melodramas. Gillman suggests that the latter all work within the Manichaean model of race in America, but that each of them sometimes has to bend the binary formulas of the melodramatic mode (Gillman 15).

A typical melodramatic plot is built according the Manichaean model. Opposing forces struggle against each other and the conflict ultimately results into the triumph of the virtue and innocence. Brooks assign these moral polarities as aspects of the characters: “Melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized; they are assigned to, they inhabit the persons (Brooks 16).” In a Manichaean world there is a difference between good and evil characters. On the one hand, the audience is introduced to personalities which are inherently good and virtuous, while on the other hand, some are defined through evil. Each character symbolizes a human basic quality. Their specific quality makes it possible for the audience to immediately recognize who represents the hero or heroine and who symbolizes the villain. Williams elaborates as she claims that in a peculiarly American race melodrama the racial victimization becomes inextricably linked to forms of virtue (Williams 2001; 44). In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, for instance, it is clear that the horrifying Simon Legree personifies evil while the colored Tom stands for virtue and innocence. This stereotypical good/evil distinction has to be modified in more complex narratives like Imitation of Life. Cawelti explains in his treatment about Dickens’ social problem melodramas that very often the moral polarities could be found in one and the same character (Cawelti 268). Analyzing Imitation of Life and it becomes clear that this narrative does not apply the clear cut Tom or anti-Tom distinction from the previous example. Placing Delilah/Annie on the side of the virtuous, it seems logical to suggest her daughter as her antipole. However, in my opinion, the latter is more complex. Peola/ Sarah Jane is not inherently good but she is not bad either. At the end of both film adaptations she feels overpowered by regret and guilt towards her mother. It can also be suggested that it is not Peola/ Sarah Jane who embodies the evil characters but the society as it forces the light-skinned girl, at least in her own opinion, to betray her own race to be happy.
A typical melodramatic plot offers a final reconciliation at the end. As Cawelti defines it: “The sympathetic and the good undergo much testing and difficulty, but are ultimately saved. Evil rides high, but is, in the end, overcome (Cawelti 261).” Williams continues: “In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice that gives the American culture its strength and appeal as the powerless yet virtuous seek to return to the ‘innocence’ of their origin (Williams 1998; 48).” Gillman, however, claims that to strive for closure in race melodrama is less conclusive than in other melodramas, an aspect she links with the film melodramas known for their imperfect endings. She gives the example of a typical nineteenth-century plot in which two lovers representing different races are united in marriage as a figure for national unity. But these unions are notably often, “too little and too late, accentuating the absence of social resolution or political reconciliation. They leave the narrative with an open ended future (Gillman 22).” Comparing the endings of all Imitation of Life treatments, and a remarkably distinction can be observed. While both the novel and the 1934 adaptation opt for a form of closure, Sirk’s interpretation is not so conclusive. The spectator has difficulties accepting the implausible ending. This type of ending allows the spectator to look at the narrative from a subversive point of view.

1.1.2 Emotionality

Opposed to Realism, melodrama is distinctively marked by a high emotionality. These stories are constructed around “the display of passion” and “playing on the emotions” (Gerould 121). Rahill accounts that during the second half of the nineteenth century – when stage melodrama was starting to change – the ‘heart’ became the centre of playwrights (qtd. In Neale 199). Based on the observations of Gerould, Neale even considers the emotional bases as the key element of melodrama: ‘All elements in melodrama- its themes, technical principles, constructions and style- are subordinated to one overriding goal: the calling forth of ‘pure’, ‘vivid’ emotions (Gerould 121). As stated before, melodrama emphasizes the personal so it comes as no surprise that the private
feelings take on a central role. Emotions are not revealed for their own sake, but they serve as justification and motivation for the actions and deeds which occur. They are manifest in the unexpected twists and sharp reversals in story lines and expressive interrelationships. A melodramatic story is built upon a series of unfortunate events, revelations, or sudden plot line reversal. Hence the abrupt alterations of the character’s emotional attitude (Gerould 122). The protagonist is confronted with positive sentiment like love and maternal feelings, but very often falls victim to suffering, vengeance and envy (Neale 199). Berlant argues that in American race melodramas the core of the emotionality lies with the ‘capacity for suffering and trauma’. It is through the trumping power of suffering that a racial victim can be established as a worthy member of the dominating society. Berlant gives the example of uncle Tom whose suffering at the hand of Simon Legree confers upon him the right to recognition as a person (qtd. in Williams 2001; 43). The same can be said about our character of color Delilah/Annie. The suffering she went through and her death result in her being accepted as a true member of society, as the funeral scene at the ending proves. A similar progress can be witnessed with Peola/ Sarah Jane who at the end of the film becomes a full member of the social order.

In *Imitation of Life* we witness an emotional struggle between the mother of color and her daughter. On the one hand, we feel for the suffering of the former but on the other we also comprehend the decision of the latter to break with her family. Elsaesser comments on this specific characteristic of the melodramatic mode:

> Everyone who has thought at all about the Hollywood aesthetics wants to formulate one of its peculiar qualities: that of direct emotional involvement, whether one calls it ‘giving resonance to dramatic situations’ or ‘fleshing out the cliché’ or whether, more abstractly, one talks in terms of identification patterns, empathy and catharsis. (Elsaesser 54).

Gerould agrees with Elsaesser’s statement about the direct emotional involvement of the spectator: “Plot, character, and dialogue, working in unison, serve to elicit from the spectator the greatest
possible intensity of feelings” (Gerould 121). The spectator plays an important role in the emotional teleology of melodrama. He/she identifies him/herself with the protagonist’s actions, shares his emotions; in short he or she becomes part of the melodramatic life style. He or she has to be able to shift from one emotion to the other (Cawelti 264). To summarize in the style of Williams, melodrama provides the audience- through the power of pathos- the chance of “being moved by a moving picture (Williams 1998; 47).”

The direct emotional involvement from the audience is a consequence of the artificial character of the melodramatic mode. While Gerould believed that the sentiments were arranged properly through speeches and dialogues Gledhill illustrates the importance of the décor in films: “the audience is involved on a character’s behalf and yet can only exercise pity only by reading and evaluating signs inaccessible to the dramatis personae”(Gledhill 30). Elsaesser agrees with the latter:

Since the American cinema, (...), is essentially dramatic (...) and not conceptual (...), the creation or re-enactment of situations which spectators can identify with and recognise (whether this recognition is on the conscious or unconscious level is another matter) depends to a large extent on the aptness of the iconography (the ‘visualisation’) (...). In other words, this type of cinema depends on the ways ‘melos’ is given to ‘drama’ by means of lighting, montage, visual rhythm, decor, style of acting, music – that is, on the ways the mise en scène translates character into action and action into gesture and dynamic space (Elsaesser 54-55).

The emotions of the characters are reflected onto the vivid colors and mute gestures and general hysteria of the mise-en-scène (Williams 44). The melodramatic mode very often calls forth an artificial imagery. The fictional world is far less than a realistic representation. It is a world not afraid to use typical cliché imageries which produce the ideal frame to make the unspeakable take form and let the emotions circulate freely. Norbert Jochum explains in his article ‘Die allerverführerischte Blicke’ the importance of the melodramatic artificiality. The operating clichés should not be regarded
as an inferior quality of the mode. Instead, he demonstrates how its flamboyant character influences the life of its characters. The sea, sky or the weather are more than simply natural elements, they resemble the sentimental internal state of the protagonist. It is not the story that is significant but the manner in which it is told (Jochum 36). My analysis of *Imitation of Life* will show how in both film adaptations the visual aesthetics help to illustrate the problematic themes of the narrative concerning race and its visibility/invisibility.

Understanding Melodrama is something that has to be learned, Jochum suggests (Jochum 36). The artificial world of the melodramatic mode goes against the realistic presentation but the audience is well aware of this. In fact, thanks to this act of distanciation (Klinger 13) the spectator is capable of fully embracing the emotions that are being aroused. Williams argues in her debate about the film *Stella Dallas* and its problematic spectatorship that the exclusion of the audience— as Kaplan suggests— does not turn them into powerless witnesses or “voyeurs”. She continues by saying that it is never a matter of simply mimicking the emotions of the protagonist, but, rather, a complex negotiation between emotions and between emotions and thought (Williams 1998; 49). Scene after scene of *Stella Dallas* permits the viewer to see a character misconstruing the meaning of an act or gesture. Williams points out that these series of scenes work simply because the audience is outside a particular point of view (Williams 1998; 49). This approach of understanding the melodrama mode is what the critics called “the ‘good’ melodrama of ironical hysterical excess thought to be immune to the more pathetic emotions (Williams 1998; 44). Elsaesser explains that an ironical recognition privileges the spectator vis-à-vis the protagonists, as he registers the difference from a superior position (Elsaesser 1972; 62). Melodrama and its emotionality do not offer the lone option of accepting the patriarchal value system. Instead, it proposes its audience the ability to criticize and resist the dominating ideologies. This is a consequence of a radical ambiguity attached to the melodramatic mode (Elsaesser 47). Sirk applies this technique in many of his films and *Imitation of Life* is no exception. He offers his spectators a conservative reading as well as a subversive interpretation of the story.
1.2 Conclusion

The melodramatic mode is perfectly adjusted to the complex issues of race. Melodrama does not ignore the world of contradictions, as a classical realist text would do, but it uncovers them and offers its spectators a way out. This characteristic allows race melodrama to change certain outcomes of history. For instance, a renunciation of the prevailing order in a white society could be one of the outcomes of an American race melodrama. Two components of the melodramatic mode help to come to this state of affairs. The first characteristic of morality serves to unravel the binary forces controlling the melodrama. Good and evil are placed against each other and their struggle ultimately leads to the triumph of the former. But the endings in race melodrama very often result in an open ending, given its spectators the chance for a subversive reading. The second characteristic is that of emotionality. Melodrama always inherits a great deal of emotionality. In race melodrama this calling forth of pure emotions centers around suffering. Furthermore, emotionality also finds its expression in the aesthetic features of melodrama. A melodramatic play is staged in an artificial world. This leads to a sense of distanciation which allows the spectator to be critical about a melodramatic story.

Part II: Analysis
2. The trope of the tragic mulatto

As Bryars suggests in her analysis of the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life*, the film revolves around the issue of women working outside the home, but the problem that draws attention here is that of racism (Byars 238). In contrast to numerous melodramas from the 1940s the plotline of the colored characters is not marginalised but takes a central part in the story (Doanne 293). In this chapter, I would like to examine how all three treatments deal with this sociological tag through the character of Peola/ Sarah Jane.

At first sight *Imitation of Life* depicts an idealized world view. In a non-segregated society, the white mother and the mother of color live together in unity. Their relationship does not seem troubled at all. This, of course, has a lot to do with the fact that in all treatments the black mother accepts her social position as servant. The latter’s daughter, however, is incapable of reconciling her colored heritage with her white one. To a great extent, she is outlined through the establishment of parallels and contrasts with her mother and the women surrounding her. Already as a child she has been confronted with the duality of her identity. On the one hand, she is automatically defined through the dark skin color of her mother. On the other hand, due to her acknowledgement with the Pullman/Turner family, she starts to focus more and more on her light-skinned, almost white features. She is caught between being “legally black yet feeling physically white” (Smith 45). Thus, the element of conflict in this narrative is not structured by juxtaposing a white woman with a colored one, but it is constructed through the trope of the tragic mulatto.

This trope was an early fixture in nineteenth- century fiction and particularly in the first part of this century (Caputi 707). Berlant isolates the mulatto body as a “site of privileged fantasy property within a nation symbolic order” (Perez 117). Zackodnik points out that the mulatta’s body can be read in two directions simultaneously: her fair skin signals notions of chastity, purity and delicacy, but
within that same body is believed to flow a ‘tainted’ blood that carries the so-called traits of a wanton sexuality (Zackodnik 15). A ‘civil war’ wages in her mind and body between on the one hand her black (savage, sexual) and her white blood (intelligent, refined, beautiful) on the other (qtd. in Caputi 707). In *Imitation of Life*, Delilah utters the ideology of ‘the clash of blood’, describing her mulatto daughter as being in the hands of “the white horses racing in her blood”. The typical mulatto formula centers upon a beautiful woman, whose touch of racial impurity proves catastrophic, usually due to her desire for a white lover.

Utilizing a trope that was extremely popular in the nineteenth century for analyzing racial situations in a contemporary society is not strange at all. Donald Bogles describes how the figure of the tragic mulatto, and other stereotypes for that matter, entered the filmic world: “The movies, which catered to the public taste, borrowed profusely from all the other popular art forms. Whenever dealing with black characters, they simply adapted the old familiar stereotypes (Bogle 4).” He refers to the tragic mulatto as “the movie-makers darling” (Bogles 9). And W.E.B Du Bois calls the mixed-blood figure “an icon of racial writings of any period (Gillman 222).” The fascination with this character lies in its ambiguity: the beautiful woman who appears to be white, who manifests all of the personal graces fostered by freedom and privilege, but who, through the accident of a few drops of ‘black blood’, is legally a slave (Fox-Genovese 794). Audiences feel like the mulatto’s life could have been productive and happy, had he or she not been the victim of a racial divided heritage (Bogle 9). *Imitation of Life* brought the problematic of the tragic mulatto into a modern and contemporary society. The desire of Peola/Sarah Jane to pass for a white girl superficially illustrates the terrible circumstances people of color had to live in. On the other hand, the ending suggests that the world of white people may not be a paradise as well.

In this chapter, I would like to examine how the mulatto character represents the racial conflict in *Imitation of Life*. During the course of the chapter, I will make several comparisons between the
tragic mulatto from *The Octoroon* and Peola/ Sarah Jane. In many ways, both light-skinned girls resemble each other. Both are the result from an interracial relationship and feel the need to pass because of their limitation in life. Furthermore, I will address the different approaches all treatments have utilized to send their message to the audience. But first, I will focus on the character of the mother.

2.1 The tragic mulatto and her heritage

As the introduction mentions, the notion of a few drops of black blood, of which the tragic mulatto manifests no, or barely any, external signs could determine a woman's fate. Although Fox-Genovese, as well as Gillman, points out that the condition of a racial identity is in fact inherited from the colored mother (Fox-Genovese 794). Gillman states that in many antebellum novels it is “the slave mother” who “provides the locus of identity, the agent both of passing down of slavery, and in cases of mixed-race families, of the possibility of passing out of that condition (Gillman 36).” Thus, should a mulatto have a slave father and a free mother in the nineteenth century then she should be legally free. *The Octoroon*’s mulatto girl Zoe, for instance, is the illegitimate daughter from the respectable white judge and his black slave. Therefore, Zoe herself is not a free person but she is passed down of slavery.

When extending this theory to *Imitation of Life* the same can be said for Peola/ Sarah Jane. In many ways she resembles the mulatto girl from *The Octoroon*. Like Zoe, Peola/ Sarah Jane is the daughter from a colored mother and a white looking father. And like Zoe, the racial identity of her mother is projected unto her. Although the link between a colored identity and the notion of slavery evaporates in the contemporary society, Peola/ Sarah Jane is still limited in her freedom and privileges.
The narrative makes us believe that Peola/Sarah Jane will follow the same path as her mother, but the mulatto girl refuses. To understand the girl’s rebellion, it seems important to take a closer look at the representation of the mother.

2.1.1 Looking at Delilah

In the novel, we are introduced to Delilah as “the enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom [...] (75)”. Her thick Southern accent and superstitious beliefs emphasize even more the idea that she embodies the stereotypical image of the Mammy. She also has the emotional package of a true mammy, looking after not only her own daughter but also the child of Bea and her “chair–child”, Bea’s father. When Delilah first came to work for the white woman, she assiduously made it clear that Bea and her daughter Jessie always took precedence over herself and Peola: “In every matter of precedence ... was the priority of Bea’s child most punctiliously observed. The duet of their howling might bring her running intuitively to her own, but the switch was without hesitancy to the white child, every labor of service adhering rigidly to that order (100).” But her nurturing role reaches even further than Bea’s family. She is described as a mother to the world, entering millions of homes with her face printed on pancake boxes. She is “the face that has become a national institution (228)”. All these features make Delilah the ideal servant. While Bea soars to the top of white society, Delilah remains her selfless and devoted domestic.

It is exactly the imagery of the novel Stahl envisaged onto the screen. Let us turn to the opening scene of the film. This sequence designates the image of Delilah as it will be portrayed during the rest of the film. We receive our first glimpse of her when she comes to Bea’s house concerning an advertisement for a domestic servant. We see her briefly enclosed through the frame of a screen door at the back of Bea’s kitchen (Fig. 1a). However, we are properly introduced to her when a
couple of seconds later Bea descends the stairs to open the door. The camera quickly shifts to the entry where we find Delilah still framed by the screen door. Now the photograph ends up in a close-up of Delilah’s face. We see her dark, round face with the characteristic mammy smile (Fig. 1b). When she finally enters the kitchen room and shows off her appearance, the audience is able to think only one thing: “O yes, I know who that is!” (Courtney 13). This assumption is even increased when Delilah offers herself as a maid and tells Bea, in her Southern tongue, that taking care of children comes natural to her (6 min 53 – 6 min 58).

The visual projection of the role of the mammy reaches its highlight when Bea decides to use her servant’s face as the sign for her pancake business. In her talks with the painter Bea describes what kind of custom-made sign she wants: “I tell you what I want. I want a great big sign with lots...”. She suddenly halts her speech by the sight of Delilah passing by. Bea then commands her servant to smile. Delilah, confused by this all, gives miss Bea a gentle smile. Unsatisfied, Bea tells her: “O no! Great big one!” With a few small adjustments Bea perfects the image and cries out: “That’s it. That’s what I want!” Now the camera focuses on the face of Delilah who is standing there with her head held back, great big eyes, round cheeks and an overwhelming big smile (Fig.2). This scene becomes even more caricatured when a couple of seconds later, after the painter has left, Delilah’s face is still frozen in that mammy-like style. Delilah is without doubt a full presentation of the image everybody knows as Aunt Jemina. At the end of the nineteenth century, Aunt Jemima became a consumer symbol of domestic salvation for middle-class white women, similar to the domestic salvation Delilah offers Bea. Like in the novel, the film makes it obvious that Delilah’s magical delivery to the house of Bea enables the latter to pursue professional desires that result in an increasingly consuming career. Unlike Miss Bea, Delilah’s desires are rather simple. Discussing their future plans for when they finally start to make money, the only thing Delilah asks for is to get off her feet. Bea, however, starts dreaming about a boarding school for little Jessie and a country house to live in.
The iconic image of Delilah has an incredible impact on the servant’s identity. As Courtney puts it “the subsequent mass production of Delilah as ‘Aunt Delilah’ quickly exceeds the original scenario such that Delilah is not simply the model for the endless stream of visual representations, but the frozen mammy portrait of those two-dimensional images in turn becomes the model on which future representations of the ‘real’ Delilah are based” (Courtney 10). Proof of this can be found in the scene following immediately the one were Bea convinces Delilah to be the model of her business sign. This scene opens with the camera fixated on the sign in front of the shop. We see a painted Delilah, smiling while she is flipping over a couple of pancakes (Fig. 3a). The camera then shifts to the shop window to reveal the living Delilah behind the glass, wearing the same apron and chef’s hat of the logo and flipping pancakes as well. Surrounded by several Aunt Delilah logos, Delilah herself becomes defined by them (Fig. 3b). The image of ‘Aunt Delilah’ is not only a caricature, Delilah herself is immediately identified and defined through that image (Courtney 10).

The inscription of Delilah’s image in a static and fixed form remains throughout the entire narrative. The film ends with a close-up of the neon board featuring the static picture of Delilah. However, not only her physical features are depicted as fixed, but so is her social position as can be concluded from the following exchange:

Delilah: You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can’t live wid ya? Oh, honey chile, please don’ send me away- don’ do that to me.

Bea: Don’t you want your own house?

D. : No’m. how’m I gonna take care of you and Miss Jessie if I ain’ here. Let me an’ Peola stay same’s we been doin’. I’s you’ cook an’ I want to stay you’ cook.

B. : Well? Of course you can stay, Delilah. I only thought, now that the money is coming in – and, after all, Delilah, it is all from your pancake flour.

D.: I give’s it to you honey. I makes you a present of it. You’s welcome. (Min)
The film gives the illusion that the narrative takes place in a idealized non-segregated society. However, analyzing the relation between Bea and Delilah begs the difference. In this conversation, Bea bestows upon her servant twenty percent of the Aunt Delilah Corporation. This might seem as a generous gesture, but the inequality between the two women still exists. Delilah is a significant collaborator in the pancake business of Bea, but the situation between the two is never threatening. This would be the case if the colored mother would demand a fifty percent share. Instead, Delilah declines Bea’s offer. The distinction between the two women is even more visible in the following scene. After the party Bea held, Delilah and Bea meet in the hallway of the mansion in which they live. We see Delilah descending the stairs to her quarters while Bea goes to her quarters upstairs. The staircase here, leading up and leading down, bifurcates the screen into Bea’s realm and Delilah’s. It is a visual reminder of the social construction of that time (Fig. 4).

2.1.2 Looking at Annie

The depiction of Delilah in both the novel and the 1934 adaptation provoked various reactions. As Itkovitz puts it “Black audiences became increasingly uncomfortable with the novel’s and film’s well-intentioned but crude and simplistic depictions of the black characters” (32). Sterling Brown even argued that Delilah was nothing more than remnants of the traditions of racist literature and blackface minstrelsy (qtd. in Itkovitz, 32).

When Sirk decided to do a remake of *Imitation of Life*, he made several changes that made the black mother less of a stereotype. Harris and Donmoyer argue that after World War II Hollywood introduced a new style of portraying people of color: “Hollywood’s new portrayals were not more accurate and sensitive to the realities of the non-white experience in America but were adjusted to conform to more credible representations (Harris and Donmoyer 64).” The visualization shifted to a more credible and less stereotypical imagery. Annie diverges a great deal from the previous Delilah.

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2 Brown was a critic who reviewed both novel and film in the magazine *Opportunity*. (Itkovitz, 32).
Sirk contemporizes the Mammy – figure by drastically changing her external features. Annie looks much slimmer and does not talk with a Southern accent. Interesting to note is that nowhere in the film Sarah Jane refers to her mother as ‘mammy’, while in the novel Delilah almost demands this naming from her daughter. Thaggert refers to Annie as ‘an authentic personality’, who does not seem to be playing a role (Thaggert 489). In Stahl’s film, as in the novel, Delilah’s visualization is used for a comic effect. Berlant argues, “I feel certain that [Delilah’s] decontextualization is specifically designed to allude to and to ironize Aunt Jemima, in her role as a site of American collective identification (Berlant 125).” The adapted portrayal of Annie does not allow any discourse of comic effect. However, the film still features certain elements of racial insensitivity. Sirk makes this point clear when Lora talks about the benefits of doing a ‘colored angle’ play, and we cut to a startled and silent Annie standing behind the bar and mixing drinks for Lora and Mr. Davids (Thaggert 488).

Sirk also made an important social change. As he stated in his interview with Jon Halliday:

> “After I had read the outline, I made one change, socially – an important one, I think. (...) Maybe it would have been alright in 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 (...) (Halliday 129).”

As mentioned above, Delilah is an indispensable collaborator in Bea’s business in the earlier versions. Annie, however, fulfills the role of a normal domestic servant. She exemplifies the typical situation of African-American women in the mid twentieth century in the U.S.A. Nancy Cott describes in her work *No Small Courage* how African-American women in the late twenties and further in time rarely had the chance to climb the social ladder. Even in the ‘Golden’ twenties, when new jobs were blooming, most African American women could only get a job as a domestic servant, or later, as a teacher. Some colored women did manage to break into these newly available jobs but most of the jobs they found available were those white women had left (Cott 466). Unlike Delilah, who remains with the
Turner family out of a slave-like feeling of obligation, Sirk positions Annie so that she stays with Lora out of necessity (Thaggert 488). As Sirk continues in his interview, Annie illustrates a typical servant “without much she could call her own but the friendship, love, and charity of a white mistress (Halliday 129).”

More than in the two earlier treatments, the film clearly attempts to establish Annie’s status as a maid. During the first meeting with Lora, who wistfully expresses the wish for “someone to look after Susie”, Annie eagerly chimes in, as Heung puts it: “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? (5 min 30). Her status is even more established when she is introduced to the world as Lora’s maid. An example of this is when Lora bluffs her way in to see agent Allen Loomis, by pretending to be a Hollywood star. When the latter dials her home number, Lora reaches for the phone saying “That’ll be my maid- I’ll talk to her” (Heung 27). Not only Loomis but the audience as well is now convinced of the established mistress- servant relationship between the two. Sarah Jane’s displeasure with the social situation of her mother is apparent from the very start of the film. When Lora shows Annie and her daughter their room for the night the latter asks her mother, rather annoyed, why they always have to stay in the back. Instead, Annie reconciles with her position telling Lora the room will do just fine.

2.1.3 Conclusion

After comparing all three characters of the black mother, we can conclude that, although Sirk made some physical adjustments, they all embody the stereotypical Mammy-image. Never do they question their colored identity and domestic role in society. In the 1934 adaptation, for instance, Delilah is offered a change to be an independent woman, but she refuses. The black mother plays an important role in the success of Bea/ Lora, but never in the narrative is she given credit. It is against this presupposed destiny Peola/Sarah Jane rebels.
2.2 The tragic mulatto and the masquerade

The narrative of *Imitation of Life* revolves around the light-skinned girl rebelling against her mother’s powerlessness and servility. Unlike her mother, Peola/Sarah Jane does not accept the limited freedom she is given. In all three treatments the black mother works energetically to keep her daughter within the same second-class place (Caputi 709). This means that the mulatto girl should go to a respectable black college, and in the case of Sarah Jane, she should also attend church functions and meet ‘nice guys’. For Delilah/Annie, racial identity is nothing more than the will of God, as she tells Peola when the latter returns home to confront her mother and ‘Miss’ Bea with her request to pass: “Lawd have mercy on mah chile’s soul, Miss Bea! She cain’t pass. Nobody cain’t pass. God’s watchin’. [...] God don’t want his rivers to mix. [...] Black wimmin who pass, pass into damnation (245-246).” Peola/Sarah Jane refuses to identify with her mother. D.N. Rodowick suggests that a typical portrayal of social conflicts in melodrama is through the cris(es) of identification: “the forward thrust of narrative is not accomplished through external and the accumulation of significant actions, but rather through the internalization of the conflict in a crisis of identification (qtd. In Heung 32).” As Nowell-Smith puts it, the tragic mulatto asks herself “whose child am I?” (Nowell-Smith 116).

As Caputi explains Peola and Sarah Jane are mulatto’s who feel their soul to be white (Caputi 708). They do not identity with their mother but feel closer related to their white-skinned father. As an ambiguous figure the latter has the power to resist the strictures of social and racial stratification, and this is the freedom the light-skinned girl chooses to exploit in identifying with him (Heung 34). As Sarah Jane tells to Susie, “My mother can’t help her color, but I can – and I wil.” However, as the father is not present in the narrative, all three choose to identify with another character symbolizing the same power and freedom as their father does.
All three mulatto figures follow the path of the white protagonist. These characters are not only white, they are also the antithesis of domesticity, represented in the character of the black mother. In a time when it was not evident for women to be the main provider of the family, notwithstanding to be one of the most respected business women, Bea succeeded in climbing to the top position of society. Peola is inspired by this. In the novel, when she asks her mother the permission to pass, she explains how well she has it made: “I’ve got on out there in Seattle. Librarian in the city’s finest branch. [...] earning a decent living. (246).” In the film the parallel between the light-skinned girl and Bea is even more visible. Like Bea who started out her career in an eating place, Delilah finds Peola working as a cashier in a restaurant as well. The more Peola is convinced of living her life like a white woman, the more she becomes visually modeled after the white career woman. As Courtney puts it “these two [Peola and Bea] are visually rhymed across shots (14).” When Peola begs her mother to cut all ties between them we first see Peola instantly followed by a shot of Bea. Their similarly tilted hats show especially that Peola’s aesthetic is modeled after Bea’s (fig. 5a, fig. 5b, fig 5c). Valerie Smith points out that narratives of passing very often portray character who pass as “betrayer of the black race, and they depend, almost inevitably, upon the association of blackness with self-denial and suffering, and of whiteness with selfishness and material comfort (Smith 44).” Although what is stated above may count for *Imitation of Life* from certain perspective, never do the film and novel portray the passing of Peola as a way for her to have material comfort. As Peola’s speech on page illustrates, the mulatto girl is not concerned with being rich. All she wants is the respect and privileges that have been taken away from her because she is black. Thaggert illustrates this as she describes the scene where Delilah visits her daughter in the restaurant. Delilah tries to convince her daughter to give up the job as cashier by offering her material things, with money from her role and image of ‘Aunt Delilah’. But Peola leaves with no belongings, emphasizing that it is not wealth she seeks in the world of the white, but a feeling of respect (Thaggert 486).

Lora is Sarah Jane’s vision of success. The light-skinned girl follows the path of Lora and becomes a performer as well. To achieve certain whiteness is to achieve a performance of white femininity.
Compared to the novel and Stahl’s adaptation, Sirk brings Sarah Jane’s passing to an extreme level. The ideal of white femininity becomes equal to the expression of her sexuality. She first tries to achieve her goals through a liaison with her white boyfriend Frankie. But when he brutally turns against her, she sells her sexuality on stage. Her performance in a tawdry night club and act on the scene of the vaudeville displays Sarah Jane as a sexual object and not as a respectable young lady as her counterparts. These attempts are rather pathetic imitations of the theatrical triumphs Lora had. Having none of the inhibiting attitudes that hampered Lora’s career progress, Sarah Jane, as Byars puts it, Sarah Jane will sell it, if that’s what it takes (Byars 251).

As noted above, Sarah Jane’s sexual expression is a rather significant change from the earlier versions of *Imitation of Life*. Sexuality was not an issue for Peola, or at least not for Stahl’s adaptation. At the time when Stahl made his remake the restrictions of the Production Code were beginning to be enforced (Byars 252). As Courtney illustrates, any assumption of miscegenation was enough for the PCA to stop the production. The idea of ‘polluting’ the white society with an interracial relationship was considered to be a threat. In *Birth of a Nation*, for instance, the fiancée of a mulatto figure, who was the son of a white senator, rather commits suicide than contaminate the white race by marrying a mulatto (Gillman 109). Surprisingly, in the 1959 version Sirk never restrains Sarah Jane’s sexual eruptions, making her an even bigger threat to society. In the novel, Peola also has a liaison with a white man but she no longer forms a threat as she “has taken care of that” (245).

A plausible explanation for Sarah Jane’s extreme take on femininity could be that through the staging of her sexuality, she manifests against her asexual mother who as a mammy–figure lacks any sign of extreme femininity. At the same time, she also makes an attempt to connect with Lora. The latter is portrayed in the film as a atypical sexual mother. Heung made the assumption about Lora’s talent, whether she is a good actress or not (Heung 26). Leaving the answer aside, it can be stated that Lora needs her sexual expression to attain high levels in her career. Similar to Lora, Sarah Jane wants more
in life than what has been offered to her. She is aware of Lora’s sexual power, and imitates this characteristic.

2.3 The endings

Judith Berzon notes: “the figure of the tragic mulatto is usually a product of the white man’s [sic] imagination and often expresses his [sic] deepest (usually unspoken) fantasies about the largest marginal group in our society: specifically, his [sic] assumption that the mixed blood yearns to be white and is doomed to unhappiness and despair because of this impossible dream (qtd. in Caputi 707).” The mulatto girl Zoe, for instance, is given the opportunity to go with her loved one to a place where no one knows she is colored, but she refuses. Further in the story, her freedom is taken away and she is sold as a slave. At the end, she dies, knowing that a legal romance between her and her lover would never be possible. In *Imitation of Life*, the formula of the tragic mulatto deviates. In the novel, Peola does succeed in fulfilling her ‘impossible dream’. The film adaptations, however, diverge from the model in that Peola’s/ Sarah Jane’s future is not described, only vaguely implied (Caputi 707).

A comparison between all three treatments demonstrates a remarkable evolution in the narration of the ending of the story. Valerie Smith suggests two outcomes for colored women who wish to pass: “Passing women characters, on the other hand, are either re-educated and returned to the bosom of home and community, or they receive some extreme form of punishment such as death or the sacrifice of a loved (Smith 45).” Hurst’s and Stahl’s Peola and their counterpart Sarah Jane follow this strategy perfectly. After telling her mother to act as if her daughter was never born, the first Peola leaves for Bolivia with her fiancé and never returns. The ultimate sacrifice she has to make may seem tragic but it is the only way for her to complete her role as a genuine white girl. Stahl’s Peola and her counterpart make the same sacrifice but at the funeral they regret their decision. What was
supposed to be their salvation turned out to be their punishment. At the funeral, Sarah Jane cries out: “I killed her! I killed my mother!” The idea of matricide overshadows the two girls with guilt.

The funeral is a moment of illumination. As Heung calls it, “At Annie’s funeral, Sarah Jane makes her most public and her most humiliating appearance, but with a significant twist (Heung 38).” Both girls publically announce their familial relation to the colored protagonist of the film and thus with their black heritage. Penelope Bullock argues that how even though the portrayals of the mulatto figure were varied in nineteenth century American fiction, they all agreed that it was the light-skinned character’s duty to ally him/herself with the Negro group and sincerely and unselfishly aid in the fight for race betterment: “the mulatto is a tragic person only because and only so long as he fails to cast his lot with the minority group. But once the shadows are uplifted, once he proudly admits that he is a Negro, he rises above his tragedy and dedicates himself to the case of the dark American (Bullock 80).”

The altered endings consequently have a major impact on the message the narrative provides. In the novel, Hurst explicitly points the finger at the system which proclaims this model of injustice. As Peola tells her mother, “There is nothing wrong in passing. The wrong is in the world that makes it necessary (243). [...] But as things go in this world, I have been a good girl, morally or whatever you want to call it. I’ve worked. I’ve studied. I’ve tried to make the best of myself. And all the time with the terrible odd against me of knowing I could never get anywhere I wanted to get (245)” By letting Peola pass, Hurst manifest against the conventional system of that time. However, she does not offer a concrete solution to the problems. The film adaptations also do not have problem of going against the grain and criticizing their society, but it happens in a much more subtle manner. Never do the adaptations make a direct insult to the ideologies of their time. Perhaps due to the lack of evidence, the need for Peola/Sarah Jane to pass is an expressing of her inner war. Nevertheless, both film adaptations implicitly call upon the system for the existing injustice. At a certain point Annie questions Lora: “How do you tell your daughter that she was born to be hurt?”.
But unlike Hurst, neither director had the same freedoms novelists had when it came to expressing their opinion: “The novel has never been subjected to something like Hollywood, to the pressure of time and big money, to sales people, producers, exhibitors – or at least not to such a degree – saying you’ve got to have a happy end even in the most god dam awful situations. (Halliday 132-133).” The unhappy ending for Delilah, and for Bea, in Hurst’s novel is often regarded by readers as a shortcoming. But as Sirk observes “with a novel you are more independent (Halliday 133).” Stahl and Sirk, however, were restricted to the Hollywood conventions of their time. As Kaplan suggests “Hollywood codes require that Peola (and Sarah Jane) returns to her mother and accept fully her blackness (Kaplan 169).” By making Peola and Sarah Jane regret their decisions and rescinding their demands to be white publically, both films tend to drive towards the direction of closure and ideological containment, rather than to an overt and subversive ending as the novel does (Heung 37). Stahl’s adaptation follows this pattern perfectly. At the end we hear Jessie telling her mother just how pleased she is that Peola has returned. The latter even decided to go to a college for colored people.

Taken inspiration from Doane’s analysis of Stella Dallas, Peola’s succession of passing could be considered as a ‘social error’. Doane explains how Stella’s attempt to raise from the lower class to the high society is seen as a social error. Stella misreads what is involved in refinement and respectability and views her access to a higher position as a matter of excess. She uses more of everything- more jewelry, more frills, more perfume, until her style becomes aggressive rather than sophisticated. She does not commit a social error, she is that social error (Doane 287). Thus, replacing the social stratum of class with that of race the same can be observed for the character of Peola. In the 30’s and 50’s it was not acceptable for the colored community to live and act like white people. Sirk illustrates this beautifully when Sara Jane’s boyfriend hits her from the moment he finds out she has been lying to him about her background and most importantly about her color. Letting Peola pass and live with the privileges and comfort belonging to the white community would be anachronic.
It may seem at first sight that Stahl’s interpretation of the narrative leads to a typical closed and traditional ending where the order it restored at last. However, the ending of this 1939 version carries a certain threat. The final scene only frames the white mother and her daughter and we hear the news about Peola from the latter. As I will further analyze in chapter 4, the film tries very hard, even at the end, not to place the mulatto girl with the white family afraid the spectator might see the resemblances between the two parties.

But a true ambiguous ending can be found in the 1959 remake. As Laura Mulvey points out a Sirkean narrative tries to never conform to a standard happy ending. The melodramas of Sirk act as a corrective (Mulvey 1998; 40). At first sight *Imitation* seems to follow the pattern of a traditional happy end–story. The scene in the car at Annie’s funeral illustrates how everyone is reunited and how the values of the nuclear family are being established again. Lora will marry Steve and the troubles between Susie and her mother look evaporated. Sarah Jane, on the other hand, has no problems anymore with her colored background. Nevertheless, the happy ending is nothing more than a deus ex machina, leaving many questions unanswered. As Sirk points out:

... you don’t believe the happy end, and you are not really supposed to. What remains in your memory is the funeral. The pomp of the dead, anyway the funeral. You sense it’s hopelessness, even though in a very bare and brief little scene afterwards the happy turn is being indicated (Halliday 132).

There is no real solution or antithesis, simply a traditional rescue element which the Athenians and the Greeks were rather keen on. This has been brought into the film simply to please the crowd, and the studio of course (Halliday 132). Using this technique has led to the notion that films only function simply and solely to reinforce the dominant ideology (Byars 252). The narrative closure in Stahl’s film and a superficial reading of Sirk’s ending do encourage the belief in the power of the individual and ignore the probability of social changes. Nevertheless, a subversive reading of the 1959 version uncovers the real message. The characters are part of a vicious circle. Their story draws along the
lines of hopelessness. Lora will forget about her daughter and go back to the theatre while Susie will find a decent guy to marry. But most importantly Sarah Jane will deny her identity again and return to the escapist world of the vaudeville and imitation (Halliday 132). As Hueng points out the character of Sarah Jane allows for a reading that goes against the established dominant ideologies. Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* is a school example of Nowell-Smith’s conclusion that “the importance of melodrama [...] lies in its ideological failures (Nowell-Smith 118).”

2.4 Conclusion

Tania Modleski describes the figure of the mulatto girl in *Imitation of Life* as a vehicle of the repressed feminine voice (qtd. in Heung 36). The racial conflict in this narrative is illustrated at its best through the image of the tragic mulatto. Peola/Sarah Jane has the ability to activate certain themes that are otherwise suppressed in the story. The relationship between the white mother and the mother of color is based on a construction of inequality but is covered up through a masquerade of friendship. While the novel and both film adaptation are situated in a non-segregated society, this level of inequality can be witnessed in the household of Stahl’s Pullman family. A perfect illustration of this, is the image of the staircase, leading up to the quarters of Bea and leading down to those of Delilah. The black mother understands the nature of her status and does not fight it. She explains it as the will of God. The objectifying representation of Delilah/Annie as a Mammy could be regarded as racially insensitive. The axiom of people of color being like cardboard characters prevails a diminishing message to the colored spectator. But this is not enough to stir the narrative.

Peola/Sarah Jane does not possess the same ability of acceptance as her mother and rebels against her predicted fate. Her imitation of the white protagonist in the narrative illustrates how terrible the situation for people of color is in the dominating system. Both Peola-characters imitate the life style of Bea. Their main care is to have the same privileges and respect as a white person. In Sirk’s
adaptation Sarah Jane’s imitation is brought to an extreme level. She addresses her sexuality to create a white feminine appearance. Hurst clearly criticizes the society for the problems Peola has with her racial identity. She manifests against the system of injustice by letting Peola pass, but leaves the dilemmas unresolved. Both adaptations, on the other hand, do not put the blame on society though they do give certain insinuations. In contrast to Hurst’s ending, both Peola and Sarah Jane return to their black heritage. However, in the 1959 adaptation, we do not believe this ‘happy end’. Similar to Hurst, Sirk deliberately fails to resolve the dilemmas.

The formula of the mulatto girl did change compared to its counterpart from the nineteenth century. The impossible dream to be white does not result from the love for a white man, as in The Octoroon, but now derives from the system of injustice. The model has been given a sociological relevance in Imitation of Life.
3. The trope of motherhood

_Imitation of Life_ does not only deal with the tag of race. It can also be categorized as a maternal melodrama. It offers an insight in the way the patriarchal code of the 1930s and 50s positioned women to the institution of family. The common belief was that women were to possess only one identity: in the case of _Imitation of Life_ either career woman or mother (Donminer 72). The narrative tells the story of two families, a white one and a colored one. After the death of her husband the white mother is forced to provide for her family. With the help of her black servant, she succeeds in becoming successful and rises to the top of society. From this minimal outline we can already conclude that the traditional mother-daughter relationship for the white family is compromised through the mother’s working position. The narrative also focuses on the mother-daughter relation of the black family. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the character of Delilah/ Annie embodies the tradition of the Mammy figure with all the maternal connotations fully intact. A logical conclusion would be that Delilah/ Annie easily succeeds in being a good mother. Nevertheless, similar to the parental troubles of the white family, the narrative shows us a relation that is troubled through the daughter’s inability of accepting her racial identity. As a result, a discourse of race becomes intertwined with the trope of motherhood.

Kaplan argues that the central issue of race in the story is repressed through ‘the relatively ‘innocent’ terrain of individual, familial relations (Kaplan 173).’ The focus, according to her, rests upon the family issues, therefore marginalizing the racial concerns. In this chapter, however, I would like to examine just how the issue of race influences the trope of motherhood. Following Hueng, I feel that the strategy applied here, especially concerning the two film adaptations, transposes the race issues onto the frame of the maternal melodrama (Heung 30). This technique makes it possible for the story to transport the notion of race from a social perspective to a familial dimension, thus formulating the
crisis as an ‘in-house arrangement’ as Neale explains (Neale 189). As a result, it is a mother and a
daughter who are each other’s antagonist and not two women of color and a racial society.

Different than other maternal melodramas, the structure of the story develops a parallel between its
two female protagonists. On the one hand, the narrative centers around Bea/ Lora who as a working
woman must deal with her gender identity of being a mother. On the other hand, its focus also lies
on what happens to Delilah/ Annie who must deal with combinations of racial identity and her role as
a mother. By juxtaposing the two mothers with each other, I would like to examine how both women
deal with their troubled situation and what effect Peola’s/ Sarah Jane’s racial identity has on the
trope of motherhood.

3.1 The self-made woman and motherhood

In a study made of the women’s magazines concerning femininity and the role of women in society
around the 1920s, Chafe wrote that these magazines voiced the idea that the role of mother and
housewife represented the only path to feminine fulfillment (Dally 144). The career of women
consisted out of making a good marriage, to be ‘deeply, fundamentally, wholly feminine’ (Dally 145).
This idea moved into the fifties as Spain and Bianchi suggest. Women who started families in the
1950s generally stayed home to raise their children (Spain and Bianchi 77). And if they did go to
work, it was not to pursue a career, but to put their husbands through school, their sons through
college or to help pay the mortgage (Friedan 17). In the novel, a president of a large paint venture
argues that the place of a woman who had to earn a living was behind the typewriter or the counter
or the school ma’am’s desk (113). Being a good mother was the only acceptable path for a woman to
feel fully fulfilled.

*Imitation of Life*, however, presents another image of women at that time. The novel and film
adaptations illustrate an unconventional household that is not confirm to the ideology of that time.
We are introduced to two families but there is no male character taking in a central place. Furthermore, the white mother in all treatments is not your everyday housewife and mother. Bea is a successful businesswoman and Lora a respected actress. However, as Kaplan illustrates in her work *Motherhood and Representation* (1998), *Imitation of Life* insist on reconstituting as ‘normal’ a nucleus family as possible as the circumstances (Kaplan 167). Chodorow explains how women’s needs to form a traditional family is in a way fulfilled through “the creation and maintenance of important personal relations with other women” (Byars 149). In this light, the friendly relation between the white mother and mother of color can be seen from another perspective. In a way Delilah takes the mother position, while Bea plays ‘father’ by earning money in the public sphere. Similarly, Gretchen Bisplinghoff has suggested that the novel and films resolve the reproductive/productive, home/career dichotomy by having the white mother take on the father function while the black mother serves for the mother function (qtd. in Kleinhans 202). This assumption suggests a shift in the gender pattern.

In this chapter, I will put my emphasis on the character of the white mother and examine how she copes with being a working woman. In her essay ‘When Women Weep’ Jeanine Basinger suggests that films ‘usually reflected the conventional wisdom that the woman who rose to power, either economic or sexual, was going to be an unhappy woman’ (qtd. in Heung 22). Does her rise in the working place effect her femininity and ability of being a good mother? Does worldly success truly necessitates in the failure as mother? Moreover, how do the novel and film adaptations react upon her situation?
3.1.1 Bea on motherhood

In this chapter I will discuss the two versions of the Bea character, that of the novel and of Stahl’s adaptation. Although both characters derive from the same blue-print, their elaboration differs from one another. Both women are widows and started their thriving career out of necessity to provide for their child. They follow the tradition of the self-made woman, a domain defined by its masculinity. However, their function as provider for the entire family has a different influence on them.

Throughout the novel Bea develops herself more as a competent business woman than as a mother. To be so successful in a man’s world was a special thing. As Virginia Eden puts it: “Five years from now we won’t be so special as we are now. From now on, women in big business are going to be common everyday, as they should be. But just the same, we’re nose ahead of the gold rush (...) (159).” The more Bea commits herself to her social role as money maker, the more she loses touch with her femininity. Bea becomes more and more rooted in social chameleonism (Itzkovitz 14). As she is part of a male domain, so does masculinity becomes a part of her. When she continued the maple syrup business from her husband, she decided to use his name: “Take Mr. Pullman and the maple-syrup side line. (...) It was as B. Pullman that she sold that week (...) (64 – 65).” Itzkovitz points out that most of the women in the business world found mobility through self-transformation. Bea’s best friend Virginia Eden, for instance, made millions in beauty culture and was born as ‘Sadie Kress’ (Itzkovitz 15). These androgynous name games allow Bea to be known not as Bea Pullman but as her husband Benjamin. The newspaper ‘The New York Mail’, for example, began their report about the B. Pullman ventures with the following line: “Few know that B. Pullman, known by name the country over, is a woman (151).” And in the rejection letter from Wanemaker she is courteously addressed as “B. Pullman, ESQ. Dear sir : (...) (111)”. Flake perfectly illustrates the observations made here. In his discussion with Bea he tells her: “How many women, in the whole history of them, have ever proved themselves to be the business man you are (238, my underlining).”
The effort she puts in her marketplace success has a negative influence on her role as a mother. Marry Ann Doane describes the maternal power in terms of pure presence: she is the one who is always there. The paternal power, on the other hand, often manifests itself more strongly through absence (Doanne 295). Extending this theory to the novel’s white protagonist and it becomes clear that she embodies the paternal function more than the mother role. Bea does not succeed in combining her career with her private life. Instead there is a growing distance between the her and her daughter, “We’re so formal. It would even be darling is she would nag. Perhaps I am just one of those tired business men to her, wanting to buy my way into her affection (173).

The film version has a far more smoother understanding of what it means to be a woman on the work floor. Bea is a successful business woman who has no difficulty combining her career with her role as a good mother. Bea only experiences sporadic tension between her private life and her status as a working woman. The opening scene starts with a shot of a floating duck in a bath tub and we hear a conversation between a little child and her mother. While Bea is trying to get her daughter ready to start her day, the latter expresses her desire for her ‘quack quack’. Bea simply refuses this request and tells her to get ready for the day nursery. The little girl declares her disapproval and by the end of the scene emphasizes her dislike in the form of a song: “I love you and you love me, and I don’t want to go to the day nursery (2 min 40- 2min 49).” However, Bea in her current situation has no other choice than to ask help from outside. Courtney suggests that the film further insists on Bea’s domestic failure in a series of shots in which she struggles to juggle at once the crying baby upstairs, a ringing phone downstairs, a phone conversation with a client and pots boiling over on the stove (Courtney 7). But the arrival of Delilah stirs the plot into another direction, away from the gender chaos, as Courtney calls it (Courtney 7).

Delilah’s presence in the home enables Bea to pursue professional desires and restores her feminine roles of mother and potential wife. When she settles on buying her own store she makes sure the location holds room enough for her family. The living area touches directly upon her pancake store,
making sure she has her eye on little Jessie all the time. Her maternal commitment is even more visible when Jessie turns sick. When Delilah enters the house we find the little girl lying on the sofa while her mother does her best to entertain the former. In contrast to her counterpart, Stahl’s Bea can be described in terms of presence, of being a good mother (Doane, 294). Even when Jessie goes to boarding school and the two are separated from one another, the relation between them does not turn sour. Instead, after witnessing the terrifying scene between Delilah and Peola, Bea goes up to her daughter and tells her: “I’ve just seen such a tragedy... poor Delilah. (...) Oh darling, if anything would ever come between us, it would kill me (Deel 9 4min 00).” To which Jessie insures her mother that such a thing would never happen.

Bea’s fulfillment of her mother role entitles her to address her femininity. Thaggert defines Bea as an erotic young woman (Thaggert 487). Opposed to Hurst’s character, Bea succeeds in intertwining her sexuality into the man’s world she is entangled in. The observation Peter Biskind made about the 1950s could also be applied here: “The career woman had replaced the vamp as the femme fatale (Heung 22).” A significant scene illustrating this takes place at the beginning of the film when Bea is looking for workers to renovate her store. At first we see the painter. When he tells Bea his estimated price she accomplishes a lowering of the costs via her flirtatious charm. The scene shifts to the furniture maker. When he cannot be so easily persuaded as his predecessor, Bea changes her position and immediately moves closer to him, complimenting his choice of scarf pin (Fig. 5).

Compared to the novel, the film drastically changes its course. While Stahl’s portrayal of the self-made woman is far more optimistic, the novel’s Bea finds herself torn between her career and motherhood. Throughout the novel, she feel as if she is missing out on something. All the effort she has put in her booming career does not seem worth it. A notion condensed in the headline of a magazine article Bea writes, entitles “What Price Business Career to a Woman?” (Hueng 23). Delilah echoes this point by advising her friend: “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 you share’ (181).” Eventually, Bea falls in love with her business manager, Flake. By forming a nucleus family Bea wants to bring her daughter closer to her, build Jessie a home she will enjoy, where she will bring friends to. But on the last page of the novel, Bea discovers her fiancé in an embrace with her daughter, and realizes she will not be the bride but the mother-in-law. Surprisingly, this ending follows the return from the daughter. Bea might lose her lover and hopes for a traditional home, but she does win the love of her daughter:

Jessie: I’m crazy about you, Bea. Not just admiration and being impressed. I think you are such a darling. (…) I only know that I’m happy Bea. Happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

Bea: Silly! Has it to do with being home?

J.: Yes. Yes Yes!

B: With me?

J.: Yes. (287)

The novel highlights a typical theme of maternal melodrama described by Christian Viviani as “an apologia for total renunciation, total sacrifice, total self-abnegation (Viviani 179).” Bea is given a second change to be a good mother now, to be present instead of absent, but for that she had a price to pay.

Although Stahl’s Bea does not jeopardizes her maternal role, she too has to make a sacrifice. At the party held in her home, Bea meets the charming ichthyologist Steven Archer. But when Bea accompanies Delilah for a couple of days, Jessie develops a crush on Steven. Bea is caught in a dilemma between her love for Jessie and her desire for Steven. She resolves to send her lover away, postponing the wedding, in the hope that her daughter’s infatuation will fade away. The difference between the sacrifice Bea has to make and that of her counterpart, is that the former’s punishment is a self-imposed choice (Itzkovitz 19). Heung defines her renunciation as “a concomitant to noble motherhood (Heung 24).”
The response to her daughter's crush and the loss of Bea’s fiancé validate a principal that is fundamentally patriarchal, “it is not possible to combine womanly desires with motherly duties (Heung 24).” The novel and the 1934 adaptation begin and end with a family situation where the central place is not taken by a man, but by a woman. This ‘central woman’ is capable of not only having a thriving career but she also succeeds in keeping a family together. A plausible explanation for this extraordinary situation could be that Hurst and Stahl want to emphasize the fact that Bea is ahead of her time. Following the message of the narrative, women should be capable of functioning on the same level as men without having a negative effect on their private life.

3.1.2 Lora on motherhood

Like her earlier counterpart, Lora is a self-made woman. But in contrast to her prior versions whose ambitions are presented as altruistic and necessary, in light of a depression-time economy, Lora is presented as narcissistic and as selfish vanity (Byars 247).

Already from the beginning of the film Lora’s ambition is made clear. She desires to be a famous actress. When Steve rather unexpectedly asks Lora to marry him, she refuses to give up her career to live the life of a typical housewife from the fifties. In the 1950’s marriage could be defined as ‘settling down’ which would mean the end of her career (Byars 246). She tries to explain to Steve that she wants ‘something more’: “I want to be honest with you darling. I want more – everything! Maybe too much! A logical explanation could be that, as a widow, she already satisfied her need for primary relations, as Chodorow suggests. We notice the differences in time spirit comparing Lora’s reaction to the proposal and the response of Bea to that of Steven, taking place 20 years earlier. In her work The Feminine Mystique (1959) Betty Friedan demonstrates how the women of the fifties found themselves in an identity crisis. Most of them felt trapped in their secure and closed world and
wanted to believe that there was more for them than raising children, performing domestic duties and satisfying their husbands. Friedan called it ‘the problem that has no name.’

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question- “Is this all?” (Friedan 15).

Lora can easily be placed in that time frame as she refuses the comfortable life Steve offers her and chooses to follow her own desires. Charles Affron describes Lora in terms of excessive egotism (Affron 48). Mulvey explains that Lora is blinded in such a matter by her own drive to be a spectacle that she is unaware of the things happening around her (Mulvey 1994; 128). The opening scene foreshadows Lora’s abilities as a mother. The first few seconds show us a mother in distress walking frantically on the boardwalk searching for her daughter. She finally finds little Susie playing with Sarah Jane while Annie is watching over them. From this sequence we can conclude that during the film Annie will be portrayed as the good mother while Lora takes the role of the bad mother on her.

This opening scene also illustrates the theatricality of Lora. The search for her daughter is embedded in a sense of theatricality. The boardwalk serves as her stage allowing her to be seen as a spectacle (Mulvey 2005; 234). This theatricality appears in everything Lora does, even in her role as a mother. At the end of the film, when Lora confronts Susie about Steve, the argument evolves into an analysis of Lora’s achievements as a mother. Lora suggests to give him up if he should come between them. But Susie manifests against her mother, “stop acting, mother. Stop trying to shift people around as if they were pawns on a stage. (100 min).” This illustrates that nothing about Lora is real, she is merely imitation, like the jewels pictured after the credits.

Thus, Lora’s priority lies with her theatrical career, a choice which undermines her natural role of being a mother. She gives little thought on motherhood and pays minimal attention to her daughter. At Christmas, for example, it is Annie who narrates a carol to the two girls while Lora is occupied
learning her lines. It comes as no surprise then when Susie accuses her mother of never really caring for her: “Let’s face it mother, Annie’s always been more like a mother to me – you never had time for me (100 min).” An accusation which Annie implicitly supports:

Lora: Why don’t I know about it? Why didn’t she come to me?

Annie: Maybe because you weren’t around.

Lora: You mean ... I ... haven’t been a good mother. (Min)

But Lora defends herself as she tells Susie that it was because of her ambition she could give her daughter everything she needed. Lora may have succeeded in providing the material needs for her daughter, she failed however, in the eyes of Susie, to provide the most important aspect of being a mother, that of a mother’s love. Harris and Donmoyer explain that Susie’s attempt to pursue her mother’s boyfriend is in fact a strategy to get Lora’s attention. There is a significant difference between the infatuations of the young girls in the previous versions and that of Susie. In the novel, as well as in the Stahl’s film, Jessie was not aware of the relationship between her mother and Steven. But this is not the case in the 1959 version. When Susie was a little girl, she witnessed the beginning of Lora’s relation with Steve. Therefore, her infatuation with Steve is unacceptable and can be seen as an act of rebellion against her mother.

However, the film does confirm Lora’s feeling of disillusion and disappointment with her theatrical success. By the end of the narrative, Lora doubts stage triumphs and is haunted by her lapses as a parent: “Funny - isn’t it? After all this time, struggling, and heartache, you find out it doesn’t seem worth it – something is missing.” This even results in Lora promising her daughter to put aside her theatrical ambitions and take up her role as a mother. But Lora’s search for success and self fulfillment gets the upper hand when she is offered a role in the new Fellini production. Her actions as well as her image have separated her from her daughter, and from her natural role of mother.

3 Harris and Dormoyer state that the communication strategies applied by Susie were: a) being agreeable, b) imitating her mother’s life and c) rebelling against her mother.
Donmoyer observes that Lora is valued more for her external than her internal attributes (Donmoyer 15). Compared to the previous Bea characters, Sirk portrays Lora as a atypical sexual matron (Byars 248). In one scene, Lora wears a bright-orange Capri pants which emphasizes her sexuality, and further in the film, she shows up at Susie’s graduation party wearing a turban, stylish sunglasses and a rather exposable blue dress. In a way it seems as if Sirk deliberately devalues his white protagonist to the audience and to Susie. Nevertheless, Lora’s punishment for her selfish behavior is the loss of her daughter’s love and respect. But a traditional reading of the ending offers the characters an opportunity for a new beginning. At Annie’s funeral, after the dramatic entrance from Sarah Jane, we see Lora sitting in the car holding Susie and her servant’s daughter. Lora then raises her head and the camera zooms in on Steve. The suggestion here is that the family is united at last. Lora is given the change to correct her mistakes as she becomes Sarah Jane’s surrogate mother. Unlike the earlier narratives, the 1959 version ends with the return of the nucleus family. This alteration can be seen in the light of the fifties ideology. Elaine Tyler May explains that the return to the ideal of the nucleus family can be placed in the ‘containment’ of true American values. A family-centered culture became America’s bulwark against fears of another economic depression, against the insecurity caused by the discovery of atomic energy, and against communism (Byars 79).

It is clear that Lora does not follow the traditional pattern of renunciation like her previous counterparts. Moreover, Heung has noted that one of Lora’s sin is her sustained refusal to suffer. Her theatrical triumphs have fitting titles like “Happiness”, “Always Laughter” and “Born to Laugh”. However, from the moment her guilt kicks in she decides to star in a film called “No More Laughter” (Heung 30).

3.1.3 Conclusion

By comparing the three characters of the white mother with each other, the following conclusion can be made. In the novel, Bea looses her femininity and the ability of being a good mother because of her ambition in a male environment. Stahl’s version, however, depicts another story. Bea has found
the perfect bridge between her working area and her role as a caring mother. Lora, on the other hand, craving for public attention, neglects her daughter. Nevertheless, they all are given another opportunity to learn from their mistakes after sacrificing their loved ones for the sake of their daughter’s happiness. Lora is the exception to the rule as the film results toward the establishment of a nucleus family. So does success truly necessitates the failure of the woman as a mother? While the novel and Sirk’s version give a rather vexed impression to this question, Stahl’s adaptation is far more optimistic. Thus, women can combine their working desires with that of motherhood, but not without a sacrifice.

3.2 The mother of color and racial identity

The previous chapter illustrated how the white mothers dealt with the burden of having a career, fulfilling the role of the father, and at the same looking after their family. In this chapter, I would like to take a closer look at the situation of the black mother in all treatments. Kaplan suggests that Delilah/Annie takes on the function of the mother in the four piece community. A logical conclusion would be that she embodies the ideal representation of what being a good mother is all about. However, the racial identity crises of her daughter undermines this perception. In the following, I will analyze the influence this issue of race has on her role of being a mother.

3.2.1 Comparing book and films

Kaplan illustrates that the black mother occupies the maternal position in the narrative. They are maternity personified. Kaplan continues: “What else was there for the black woman in the 1930s and beyond? (Kaplan 168).” This statement is even more established through the stereotypical imagery of the Mammy all three characters symbolize in the novel and film adaptations. They do not only take care of their own children but keep an eye on the children of their white mistress as well. In fact, in
Sirk’s version Annie is usually shown embracing Lora’s daughter rather than her own. Patricia Hill Collins refer to these networks of women taking care for children who are not their own as othermothers (qtd. in Thaggert 485).

All three mother are pictured as the prototype of what a good mother, according to the patriarchal codes, is all about. They lack the strive for success, are devoted to their daughters and most importantly they are always present. Hueng explains that is was very rare in the 1930s and 1950s for a black servant to be a live-in maid like Delilah and Annie are. Normally, she was caught up in a quintessential struggle having to choose between taking care of her employer’s family or her own (Hueng 28): “Most of the female domestic help demanded the freedom to return home in the evening (74).” The authors create a fantasy situation in which Delilah and Annie are not separated from their daughter and are given the opportunity to properly mother Peola and Sarah Jane. Ironically, while Bea and Lora are punished for their own ambition and working status, the mother of color is not. In fact her working status is constructed in such a manner without calling this contradiction into question. Because she is able to practice her day time activities at home, she is closely in touch with not only Peola/Sarah Jane but with Jessie/Susie as well.

A critical side remark can be made that mothers of color always had to combine a family situation with a working position. So how come Imitation of Life did not give an opportunity to the black mother to take part in the American dream as it did for Bea and Lora. In contrast to the other treatments, Stahl does make an effort to change all this. Bea offers Delilah a twenty percent share of the ‘Aunt Delilah Corporation’. Sirk deliberately changed this feature as he felt that in his time this would mean Delilah could built her own house and company, a fact which makes the Negro woman’s daughter less understandable (Halliday 129). Delilah’s refusal could be seen in this context. But there is also another explanation possible. By refusing the proposal Delilah confirms her stereotypical position as a humble black person. Thus, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.
3.2.2 Black motherhood and suffering

As the previous chapter showed, both Delilah characters and her counterpart Annie embody the ideal mother. Instead, we witness their domestic failure. In her work *Blood Talk* Gillman explains the important position the mother figure takes to help form the identity of her children. Doane agrees and says that “the mother must be an adequate mirror for the child (Doane 294).” The novel shows this with the white mother and her daughter. Though their mother-daughter bond is not as strong as it should be, Jessie is proud to be her mother’s daughter and even looks up to her. In her basic re-reading of Freudian theory accounting the organization of gender, Chodorow focuses on the infant-mother relationship, seeing the mother as the infant’s most important object (qtd. in Byars 142). In other words, a girl develops her feminine gender identity through the image and presence of her mother (Williams, 313). However, the same cannot be said about Peola and Sarah Jane.

In his article ‘Two or Three Spectacular Mulatas’ Perez debunks the myth that everyone loves his own mother (Perez 127). He argues that in the case of the black daughter’s in *Imitation of Life* the contradiction of loving your mother but at the same time wanting to kill her can be utilized (Perez 127). In Sirk’s adaptation, for instance, we see Sarah Jane angered and humiliated at being discovers as black by Annie. However, she lies cradled in her mother’s arms, nearly swallowed up in the maternal abundance of the black mammy figure. She protests meekly into her mother’s bosom, “You did this. You made me this way.” All three versions of the story display Peola’s/ Sarah Jane’s resentment towards her own blackness, and therefore towards her mother. In Sirk’s adaptation, for instance, Sarah Jane’s blackness is translated into a maternal issue. For instance, when Annie unexpectedly comes to school to bring her little girl rain gear and exposes Sarah Jane’s color, the latter turns on her mother and demands: “why did you have to be my mother? Why?.” Or when Frankie brings up Sarah Jane’s racial identity, his demand is formulated so that the race issue is brought upon her mother. After arriving home from Frankie’s assault, she vends her rage on her
mother: “Frankie found out that I am not white – because you keep telling the world that I’m your daughter! .”

This repulsion of the black mother’s daughter towards her own racial identity resolves in breaking all contact with her mother. Viviani argues that being a good mother also means disappearing into anonymity so that the child can develop its own identity (Viviani 177). This is a task both Delilah characters have less problems with than Annie. Fassbinder explains that Annie stays committed to Sarah Jane out of selfishness. As I find this a bit of an overstatement, I agree with Ruth Feldstein. She describes Annie in terms of excessive loving (Feldstein 225). Not only the racial conflict of her daughter but also her smothering love led to the exclusion of Sarah Jane from her life. as Annie mentions on her death bed: “Tell her I know I was selfish and I loved her too much. Tell her I am sorry!”.

Both Delilah and Annie are school examples of the suffering mother. Although the white mother, with the exception of Stahl’s Bea, could be characterized as the opposite of what the patriarchal codes suggest what a good mother is all about, they are given a second chance to correct their mistakes. However, the colored mother, suffers from the loss of her daughter and eventually dies of a broken heart.

3.3 Conclusion

At first sight, it seems as if both mother types had nothing in common. Through her success as a business woman, the white mother took on the role of the father, neglecting her natural role as a mother. The black mother, on the other hand, is a personification of maternity but her idealized status is interrupted by her daughter’s inner racial conflict. However, a closer look shows that they do have some similarities concerning parenting. On the one hand, the novel’s Bea/ Lora exaggerates in her pursuit for success while Delilah and Annie exaggerate in their mother role, both pushing away
their children. We see a clear difference in the effect the racial identity has on the trope of motherhood for the mother of color. The racial crisis of her daughter degrades Annie/Delilah to a state of suffering.

4. Trope of Visibility/ Mise-en-scène

The previous chapters mostly dealt with the textual outline of the narrative. In chapter 2 we saw how the trope of the tragic mulatto was the ideal instrument to formulate the themes of race which the novel and film adaptations suppressed through the befriended relationship between the white mother and the black mother. The previous chapter illustrated how the trope of motherhood became troubled by the refusal of the light-skinned girl to accept her colored identity. In this chapter, I would like to focus on the aesthetic values of the melodramatic mode. The first part of this dissertation already mentioned the importance of the aesthetic in melodrama. Elsaesser associates the formal characteristics of style with a crisis of expression, in which language is inappropriate or inadequate to the emotional burden of the subject matter at hand (qtd. in Mulvey 1989; 72). These aesthetics of melodrama evolved in the nineteenth century for a non-literate audience and had a strong influence on the cinema. As the silent movies could not depend on the power of language, directors had to look for other ways to compensate for the expressiveness (Elsaesser 50). This constrain placed an emphasis on gesture, dramatic action, and the expression through visual meaning (Mulvey 1989; 73). This cinematic style survived and the expression through color, lighting and mise-en-scène became distinct features of the Hollywood melodrama. Elsaesser argues that they
became functional and integral elements in the construction of meaning. He therefore describes melodrama as “a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène (Elsaesser 51).”

In this chapter, my primary focus will be on the two motion pictures. First, I will examine how the invisible quality of race has been visualized by the aesthetics of the melodramatic mode. Secondly, I will analyze the funeral scene and the influence this mise-en-scène has of the position on the protagonists.

4.1 Trope of Visibility/ Invisibility

In a sense *Imitation of Life* can be understood as a depiction of race relations through the question of visibility and invisibility. There are two models of legibility revealing the invisibility of racial forces barely hidden beneath the social surface in race melodramas: the invisible ‘one drop’ revealed by narratives of passing and the invisible empires that dominate the narratives of race conspiracy and race riots (Gillman 2003; 19). As illustrated in chapter 2, *Imitation of Life* is structured according to the first model. In her article *Picturizing Race* Courtney points out the problems the Production Code Administration (PCA) had to identify the character of Peola in the 1934 adaptation. Her description varied from ‘the white child of a colored mother with negro blood in her veins’, ‘the white skinned negro girl’ to ‘the half-white, half-black girl’ (Courtney 4). Courtney continues as she suggests that these ever-changing names expose the discursive construction of race into different, and sometimes contradictory categories to mark racial difference. ‘White’, ‘black’ and ‘colored’ operate through a discourse of color tied to skin, ‘negro’ works on the discourse of race, tied to blood (Courtney 10). The failed attempts to define Peola illustrate how difficult it is to pin down the notion of race. If those who tried to classify her in writing already had problems, then it would surely be a very complicated task to picturize her. Hurst counterbalances Peola’s exterior ‘whiteness’ by reimposing
an interior ‘blackness’. Delilah describes her baby girl as a “white nigger baby” (74). This strategy, Courtney argues, would not suffice on film (Courtney 6).

Hollywood productions fully invest in a visual discourse to bring “the ghost in the machine”, as Morisson describes race, to the big screen (qtd. in Gillman 16). It is the imagery, and not the notion of blood or ancestry, that guarantees a racial identity. In this chapter I will examine the aesthetic strategies both directors utilize to visualize an authentic ‘white skinned negro girl’. The light-skinned girl states her problem as ‘looking white but being black’ but both films never quite allow us to see her genuinely as the former and always attempts to convince us of the latter. Stahl’s way of staging the invisible identity of Peola is characterized by a far more straightforwardness than the 1959 version. Sirk’s translation of the book is expressed through the use of metaphors.

### 4.1.1 Stahl’s visualization

Courtney suggests that the “inflammable image of the tragic mulatto came in the unequivocal image of her mother (Courtney 6).” The following scene is a perfect illustration of her suggestion. On a stormy day, Delilah goes to school to bring her daughter a pair of rubbers and a coat so the latter will not be soaking wet when she arrives home. Up until that moment everyone believed Peola to be white as there was nothing visible in her appearance stating the opposite. The teacher verifies this when Delilah arrives: “There are no colored children in my class room.” (32 min). But from the moment mother and daughter are brought together in front of the camera, the racial identity of the little mulatto girl is established. The visible relationship with her mother undermines her performance as a white girl.

Stahl focuses on the juxtaposition of Peola and her authentic black mother. Similar to the traditional Hollywood techniques used for depicting race, Stahl’s emphasis lies on the imagery of the skin color. During one scene the troubled and troubling visualization of the tragic mulatto becomes visual by the
use of mirrors. Doane argues that a mirror is always a proper representation of its referent (Doane 1987 288). During the party at Bea’s house, Delilah asks what her baby wants. Responding to her mother’s question, Peola protests, “I want to be white, like I look”. “Look at me,” she demands of her mother and the audience, “Am I not white? Isn’t that a white girl there?” (45 min 30) (Fig. 6a). No sooner has this speech begun or the camera moves and includes Delilah in the shot, leaving the mirror out of the frame (Fig. 6b). If Peola would be facing the mirror on her own then the question she asks would seem just. But now, with her mother hovering over the light skinned girl, the white reflection in the mirror is haunted. In a way, it reflects who Peola is and who she wants to be. Courtney points out how, standing in a rhymed posture, the dark mother’s body roughly mimes the daughter’s stance, as do the lines and shapes of the women’s dress and hair (Courtney 13).

She continues by suggesting how the visible differences in this scene between the women seem to narrow considerably in the one that follows it. Later that same evening, Delilah finds the distraught Peola lying on her bed. Delilah answers her daughter’s previously asked question with a speech in which she attempt to encourage Peola in accepting her blackness: “Ain’t nothing to be ashamed of, darling dear. [...] Go amongst your own. Quit battling. [...] He made you black honey, don’t be telling him his business... Accept it honey (59 min).” Stahl utilizes visual efforts to emphasize Delilah’s speech. Because of the dark lighting Peola’s skin has darkened considerably compared to the earlier scene. The distance which used to be present between the two bodies is now gradually closed, resulting into a maternal embrace hiding Peola’s face and skin behind and within her mother (Courtney 14). The union between the two is now complete (Fig 7). The film’s scheme to illustrate the racial identity as visual as possible is now complete.

It is interesting to remark that the film never permits a similar comparing shot between Peola and Bea. Although the former resembles the latter more and more when it comes to clothing style (see chapter 2), the camera always focuses on framing and reframing the black mother and her daughter. A unique moment when they are portrayed together, without the image of Delilah in the back, is
almost at the end of the film. But in this shot Peola has her back to the camera and we only see Bea, making any comparison impossible (Fig. 8). Even at the very end, after Delilah’s death, the film does not take the risk of placing Peola in the same frame as Bea. Instead, it is Susie who tells us the news that Peola has agreed to return to her negro education (Courtney 14). Thus, the film cinematically restricts the visualization of Peola’s ‘white’ appearance as it constantly situates the girl in a colored identification frame.

Even when she is passing as a white girl, the film refuses to let Peola be visualized as a white girl. The scene opens with a shot of Peola gazing into the restaurant with a smile on her face. This picture is interrupted as we see Delilah arriving outside the restaurant. The film then puts the two together in a frame, separated by a window (Fig. 9). The window serves a medium of reflection. While Delilah is looking through the window to take a closer look at her daughter, her identity is transported onto her daughter. Unaware of this process, Peola is no longer passing; her colored identity is established again.

### 4.1.2 Sirk and the Mise-en-Scène

While Stahl’s film exemplifies clarity of its enactments and a straightforwardness of his staging, Sirk’s visualization of the racial identity is less clear-cut and more embedded in the use of metaphors. Sirk’s use of the mise–en–scène to formulate the invisible identity of Sarah Jane encourages, as Elsaesser calls it, a conscious use of style-as-meaning. Very often this type of scene does not seem to advance the plot, rather, it gives motivation to the emotional layer which cannot be expressed that easily. It is in this tradition we have to situate the following examples.

Courtney argues that Hollywood cinema is particularly invested, and suited to, shifting the meaning of racial identity from a discourse organized around ‘blood’, to one more heavily dependent on visual
discourse of skin, color, and bodily image (Courtney 2). With *Imitation of Life*, however, we can observe a contrasting evolution. While Stahl focused primarily on the notion of skin and color, as seen before, Sirk also makes an effort to visualize the much debated differences of blood. When Lora arrives home from a terrible meeting with Mr. Loomis, she finds her daughter with a bandage around her wrist. Annie explains to her that it was all just an experiment: “After class, one of the kids said that Negro blood was different. So later this evening, Sarah Jane wanted to compare her blood with Susie’s (30 min 35).” This scene illustrates the beliefs that blood of people of color is different and inferior to that of white people (Zackdonik 24). Sirk tried to make this invisible myth a part of the visual world. However, this type of scene proves to be an incompetent technique to bring Sarah Jane’s racial features to the foreground. The spectator is only left with the assumption that the black girl’s blood is different than Susie’s. There is no visual evidence. Thus, Sirk is forced to change his strategy.

Stahl’s essential technique for visualizing Peola’s racial identity consists out of juxtaposing Peola and her stereotypical mammy. Of course, Sirk does this as well, as we can see during the opening scene at the beach. We see two girls playing, and never do we ask ourselves whether it could be possible that one of them is colored, although Susie does have a fairer complexion than Sarah Jane. However, the latter receives her racial identity at the end of this scene. When both families say goodbye the frame is divided. One side of the frame holds the Turner family while on the other side we see Annie embracing the little Sarah Jane. From this moment on, it will be problematic, if not impossible, for Sarah Jane to throw off this established identity.

Furthermore, Sirk utilizes the mise-en-scene very often on a metaphorical level. When Lora shows Annie her sleeping place for the evening, Sarah Jane and Susie are playing in the latter’s room. At first sight, this scene looks like a harmless portrayal of two girls enjoying themselves. However, the racial theme of the film shines through in this scene. When Susie offers Sarah Jane her black doll Nancy, the little black girl protests, “I want that one.”, pointing to the white doll Susie is holding (8
Afraid of the label the first toy would project on her, Sarah Jane fiercely grasps the white doll claiming she does not want the black one. Sirk is known for his use of significant objects or things, extracted from the everyday life and placed within the mise-en-scène. They help the audience decipher the image and the meaning behind it (Mulvey 2005; 232). Here, a racial meaning is given to the doll. It works as a metaphorical mirror, projecting its colored features unto Sarah Jane. As Elsaesser points out: “In Sirk, of course, they [the characters] are locked into a universe of real and metaphoric mirrors (Elsaesser 56).” This scene is made even stronger when immediately after the incident Sarah Jane manifest against her mother. Still holding the colored doll she insists: “I don’t want to live at the back. Why do we always have to live at the back? (8 min 40)”

A similar strategy is applied in the following scene. Asked by her mother, Sarah Jane goes and brings a tray with food to Lora. When Sarah Jane enters the living room, however, we witness a radical performance of the girl as a stereotypical Southern Mammy-caricature. With her bright clothing and Southern accent Sarah Jane wants to prove to Lora that she can be colored (70 min 19). This scene allows the spectator an insight in to the interior world of the mulatto girl. Fed up with the demands of everyone to be colored, Sarah Jane ventilates her emotions in this performance. Her performance is directed towards Lora. The girl’s staging illustrates that she can be colored but it is also a reaction to the assumption that just because she has a black heritage she should also fulfill the role of a servant, like her mother. This could be a plausible explanation why she makes her theatrical entrance, while Lora is having a business meeting concerning her future film project. It is as if Sarah Jane wants to demonstrate that her performance talent is as good, if not better, than that of Lora.

This scene is drenched in irony. On the one hand, it uncovers the true themes of the film which are continuously suppressed. The relation between Lora and Annie is defined by a mutual friendship. However, Sarah Jane’s performance depicts Lora as nothing more than a traditional servant holder. She single-handedly breaks the illusion the film portrays. On the other hand, her heightened performance does also have an opposite effect. Through her performance Sarah Jane wanted to
illustrate that being colored is nothing more than a staging for her. But it is because of the exaggerated staging that it becomes difficult to separate the mulatto girl from her role. The following scene continues this observation. When Lora confronts Sarah Jane with her action we see a difference in lighting. A bright light emphasizes the whiteness of Lora’s features while Sarah Jane is kept in a shaded light, shadowing her with a darker tone. When Annie is included in the frame, the resemblance between mother and daughter is made distinctively clear.

4.2 The Funeral

From chapter 2 we can conclude that this final mise-en-scene has a key role in the story. It carries an enormous emotional and symbolical power. Heung points out that just like the final scene in Stella Dallas, a simultaneous eradication and glorification of the mother of color occurs (Heung 37). This final scene evidently functions to glorify her sacrificial act of motherly love and to efface the abstract ideal of motherly sacrifice she had become. Unlike the novel’s version, it operates to finally lay the subversive energy of Peola/Sarah Jane to rest and to reinstate Delilah/Annie as the emotional and ideological center of the film. In neither adaptation did the mother of color express any form onfambition, except this one time. In Sirk, Annie, before her death, tells Lora: “I wanna go the way I planned, especially the four horses … and a band playing. No mourning... but proud and high stepping, like I was gone to glory. [...] I’m getting on, and [a big funeral is] the one thing I’ve always wanted to splurge on. I really want it elegant (120min).” When Bea offers Delilah a twenty percent share of the pancake business, the latter refuses the present, but adds that she “does hanker for a good funeral (Deel 4 9min 30).”

In this chapter, I would like to examine how the aesthetic approach of this funeral scene accomplished to visualize the character of the black mother who, during the film, was always placed in the background, as a spectacle. Heung notes that the funeral is in fact an occasion for a public
spectacle rivaling one of Lora’s or Peola’s/ Sarah Jane’s theatrical triumphs. Could we then see this sequence as the ultimate evidence of Delilah’s/Annie’s authenticity? Does the one who stayed loyal to her racial identity finally triumph? Before I begin my analysis, I would like to elaborate on the black mother’s status of invisibility during the film.

4.2.1 Delilah/ Annie and the trope of invisibility

In both film adaptation and the novel the racial relationships become condensed with questions of visibility and invisibility: the white woman of spectacle and success and the woman of color whose labor produces the other woman’s achievements. Although Annie gradually emerges as the central figure in Sirk’s adaptation she has always been the woman behind Lora. Both as a woman of color and as a worker she cannot achieve the same status of ‘spectacle’ as Lora. At the beginning, it is Annie’s labor and nurturing that initiates Lora’s success as a Broadway actress, and then, it is the black maid’s unconditional care that sustains Lora’s ascent to stardom. Hence, it can be said that Lora’s production of herself as a star is painted on the surface of Annie’s work as a maid, an effort that goes unnoticed by Annie’s mistress (Mulvey 1998; 131). This unbalanced relationship is emphasized through the visualization of both characters. The film opens in Coney Island where we are introduced to the character of Lora. Dressed in a white floating dress she pushes herself through the crowd. Mulvey describes Lora here as an expression of iconic sexual femininity. Later we are introduced to Annie, who looks rather pale, in her dark and conservative clothes, next to Lora (Mulvey 2005; 234). Mulvey demonstrates that as Lora goes, as she says, ‘up and up’, the white mother becomes on the screen whiter and whiter, more and more invested in appearance as if she were a goddess almost (Mulvey 1994; 131). Compared to her mistress, Annie’s presence is rather dull and conservative. For the greater part of the film she is dressed in dark colors.
Compared to Annie, Delilah is less pushed in the direction of invisibility. She is a public icon known by the people as the face of ‘Aunt Delilah’s Pancakes’. However, the distinction between the woman of color and her white mistress is still fully present. When Bea organizes a business related party it is she who entertains the guests while Delilah symbolically remains at the private quarters, completely invisible for the quests. Like Lora, the more Bea becomes successful the more she becomes a figure of spectacle. A process that is visual in her clothing style. At the beginning, the film projected the image of a middle class woman with a simple style of dressing, but as the narrative continues Bea appears more frequently in silk colored shiny gowns and heavily decorated coats. Similar to Annie, Delilah is visualized in far more simple and plain gown.

Following Mulvey’s course of thinking, both film adaptations demonstrate how the performance of both white women – be it the role of a successful business woman or of a famous actress - is built on the disavowal of the black women’s labor which the pictures subtly masquerade under the label of genuine friendship (Mulvey 1994; 131).

4.2.2 The funeral as spectacle

As already mentioned, this scene is an important element in the films’ strive for closure and is based on the central metaphor of the film, that of imitation (Heung 37). Both women wanted a grand and glorious funeral. In a way, they seem to regard this occasion as a public spectacle where they can enjoy the glory which has been denied during their lives. Although the funeral scene is similar in both film adaptations, there are still some significant differences.

In both film adaptations, the world which has been depicted throughout the entire duration of the film has been reversed. As the previous chapter illustrates, both Lora and Miss Bea were characterized through their fine white and decorative clothing. Delilah and Annie, on the other hand, contrasted the white ladies with their rather plain and conservative clothing. As a result, the funeral
reverses the conditions of the black mother’s working life. In Stahl’s adaptation, Delilah is brought outside in a beautifully decorated white coffin while two rows of colored men raise their swords to salute her. Her bright carriage stands out in a crowd completely dressed in black, Delilah’s color. A similar mise-en-scène takes place in Sirk’s adaptation. Where both mothers of color seem to have had a humble life-style and worked without any form of monetary value, the grand spectacle of this scene serves as a compensation for their modest life. Where they served their white mistresses without any complaint, now they are among their own as the crowd is dressed in the colors of both women, that of black (Heung 36). Even Lora’s habitual white garments are replaced by the color of mourning, making her part of the vast crowd. Instead, Annie has taken her place as the spectacle. It is interesting to note that Sarah Jane’s recognition of her mother and of her racial identity is not only depicted through her humiliating scene at the funeral, but also via her clothing style. Similar to Lora, her garment has toned down and is doused in the color black. This is similar to the ending scene of *Stella Dallas*, where Stella is looking in at the wedding ceremony of her daughter. Throughout the film Stella tried to be a member of the upper class, imitating their style. However, instead of looking like a lady, she was dressed in overly decorated gowns. At the end of the film, we see Stella in a toned down and simple gown, illustrating her acceptance of her place in society and finally looking like a good mother should.

Delilah’s and Annie’s funeral as a public spectacle parallels the various performances of Peola, Lora and Sarah Jane. By ‘performing’ in a grand funeral, Delilah, on the one hand, rivals with her daughter who is putting on the performance of her life trying to pass as white; Annie, on the other hand, parallels with the various performances by Sarah Jane and the theatrical triumphs by Lora. However, unlike the anonymous audiences at Lora’s staging or the rather vague male caricatures at Sarah Jane’s vaudeville acts, the audiences at both funerals are seen more frontal and at closer range (Heung 37). The audiences collectively symbolize a distinctive identity of both Delilah’s and Annie’s black community (Heung 36). However, Sirk adds a remarkable element to the funeral which Stahl does not. Among Annie’s community of color we are able to individually identify certain characters.
Annie came in contact with during the film. We recognize Lora’s agent Loomis, the director David Edwards and even the milk man from Lora’s old flat, Mr. Mckenny. This seems strange as the 1934 adaptation portrays Delilah as a national symbol of the black community. But as Caputi argues, she had never even been in touch with her own community (Caputi 703). Although Annie’s concerns and troubles are displayed rather openly in the film, there is one element we did not know yet. When Lora and Annie are talking about the latter’s funeral, Lora makes a strange remark, “It never occurred to me you had any friends (71min).” To Lora’s surprise Annie tells her she knows lots of people, as she belongs to the Baptist’s group and several lodges as well. Although she lived an anonymous life, Annie still had the ability to build a large and close friend base. Lora, on the other hand, who craved for attention and public recognition seemed to push her inner circle only further away, first Steve and then her daughter. Thus, all the various bystanders saluting Annie’s carriage passing by have a concrete dimension which the audiences of Sarah Jane and Lora lack (Heung 38).

Furthermore, the way the funeral scene is shot also contributes to the meaning. In both adaptations, most of the scenes take place indoors; but not this final scene. The exterior location and the use of the panoramic high camera angles create the effect of watching a pseudo-documentary. As Heung suggests, the characters are constantly seen through narrow doorways and corridors, or framed within windows or mirrors frames (Heung 38). The unconfined exterior scene provides a commentary on the ‘unreal’ existence of the others. Both Annie and Delilah are brought into liberation through a more authentic space, illustrating their own authenticity and absolving them from any suggestion of imitation (Heung 38). Sirk pushes this even further. His final scene contains two shots from inside a store (Fig.). These visualizations stand in great contrast with the rest of the film. While the characters in the film utilize each other as surrogates and mirror reflections, these two shots allow a view on the world rather than a mirrored reflection (Hueng 37). Finally, Sirk brings in the famous singer Mahalia Jackson. Although her relation to Annie remains covered, her performance gives a dimension to the scene “as something other than an imitation (Heung 38).
The final scene of both film versions is entirely constructed around the celebration of the black mother. The aesthetics – the use of color, the exterior open spaces – all serve to acknowledge Delilah/Annie her truthful status as an authentic person. Delilah can finally shed the image of Aunt Jemima, which was imposed on her by Bea. We see her now as a true, authentic character who did not play a role. The same is true for the character of Annie, throughout the film, she has been represented as the only main character who does not fall victim to imitation and role-playing. Her funeral procession is the crown on her authentic life style. It duplicates the meaning of her life and can be placed directly against the inauthentic performances of Sarah Jane and Lora. Both adaptations succeeded in letting the black mother triumph; she finally rises from her place in the background and at the same time wins back the love of her daughter. In Sirk’s adaptation, Annie finally also outshines Lora.

4.3 Conclusion

Stahl pictures the invisible characteristic of race with a straightforwardness typical for the 1930s. He always makes sure Peola and Delilah are pictured together in the same frame. Sirk, however, uses a technique that is much more complex. His mis-en-scènes are characterized by the use of metaphors and irony. Both directors finally place the black mother in the center of the spectacle at her funeral. Delilah and Annie are praised for their resistance against the metaphor of imitation. It is ironical that everything falls in place for the mother of color at her own funeral. It is only in death that the society allows her relations to be publically known. Here, we clearly see the key feature of melodrama in its compulsion to reconcile the irreconcilable. Now, the most important person returns to her again, but she will never be able to enjoy it. Here, the film adaptations feel the urge to set something straight but in a way, it is too late.
In my introduction, several questions were posed. The general statement was whether melodrama is able to touch upon serious themes like the subject of race. To illustrate this, I focused on three basic questions: How does *Imitation of Life* deal with the conflict of race? Do these treatments plead for any social change? And finally, is there a significant change in the approach of the problematic 20 years after the original and first remake came on the market?

*Imitation of Life* deals with the conflict of race as follows. All three version show us an ideal situation of a white woman and her daughter living together with a black mother and her child. At first sight, the idealized situation seems to work. However, a closer analysis shows the underlying troubles in their own respective family. It is only in Stahl’s adaptation that we witness a certain spatial segregation between the two mothers. But this is covered up by a veil of friendship. This is not the case in the original version and Sirk’s adaptation. All three do portray the black mother as a stereotypical mammy figure, but we can clearly see in the 1959 adaptation a toning down of this stereotypical character. From this we can conclude that the racial connotation diminishes in time. Therefore, the character of the tragic mulatto is forced to embody the racial conflict entirely on her own. Sirk is a lot more extreme in his portrayal of this figure. While Peola wants the same treatment of respect and privileges of a white girl, Sarah Jane is prepared to sacrifice her self-respect to be white. She even sells her sexuality to receive a white identity. The racial conflict in Sirk’s adaptation has also been depicted by mise-en-scènes, on a metaphorical level. Furthermore, all three girls want to get rid of any connotation with being black and are prepared to push their own mother, the marker of their black identity, away. Even when they realize they are causing their mother so much pain.
The plead for social change is obvious throughout the narratives. In the novel, Peola is a hardworking girl, but is condemned because of her black roots. The biggest plead for social change, is that Peola succeeds in the end, so the racial stereotype of the inferiority of African Americans has been broken. We could compare this with a blind racist, who does not know he’s talking to an African American, and finds it a very pleasant and interesting conversation. If the man had known he was talking to a person of color, he would have walked away instantly. Sirk follows Hurst in her manifest and criticizes both white and black behavior. But he delivers the viewer an open ending, with which he leaves a space for a better future. We don't know what the future will hold for Sarah Jane, but there is still hope. We can conclude that Hurst and Sirk do not resolve the dilemma’s posed during the narrative but they do not impose their own personal view on the situation. Stahl on the other hand, does not let Peola pass for white. But he gives Delilah the chance of stepping out of her domestic servitude with the 20% offered by Bea. Stahl, in contrast to Hurst and Sirk, chooses for closure. The films portray a domestic servant with no visible evidence of a life outside her commitment to the white family. The funeral scene, however, shows us the exact opposite. Apparently Delilah and Annie, had been in touch with their community all the time. This is emphasized in Sirk’s adaptation where Laura is surprised by how many friends Annie has. The invisible life of their servant comes to show.

Finally we can conclude that there is a significant difference between the first two versions and that of Sirk, twenty years later. Stahl and Hurst centralize their story around an emerging businesswoman, following the ideology of the thirties, which stated the upcoming of the first career women. Therefore Peola’s manifest is placed on the level of social equality. Sirk made his film in an society where there were already several women who had “made it”. Therefore Sarah Jane needs another way of expressing and distinguishing herself from the colored community. She takes the easy way out, namely she uses an extreme form of femininity.

It is quite clear now that melodrama is not just a vehicle for the low cultural amusement. It is very much a medium to address sensitive subjects like race and gender issues. As my analysis showed, not
only has melodrama a way of visualizing the problematic, but it can also be a forum for critique. As Sirk pointed out: “the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road.” (Mulvey 1989; 40).
Appendix
Chapter 2

Fig. 1a

Fig. 1b
Chapter 4

Fig. 5c

Fig. 6a
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