

# Imitation of Life (1959)

By Matthew Kennedy

Universal Pictures was no stranger to remakes. In the 1950s, the studio revisited "Magnificent Obsession," "The Spoilers," and "My Man Godfrey," among others. Studio head Edward Muhl wasn't sure another "Imitation of Life," first filmed in 1934 (National Film Registry 2005 inductee), would fly in the late '50s until producer Ross Hunter suggested Lana Turner as the star. She had recently been embroiled in a scandal lurid even by Hollywood standards, her Mafioso boyfriend Johnny Stompanato fatally stabbed by her under-aged daughter. While other studios treated her like radioactive waste, Universal capitalized on Turner's volatile tabloid-headline life. On the first day of shooting, with press and flash bulbs everywhere, she overcame jitters and carried herself regally. She accepted floral bouquets and well wishes, then got to work and would take no questions regarding the killing. The studio backed her with lavish treatment befitting her status as an old school movie star, reportedly giving her the most luxurious trailer in Universal's history.

Faint echoes are heard between the public and private Turner in "Imitation of Life." The story began as a 1933 Fannie Hurst novel about the troubled relationships between two pairs of mothers and daughters, one black and one white. While Hunter combed over the source material, and even toyed with transferring it into a Broadway musical, director Douglas Sirk conceptualized without reading the book or seeing the original film. Key changes were made in transferring it to screen a second time. In the novel and first film, the two mothers shared a food business, but now the story was moved to the decidedly more glamorous world of New York theater, where white Lora (Turner) begins as a struggling actress and black Annie (Juanita Moore) remains her friend and maid. In this version there is no opportunity for Annie to break from her subservient role, a point combining well with Sirk's commentary on America's entrenched racial hierarchies.

Lora finds success as an actress, but the cost is a loving relationship with her daughter Susie, played by popular blonde teen star Sandra Dee. Complicating their story is John Gavin, a square-jawed leading man of the Rock Hudson mold playing Lora's love interest and the object of Susie's girlhood crush. Their story is the stuff of more conventional movie soap operas, though the beautiful people involved

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BEST-SELLING NOVEL OF  
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LANA TURNER  
JOHN GAVIN

*Imitation  
of Life*  
in Eastman COLOR

CO-STARRING  
SANDRA DEE  
DAN O'HERLIHY  
SUSAN KOHNER  
ROBERT ALDA  
WITH  
JUANITA MOORE  
MAHALIA JACKSON  
singing "Trouble of the World"

HEAR  
EARL GRANT  
sing "Imitation of Life"

Screenplay by ELEANORE GRIFFIN and ALLAN SCOTT  
Directed by DOUGLAS SIRK  
Produced by ROSS HUNTER

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"You've given me everything a mother could, but the thing I wanted most ... your love!"

"I'll get the things I want out of life... one way— or another. From one man— or another!"

"The color line won't stop me, Ma! I look, feel, think white ... and I'm going to marry white!"

This ad appeared in the April 1959 edition of Modern Screen magazine. Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

suffer in high style with plush décor, Jean Louis décolletage, and Laykin et Cie jewels appraised at a million dollars.

The parallel relationship of Annie and her light-skinned daughter Sarah Jane (a galvanizing Susan Kohner) is made more compelling by explorations of race and identity. Sarah Jane can pass as white, and she wastes no time rejecting her dark-skinned

mother and lunging at racial privilege. The film does not condemn Sarah Jane for her choices. At every turn, we see her limitations should she own her identity in racist America. Her imitation of life creates the film's most emotionally brutalizing moments, and sets into motion a narrative ending of pure heart-ache. The easily cheapened genre of melodrama rises here to Greek heights of catharsis.

Though Lora and Annie behave as dear and trusted friends, there is the ever-present reality of their inequality. One writes checks to the other; one receives the glory and attention while the other toils in the shadows. The film is suffused with a quiet sadness for the unyielding social divisions in American life. In Moore's subtly complex performance, Annie becomes the heart of the film. Her quiet stoicism is shattered not by the cruelties of racism – after all, she lives with that every day - but by her daughter's rejection of her birth identity.

The erudite Sirk, a German-born man who escaped the Nazi regime with his Jewish wife in 1937, was an outsider looking in with a keen eye for detail.

"'Imitation of Life' is a piece of social criticism – of both white and black," he said. "You can't escape what you are.... I tried to make it into a picture of social consciousness – not only of a white social consciousness, but of a Negro one, too. Both white and black are leading imitated lives... There is a wonderful expression: seeing through a glass darkly. Everything, even life, is inevitably removed from you. You can't reach, or touch, the real. You just see reflections. If you try to grasp happiness itself your fingers only meet glass. It's hopeless."

Hunter and Sirk made a succession of finely wrought dramas at Universal in the 1950s, including "Magnificent Obsession," "All That Heaven Allows" (National Film Registry 1995 inductee), and "There's Always Tomorrow." They were hits with audiences but dismissed by critics, and now esteemed for their

masterful play of controlled emotions and visual symbolism. Hunter and Sirk's temperamental and aesthetic differences complimented and strengthened their collaborations. Hunter favored a gauzy lens, while Sirk embedded their films with layered commentary on life's vicissitudes. Sirk was uneasy with the grand ending of "Imitation of Life," which approaches but avoids bathos. Not Hunter, who was rapturous and vindicated by audience response. For him, the racial themes in "Imitation of Life" served not to raise political consciousness, but to generate a river of tears. "Good God," a theater owner wired to him, "even strong men are crying."

"Imitation of Life" became one of the biggest hits in Universal's history. Sirk was bombarded with offers, but he retired instead. "In my mind I guess I was leaving Hollywood, yes, even before I made the picture," he said. "I had had enough." "Imitation of Life" is arguably his highest masterpiece. The pain and futility of pretending, the fraud of upward mobility, the rejection of a mother's love, and the walking hell of unresolved regret are all brilliantly essayed. The specifics of "Imitation of Life" expand to become a drama we live in one form or another every day.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Matthew Kennedy is the author of four books on Hollywood history: Marie Dressler: A Biography, Edmund Goulding's Dark Victory: Hollywood's Genius Bad Boy, Joan Blondell: A Life Between Takes, and Roadshow! The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s. He has contributed articles to The San Francisco Silent Film Festival and Turner Classic Movies Film Festival program books. He has also hosted film retrospectives based on his books at the Museum of Modern Art and Pacific Film Archive.*