

## Racism in a Women's World: an Analysis of *Imitation of Life*

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The 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, directed by John M. Stahl, is an extremely progressive film for its time period. The four main characters are all women, with two of them being women of color, and the storyline follows the two main characters as they build a wildly successful business from the ground up. Bea and Delilah may triumph together as business partners, but in spite of this they are never really on equal footing. Their daughters, Jessie and Peola, are afforded the same opportunities because of their mothers' success, but the girls still lead lives that are vastly different in terms of success, happiness, and self-fulfillment. These differences can be attributed to race, and the film brings to light important racial issues by mirroring Bea with Delilah and Jessie with Peola in order to examine the relationships between them. By placing black women against a backdrop of white women in the same situations, the film makes the differences between them tremendously clear.

One of the early scenes in the film involves Bea talking to a man about her vision of how she wants her restaurant to be set up. She brings Delilah along with her. The two women appear as stark opposites: Bea is white while Delilah is black; Bea is very nicely dressed, while Delilah wears an ill-fitting dress and an apron; Bea speaks quickly in her clever attempts to manipulate the workmen, while Delilah speaks slowly and softly. As Bea begins to describe the sign she wants painted for the store, she catches sight of Delilah and makes her pose for the painter, saying, "Smile... a great big one... turn to the right, now hold it" (*Imitation of Life*). In today's culture, there is a lot of controversy about asking a woman to smile, as some think of it as a part of rape culture in that women are always expected to look happy and pretty, no matter what they might be feeling inside.

While this moment is certainly uncomfortable for this reason, it's made even more so by the clear comparison being made between Delilah and minstrelsy. Blackface minstrelsy by its very definition seeks to make the black character appear stupid, comical, and frivolous, her only purpose that of entertaining the audience. There is obvious inherent racism in minstrelsy, and we see this same racism being called to the viewer's attention in this scene. Bea, a white woman, has decided to open a business using Delilah's recipe without so much as asking her opinion, and now she is demanding that Delilah pose like a minstrel for her company logo. Bea then proceeds to laugh at Delilah's posing just as white audiences once laughed at minstrel shows. What is more, all of Bea's money will be made from selling products branded with this exploitative image of a woman whom she professes as her friend. Bea says she wants to run the business with Delilah as her partner, but it is clear that they are far from equal.

The relationship between Bea and Delilah continues to be marked by the effects of minstrelsy as the film moves forward. In the scene where Elmer and Bea have Delilah sign an incorporation contract, further evidence of exploitation and minstrelsy is rampant. The scene opens with Elmer exclaiming, "I don't know why I bother about all this... you tell her" (*Imitation of Life*), clearly frustrated with trying and failing to explain the contract to Delilah. This mostly comes off as merely rude, but when Bea takes over, she immediately starts talking to Delilah in a slow, high-pitched voice, as if to a child. With Delilah being a black housekeeper, it is clear that both Elmer and Bea expect Delilah to have below average intelligence, thus rendering her incapable of understanding.

On the contrary, Delilah is inquisitive and asks Bea questions about the contract, nodding along as she follows Bea's answers. It seems to the viewer that Delilah has no trouble understanding the situation, and that it is merely her reluctance to use their potential earnings to

move into a different house from Bea that is holding her back from signing. Elmer and Bea, however, are unable to see any reason for Delilah's decision not to accept the cash besides her stupidity and lack of understanding. Bea calls Delilah "hopeless," to which Elmer replies, "I could have told you that," and they both have a laugh at Delilah's expense, echoing the minstrelsy from the previously discussed scene (*Imitation of Life*). It is highly immoral that they have Delilah sign despite this; by making her sign a contract that they believe she does not fully understand, Elmer and Bea are setting Delilah up for further exploitation. This would likely not have happened if they could see past their racial blinders to Delilah's true thoughts.

The same racial structures that define the relationship between Bea and Delilah are also evident in Jessie's and Peola's friendship. The girls are painted as the best of friends. While they joke and quiz each other on world capitals in one scene, their mothers look on fondly and Delilah says, "They sure do like each other, those two" (*Imitation of Life*). They are dressed similarly in light colored dresses, and they go to the same school because Peola is very light-skinned and able to pass for white. Soon after the girls depart for school, however, Peola comes running back in tears because Jessie called her black. Sobbing in her mother's arms, Peola cries, "It's because you're black! You make me black! I'm not black, I won't be black!" (*Imitation of Life*). Peola's distress is understandable but disturbing. For all intents and purposes, Jessie and Peola are mirrored based on their clothing and light skin, and they both appear white. It's difficult for any child to feel different, however, and being black was not an easy thing in 1930s society. On the other hand, Peola's intense hatred of her race is troubling. She is clearly a victim of internalized racism, and this causes her to lash out at her mother and deny her race at every opportunity.

When Bea confronts Jessie about the incident, asking her how she could say "such a mean, cruel thing to Peola," Jessie replies with, "I didn't mean anything" (*Imitation of Life*). The

context of the scene proves Jessie's answer false. Jessie does not look at all troubled about the distress she has caused, and merely stands by impassively watching Peola cry. She makes no attempt to apologize for upsetting her friend, even when her mother tells her to do so, suggesting that Jessie feels no remorse. This could be because she does not think of calling Peola what she is as an insult, but it is more likely that Jessie knew exactly what she was doing. The girls seem much more aware of racial structures in their relationship than their mothers are. We can see this in Peola's devastated reaction to being called black, which shows that she perceives this as an insult based on black people being treated unequally in society. Even as a child, Peola instinctively knows that society tells us it is better to be white.

We can also see evidence of this knowledge in Jessie. As the girls leave for school, Peola can be heard teasing Jessie about answering a question incorrectly, and a laughing Bea exclaims, "Peola's smarter than Jessie!" (*Imitation of Life*). It is very possible that Jessie, upset by Peola's teasing and her mother's comment, took her anger out on Peola by calling her black. If this is true, it is obvious that Jessie knew her comment was hurtful because she is as aware of society's unequal treatment of black people as Peola is. The main difference is that Peola suffers from this inequality, while Jessie benefits from it. The scene ends with Delilah's lament of, "I don't know where the blame lies" (*Imitation of Life*), showcasing her helplessness to defend her daughter from what is hurting her because being black is something Peola cannot change. As Delilah says this, she is dressed exactly like the neon sign image of herself, with the only difference being that the neon sign smiles, while the real life Delilah looks incredibly sad.

The differences between Jessie and Peola only become more apparent as they age. At home as young adults, Jessie is happy and bubbly as she laughs with her mother and tells tales of her experiences at school. Peola, on the other hand, appears extremely depressed, and it is made

clear that this is due to her lifelong battle to reconcile her race and her appearance. As she looks at herself in a mirror, she says to her mother, “I’m sick and tired of [being black]... I want to be white, like I look. Look at me; am I not white? Isn’t that a white girl there?” (*Imitation of Life*). Her mother answers with, “We’ve had it out so many times. Can’t you get it out of your head?” (*Imitation of Life*), showing that they have had this conversation many times over and Peola has never been able to find an answer that satisfies her. This is, of course, because what she wants is to be white, and this will always be impossible. The viewer can no longer pretend that Jessie and Peola are afforded the same opportunities like it appeared when they were young; the difference in their levels of happiness and fulfillment as adults is too great. Peola even goes so far as to disown her mother, saying, “You don’t know what it is to be black and look white. I can’t go on like this any longer” (*Imitation of Life*) before leaving to live as white. She intends never to see her mother again, whereas Jessie and Bea can continue to be happy together because no racial issues divide them.

In conclusion, the film self-consciously brings racial structures of society in the 1930s to light through the relationships between its characters. Bea and Delilah are partners in business, but Delilah faces challenges based on race that Bea does not even think about. Bea is haunted by her unconscious racism after Delilah’s death, but even she is not able to fully comprehend her own feelings of guilt because she is blind to the issues of race that dogged her friendship with Delilah. Jessie and Peola are far more aware of racial issues than their mothers, but this awareness does not make Jessie more compassionate or make Peola hate herself any less. If their knowledge does anything it is to highlight the differences between them even more starkly than the film highlights the differences between Bea and Delilah. The film’s goal in portraying blatant racism is not to paint Bea or Jessie as villains, but to show how similar black and white people

can be underneath the color of their skin. Bea represents white society in that both are riddled with unconscious racism, and calling attention to racist structures in this way is an attempt to portray Delilah and Peola as innocent victims of something that society can and should change.

## Works Cited

*Imitation of Life*. Dir. John M. Stahl. Perf. Claudette Colbert, Warren William, and Louise Beavers. Universal Pictures, 1934. Web.