**Imitation of Life (1959 film)**

*Imitation of Life* is a 1959 American romantic drama film directed by Douglas Sirk, produced by Ross Hunter and released by Universal International. It was Sirk's final Hollywood film and dealt with issues of race, class and gender. *Imitation of Life* is the second film adaptation of Fannie Hurst's novel of the same name; the first, directed by John M. Stahl, was released in 1934.

The film's top-billed stars are Lana Turner and John Gavin, and the cast also features Sandra Dee, Dan O’Herlihy, Susan Kohner, Robert Alda and Juanita Moore. Kohner and Moore received Academy Award nominations for their performances. Gospel music star Mahalia Jackson appears as a church choir soloist.

In 2015, the United States Library of Congress selected *Imitation of Life* for preservation in the National Film Registry, finding it "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" just like the original 1934 film.[4]

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**Plot**

In 1947, widow Lora Meredith (Lana Turner) dreams of becoming a famous Broadway actress. Losing track of her young daughter Susie at the beach (portrayed as a child by Terry Burnham), she asks a stranger named Steve Archer (John Gavin) to help her find the girl. Susie is found and looked after by Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore), a black single mother who also has a daughter, Sarah Jane (portrayed as a child by Karin Dicker), who is about Susie's age. Sarah Jane inherited her father's fair skin and can pass for white.
She does this with fierce zeal and fervor, taking advantage of her European heritage and features. In return for Annie's kindness, Lora temporarily takes in Annie and her daughter. Annie persuades Lora to let her stay and look after the household, so that the widow can pursue an acting career.

With struggles along the way, Lora becomes a star of stage comedies, with Allen Loomis (Robert Alda) as her agent and David Edwards (Dan O'Herlihy) as her chief playwright. Although Lora had begun a relationship with Steve Archer, the stranger she met at the beach, their courtship falls apart because he does not want her to be a star. Lora's concentration on her career prevents her from spending time with her daughter, who sees more of Annie. Annie and Sarah Jane have their own problems, as Sarah Jane is struggling with her mixed-race identity and wants to pass for white because of its privileges in American society in the pre-civil rights era.

Eleven years later, in 1958, Lora is a highly regarded Broadway star living in a luxurious home in New York. Annie continues to live with her, serving as nanny, housekeeper, confidante and best friend. After rejecting David's latest script (and his marriage proposal), Lora takes a role in a dramatic play. At the show's after-party, she meets Steve, whom she has not seen in a decade. The two slowly begin rekindling their relationship, and Steve is reintroduced to Annie and the now-teenaged Susie (Sandra Dee) and Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner). When Lora is signed to star in an Italian motion picture, she leaves Steve to watch after Susie. The teenager develops an unrequited crush on her mother's boyfriend.

Sarah Jane continues to pass as white and begins dating a white boy (Troy Donahue). He beats her in an alleyway after learning she is black. Some time later, she again passes for white to get a job performing at a seedy nightclub, but tells her mother she is working at the library. When Annie learns the truth, she goes to the club to claim her daughter; Sarah Jane is fired. Her rejection of her mother begins taking a physical and mental toll on Annie. When Lora returns from Italy, Sarah Jane has run away from home. She asks Steve to hire a detective to find her. The detective locates Sarah Jane in California, living as a white woman under an assumed name and working as a chorus girl. Annie, becoming weaker and more depressed by the day, flies out to California to see her daughter one last time and say goodbye.

Annie is bedridden upon her return to New York, and Lora and Susie look after her. The issue of Susie's crush on Steve becomes serious when Susie learns that Steve and Lora are to be married. Annie tells Lora of the girl's crush. After a confrontation with her mother, Susie decides to go away to school in Denver, Colorado, to forget about Steve. Not long after Susie leaves, Annie passes away. As she wished, Annie is given a lavish funeral in a large church, complete with a gospel choir, followed by an elaborate traditional funeral procession with brass band and horse-drawn hearse. Just before
the procession sets off, Sarah Jane pushes through the crowd of mourners to throw herself upon her mother's casket, begging forgiveness. Lora takes Sarah Jane to their limousine to join her, Susie, and Steve as the procession slowly travels through the city.

**Cast**

- Lana Turner as Lora Meredith
- Juanita Moore as Annie Johnson
- John Gavin as Steve Archer
- Sandra Dee as Susie, age 16
- Susan Kohner as Sarah Jane, age 16 (singing voice dubbed by Jo Ann Greer)
- Robert Alda as Allen Loomis
- Dan O’Herlihy as David Edwards
- Than Wyenn as Romano
- Karin Dicker as Sarah Jane, age 8
- Terry Burnham as Susie, age 6
- Ann Robinson as Showgirl
- Troy Donahue as Frankie
- Sandra Gould as Annette
- Jack Weston as Tom
- Mahalia Jackson as choir soloist

**History and production**

The plot of the 1959 version of *Imitation of Life* was significantly altered from the original book and the 1934 film version. In the original story, the "Lora" character, Bea Pullman, became successful by commercial production of her maid Delilah's family waffle recipe (the 1934 film version features a family pancake recipe instead of a waffle recipe). As a result, Bea, the white businesswoman, becomes rich. Delilah is offered 20% of the profits, but declines and chooses to remain Bea's dutiful assistant.

Director Douglas Sirk and screenwriters Eleanore Griffin and Allan Scott felt that such a story would not be accepted during the Civil Rights Movement amid milestones, such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and the Montgomery bus boycott, but racial discrimination and inequities was still part of it. The story was altered so that Lora becomes a Broadway star with her own talents, with Annie assisting her by serving as a nanny for Lora's child. Producer Ross Hunter was cannily aware that these plot changes would enable Lana Turner to model an array of glamorous costumes and real jewels, something that would appeal to the female audience at that time. Lana Turner's wardrobe for *Imitation of Life* cost over $1.078 million, making it one of the most expensive in cinema history at that time.[5]

Although many actresses, most of them white,[6] were screen-tested for the Sarah Jane role in the 1959 remake, Susan Kohner, daughter of actress Lupita Tovar, born in Mexico, and Paul Kohner, a Czech Jewish immigrant, won the role.[6] Karin Dicker made her debut in this film as the young Sarah Jane. Noted gospel singer Mahalia Jackson received "presenting" billing for her one scene, performing a version of "Trouble of the World" at Annie's funeral service.

**Release and critical reaction**

*Sirk's* *Imitation of Life* premiered in Chicago on March 17, 1959, followed by Los Angeles on March 20 and New York City on April 17,[2] then Universal put the film into general release on April 30. Though it was not well-reviewed upon its original release and was viewed as inferior to the original 1934 film version – many critics derided the film as a "soap
Imitation of Life was the fourth-most successful motion picture of 1959, grossing $6.4 million. Imitation of Life was Universal-International's top-grossing film that year, and ranked as Universal's most successful film until the release of Thoroughly Modern Millie (1967).

Both Moore and Kohner were nominated for the 1959 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress and the 1959 Golden Globe award for Best Supporting Actress. While neither actress won the Oscar, Kohner won the Golden Globe for her performance. Moore won second place in the category of Top Female Supporting Performance at the 1959 Laurel Awards, and the film won Top Drama. Douglas Sirk was nominated for the 1959 Directors Guild of America Award.

Since the late 20th century, Imitation of Life has been re-evaluated by critics. It has been considered a masterpiece of Sirk's American career. Emanuel Levy has written, "One of the four masterpieces directed in the 1950s, the visually lush, meticulously designed and powerfully acted Imitation of Life was the jewel in Sirk's crown, ending his Hollywood's career before he returned to his native Germany." Sirk provided the Annie–Sarah Jane relationship in his version with more screen time and more intensity than the original versions of the story. Critics later commented that Juanita Moore and Susan Kohner stole the film from Turner. Sirk later said that he had deliberately and subversively undercut Turner to draw focus toward the problems of the two black characters.

Sirk's treatment of racial and class issues is also admired for what he caught of the times. Writing in 1997, Rob Nelson said,

Basically, we're left to intuit that the black characters (and the movie) are themselves products of '50s-era racism – which explains the film's perspective, but hardly makes it less dizzying. Possibly thinking of W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of African American double-consciousness, critic Molly Haskell once described Imitation's double-vision: "The mixed-race girl's agonizing quest for her identity is not seen from her point of view as much as it is mockingly reflected in the fun house mirrors of the culture from which she is hopelessly alienated."


In 2015, BBC Online, the website of the British Broadcasting Corporation, named the film the 37th greatest American movie ever made based on a survey of film critics.

### Awards and nominations

- **Laurel Awards**
  - Top Drama
  - Top Female Supporting Performance (Juanita Moore) – 2nd place
  - Top Cinematography – Color (Russell Metty) – Nomination, 5th place

- **Academy Awards**
  - Best Supporting Actress (Susan Kohner) – Nomination
  - Best Supporting Actress (Juanita Moore) – Nomination

- **Golden Globes**
  - Best Supporting Actress (Susan Kohner)
  - Best Supporting Actress (Juanita Moore) – Nomination
- Directors Guild of America Award
  - Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Motion Pictures (Douglas Sirk) – Nomination

## Home media

Both the 1934 and 1959 films were issued in 2003 on a double-sided DVD from Universal Home Entertainment. A two-disc set of the films was issued by Universal in 2008. A Blu-ray with both films was released in April 2015,[14] this edition has been re-mastered, and is not identical with earlier DVD releases.[15]

Madman Entertainment in Australia released a three-disc DVD set, including the 1934 film version as well as a video essay on the 1959 film by Sam Staggs.[16]

## See also

- List of American films of 1959
- Whitewashing in film

## References

1. *Imitation of Life* (http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=&Movie=53583) at the American Film Institute Catalog
9. Schwartz, Dennis (January 29, 2002). "Review of Imitation of Life" (http://homepages.sover.net/~ozus/imitationoflife.htm). Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20101219023102/http://homepages.sover.net/~ozus/imitationoflife.htm) from the original on 2010-12-19. "Over the course of time, many have come to consider this as a great film about post-war America—something the public recognized before most of the critics did."
Further reading


External links

- *Imitation of Life* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052918/) on IMDb
- *Imitation of Life* (http://tcmdb.com/title/title.jsp?stid=79029) at the TCM Movie Database
- *Imitation of Life* (https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v24403) at AllMovie


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