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A SERIES OF FAMILY RESEMBLANCES: INTERROGATING HOLLYWOOD'S TROPE OF THE US-AMERICAN FAMILY

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For Ottis Shaw (1935-2019) and Judy Shaw (1937-2020)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The perennial debates about "the family" indicate its centrality to US-American values, traditions, and mythology. The US-American family, its corresponding spatial location, the home, and the corollary notion of domesticity remain one means of realizing the so-called US-American dream. Yet, we forget that the parents' dream is achieved in the family. With little to no independence, children remain at the mercy of their parents' means of actualizing "the family" and the US-American dream. Why do we assume parents' benevolence to their children if it is the parents' dream realized in the family? I address this question through a close analysis of three films, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Bigger than Life* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1959), in chapters two, three, and four, respectively. I argue these films undermine the assumed consequences of parental love and good intentions toward children, perhaps the most evident reasons why we assume the benevolence of parents. Rather, we will see that within the traditional family the competing roles of parents—they are fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, friends, colleagues, workers, people of color, white folks, and individuals with self-interest—cannot always be adjudicated so to avoid the suffering and ensure the well-being of children.

In the argument of this dissertation, I contend that a formal aesthetic analysis of a film can be an interpretative mode of social criticism and as such prompts an ethical engagement. By conducting a close "reading" of a film I am not thinking of film as mere escapism and entertainment nor am I suggesting that film simply ventriloquizes popular culture. A film's aesthetic form can affirm and critique US-American identity, its accompanying institutions and mythology, and the widely accepted ethical theories and practices across the country; it shapes and reflects our normative practices and conventions.

This inherently interdisciplinary project crosses into film studies, political religious ethics, and US-American studies. To establish a common foundation for conversation among these three fields, I identified several abstract but overlapping categories controlling my argument—social criticism, appearance and reality, and US-American identity. Within each of these categories are concepts that I will use to make my argument. The first category, social criticism, encompasses and plays the other two off one another. Under the category of US-American identity, I locate the prevalence of the "nuclear family," the myths of US-America, and the tradition of Hollywood. In thinking about appearance and reality, I connect to the genre of melodrama and the use of figurative devices. The social criticism of the US-American idea of the nuclear family is accomplished by figurative devices and the appropriation of biblical tropes, which results in the criticism of one of the underlying principles in the concept of family, the assumed benevolence of parents to their children.

1.1 Social Criticism

For this dissertation, social criticism is understood as a critical interpretation of the already existent values, moral claims, and beliefs experienced in everyday life of society. This mode of criticism reveals the gap between the ideal and the reality of the lived experience. In working with this definition of social criticism, I follow the argument of Michael Walzer that critical distance and radical detachment are not necessary prerequisites of social criticism. Instead of the detached critic, the films align with what Walzer calls the connected critic:

> The connected critic…earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows…. This critic is one of us. Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached; he does not wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise.[1]

[1] Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 39.

The connected critic can offer criticism because they have experienced and are invested in their society's constructed values and ideals. Instead of stepping away from society as a whole, criticism requires us to "step away from certain sorts of power relationships within society. It is not connection but authority and domination from which we much distance ourselves."[2]

The films in this project can be seen as connected criticism given their production conditions. "Movies were not protected under freedom of speech clauses of state or federal constitutions," the Supreme Court concluded in 1915.[3] This ruling ensured that censorship was a legal possibility in the film industry. It was not until 1934, however, that Hollywood entirely capitulated to the demands for censorship. The combination of the economic collapse caused by the Depression beginning in 1929—which began seriously impacting film attendance in 1931 and led to several studios facing bankruptcy in 1932[4]—and the enhanced moral standing of the Catholic Church, prompted this capitulation. "In less than a year, the church had recruited millions of Americans of all religious denominations to pledge not to attend "immoral" movies."[5] To keep censorship within the power of the Hollywood industry, Will Hays, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), created an internal agency, the Production Code Administration (PCA) to enforce "the censorship code adopted by the industry."[6]

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[2] Walzer, *Criticism,* 60.
[3] Gregory D. Black, "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry 1930-1940" *Film History* 3 (1989), 167-89, qtd in "Censorship and the Attack on Hollywood 'Immorality'" in *Movies and American Society*, ed. Steven J. Ross, 2nd ed. (United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 103. For a more detailed account of Hollywood and Censorship see Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For the court ruling see, Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio. 236 U.S. 230 (1915).
[4] Black, 109.
[5] Black, 101. See also, Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, rev. ed. (1975; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 173-174, 294-296.
[6] Black, 101-102.

In the years leading up to writing and adopting the Code, Protestant ministers and women's organizations had lobbied for federal censorship of films, arguing that Hollywood "was directly responsible for the dramatic changes that had taken place in American society in the past three decades. Alarmed at an increasing divorce rate, a rise in juvenile delinquency, and a general flaunting of traditional values by young men and women, ministers held the movies directly responsible for what they saw as America's moral collapse."[7] The Catholic activists who collaborated and wrote the Code shared a common objective with the Protestant reformers: "They all wanted entertainment films to emphasize that the church, the government, and the family were cornerstones of an orderly society and that success and happiness resulted from respecting and working in this system."[8]

More than a mere document of censorship, the Production Code provided an outline of the purpose of films, which was to reaffirm what its authors considered cornerstones of US-American society and values. We can see those cornerstones in the general principles the Code adopted:

> No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of a crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
>
> Correct standards of life shall be presented on screen, subject only to necessary dramatic contrast.
>
> Law, natural or human, should not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.[9]

The film's capacity to serve as societal criticism was constrained by the restrictions on content and the enforcement of particular values like family and religion. Scripts that would adversely affect "industry policy" would be reviewed by Hays or Joseph Breen, the chief of the PCA office. This category was set aside for movies that, despite nominally adhering to the code, Breen or Hays

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[7] Black, 104.
[8] Black, 106.
[9]Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 361.

deemed "hazardous" to the industry's health. Industry Policy was invoked in screenplays that touched on social or political issues. The PCA employed the rule to restrict studios in their choice and presentation of social criticism out of concern that the social or political content would have a detrimental financial impact on the industry.[10]

The Production Code reigned supreme until the early to mid-1950s before several court decisions weakened its hold on the industry. In 1948, the *Paramount* court decision forced Hollywood studios to divest their production-distribution sectors from their exhibition holdings, arguing it violated anti-trust laws.[11] The divestment was to be completed by 1960. As the studios began complying with the ruling, independent films could gain access to previously unavailable theatres for exhibition. In 1952, the U.S. Supreme court ruling in *Burstyn v. Wilson*[12] overturned their 1915 ruling in *Mutual Film Corp v. The Industrial Commission of Ohio* and granted movies protection under the first amendment's freedom of speech clause.[13] Short on the heels of the legal change to cinema censorship was Otto Preminger's challenge to Breen and his staff.

Preminger's production of *The Moon Is Blue* used "words like 'seduce' and 'virgin'," but more problematic for Breen was the film's implication that unmarried sexual relations were not an issue of morality.[14] Joseph Breen rejected the picture's code approval. The distributor, United Artists, left the producers association and didn't use a code seal when releasing the film. Breen retired shortly after the confrontation with Preminger and United Artists. According to Thomas Doherty, he was not forced out of the PCA, rather, "his health was poor and the fire in his belly

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[10] Black, 114.
[11] United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et. al. 334 U.S. 131 (1948).
[12] Black, 103. Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson, Commissioner of Education of New York, et al. 343 U.S. 495 (1952).
[13] Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio. 236 U.S. 230 (1915). s
[14] Sklar, 295. Sklar makes this assertion based on Jack Vizzard's memoir of his years working at the PCA. See Jack Vizzard, *See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).

had flickered out long ago."[15] Geoffrey Shurlock replaced Breen. Shurlock was Englishman who held the contrary position that the code should not exclude scenes displaying actual human conduct on screen as long as they were neither obscene nor unpleasant to viewers.[16] Under Shurlock's strategy, the PCA and the Catholic Legion of Decency were at odds; the influence of the Legion of Decency was waning, marking a shift in attitudes of Hollywood producers and the public. For instance, unlike in the financially precarious 1930s, a boycott sponsored by Catholics in the 1950s did not endanger Hollywood. As opposed to harming a movie, such a boycott "was likely to offer recognition and raise audience interest to watch the picture."[17]

The changes to the PCA and its power in the 1950s did not mean that films were not still subject to PCA approval. The films in this project offer us a view of the changing restrictions of the Code and how it could be undermined and critiqued. For instance, the 1955 film *The Night of the Hunter* illustrates Breen's concept of compensatory moral values. Under Breen's direction, every picture was now required to have sufficient good to make up for any potential evil. Films strongly focused on crime or vice must have a "compensating moral value" to support the subject matter. Breen envisioned a "good character that advocated for the voice of morality, a figure who blatantly informed the criminals or a sinner that he or she was wrong" in their movies.[18] Each film must contain a stern moral lesson: regeneration, suffering, and punishment.[19] Lillian Gish, a prominent Hollywood star, plays the honest voice in *Hunter*, while Robert Mitchum plays the deceitful and murderous preacher, Harry Powell. Gish's character fulfills the necessary "sufficient

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[15] Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & The Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 314.
[16] Sklar, *Movie-Made America,* 296.
[17] Sklar, 294-296.
[18] Black, 113-114.
[19] Black, 113-114; Sklar, 173-174. For more on the Code, its content, and variations, see Olga J. Martin, *Hollywood's Movie Commandments: A Handbook For Motion Picture Writers and Reviewers* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1937).

good" to compensate for the evil of Harry Powell, and Powell's defeat at the hands of Gish and subsequent trial offers an overt moral lesson.

All three of the films in this project were subject to the Hollywood Studio System and the Production Code, despite their waning influence. The films employ conventions from the Production Code, only to undermine and critique those conventions through literary devices such as the uncanny, irony, ambiguity, and defamiliarization. Functioning as an insider and connected critic, these three films effectively participate in and criticize the system from which they were born. My specific attention is to how the three films in this project appropriate biblical tropes that are ethically ambiguous and threaten the stability of the family. Thus, these three films critique two cornerstones of US-American values—religion and the family—through interpretations of those values that subversively violate the rules of the Code meant to reinforce those same values and delimit social criticism.

While *Hunter* ostensibly meets the requirements of Breen's "moral compensating value" it remains dubious whether Powell's defeat and Gish's moralizing are sufficient to justify the numerous breaches of the Production Code. *Hunter* throws "ridicule on" religious faith, depicts a minister "of religion" as a "villain," inspires "others with a desire for imitation" of the crime of murder, and contains "repellent subjects" which "must be treated within the limits of good taste"; namely, "hangings" as "legal punishment for crime," and "apparent cruelty to children."[20] As in the other two films in this project, *Hunter* uses Breen's "moral compensating value" to violate the Production Code and criticizes the values the Code is meant to uphold. This criticism is only possible from a film produced inside the Production Code.

[20] Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood,* 347-364.

1.2 Biblicism

While Production Code may be theologically driven,[21] the films in this project have a more generic religious expression that I will call biblicism The term "biblicism" is a fusion of Christian and Jewish traditions that base their religious beliefs on the biblical text—namely the Hebrew Bible, in the case of the Jewish tradition. I use this term rather than Christianity, Protestant, Catholic, or Judeo-Christian because the biblical references and depictions of religion in these films are appropriated biblical tropes and remain purposely ambivalent.

In *Hunte*r and *Bigger than Life*, we will see particular expressions of Christianity, which appear to be Protestant Christianity. However, textual allusions to the Bible provide a degree of ambiguity that allows a more significant and general identification with the events on the screen. In this case, identification is not meant as usually understood in film studies, where the audience is meant to see themselves as a specific character on the screen. Instead, I mean identification in a Walzerian sense of thick and thin recognition.

Walzer grounds his discussion of thick and thin recognition in an argument about moral minimalism and maximalism. Moving in broad strokes, Walzer works from the premise that there is often a duality to morality. On the one hand, there are thick accounts of morality; these accounts are historically situated, contextually framed, locally significant, and particularistic in meaning that would not seem universally relatable. On the other hand, a thin sense of morality is when people who are not familiar with the thick elements of a situation, or act, can look on at an activity—such as violence against the poor, or tyrannical oppression—and will see something with

[21] Black argues the Code is a "fascinating combination of Catholic theology, conservative politics, and pop psychology...."(106). He is undoubtedly correct that the document contains Catholic doctrine. Still, when writing the Code, the authors took into account, among other things, "the concerns of Protestant reformers," in addition to other things like governmental censorship rules. As a result, it raises the question of whether the Code itself is better characterized as a document of biblicism or a guide to Christian tolerance than as a codification of a particular Catholic theology. A question like that remains outside the purview of this undertaking.

which they identify as familiar and relatable. Regardless of the origins of the idea such as justice, or the thick expressions of justice in a society, "Pretty much anybody looking will see something here that they recognize. The sum of these recognitions is what [Walzer] mean[s] by minimal morality."[22]

I acknowledge that at times these three films present specific religious traditions, replete with thick expressions of meaning and particularistic aspects. But I maintain that the biblical references work like Walzer's notion of thin expressions of morality, where most if not all of the audience will see something they recognize or can identify as familiar. The audience is then free to apply their thick or maximal understanding of those biblical references to the films at large. Indeed, the ambivalence and ambiguity around the precise Christian denomination in *Bigger than Life* and *Imitation of Life* as well as the folksy and informal religious elements in *Hunter* encourage a less overt identification of a specific religious tradition and instead associate religion and the referent text—namely, the Bible—as sources of ethical behavior. Put differently, using biblical references and stories, especially those from the Hebrew Bible, provides a thin expression of religion and morality with which viewers are enabled initially to identify, and then tacitly invited to overlay with their thick understandings.

1.3 US-American Identity

The United States does not have a single identity, but it articulates ideals that the nation's emergent mythology has transformed into narratives of identity. Here I understand myth to designate narratives that serve as foundations for our national identity: such narratives include claims like US-America is a land of freedom, equality, and social mobility; a place where the people rule

[22] Michael Walzer, "Moral Minimalism," in *Thick and Thin: Moral Arguments at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 6.

themselves through democracy, have natural rights, and are self-reliant; a City on a Hill, a heroic nation, and so on. Each of these narratives anchors itself in and sustains the idea of US-America as a paragon nation.

These narratives and idealization of the nation are in part perpetuated through Hollywood films and the Production Code. While films produced under the regime of the Code found ways to subvert the Code and offer social criticism, they simultaneously remain vehicles of reification of the mythic narratives of US-America, ensuring that the cornerstones of the nation are enshrined however dubiously. The films in this project all center around the family, and while offering criticism of the family, they also buttress the importance of the family through their focus on the institution.

Film's perpetuation of these mythic narratives and their idealization bears witness to its power in shaping and inheriting our cultural and intellectual heritages.[23] Stanley Cavell's philosophy informs my readings and arguments, particularly Cavell's claim about our intellectual heritage and common cultural inheritance. Cavell observes that word "common" denotes the "common, familiar, and the low."[24] However, common also holds the connotation of shared, of having something "in common." The common cultural heritage is the familiar ideas and values that everyday US-Americans share. Our intellectual heritage is the ideas put forth by people whom we consider learned, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Abraham Lincoln, and they are part of

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[23] A parallel claim made by the authors of the Production Code and one that leads them to determine the need for censorship via the Code: "Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings….the *moral importance* of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours and ultimately touches the whole of their lives….[they] affect the of those who thru the screen take in these ideas and ideals" (Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood,* 347-349, italics in original).
[24] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 14. Here Cavell is building his argument on his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar."

and/or influential on those "common" US-American values and ideas. Yet, I argue the average US-American experiences our heritage through movies rather than the writings of individuals like Emerson (and behind him, Kant), who have examined the ethical and philosophical issues facing US-America.[25] Part of that heritage presented to audiences in film is the link between biblicism and ethical behavior, the greatness of US-America, and the idealization of the family.

1.4 The Traditional US-American Family

One of the best ways for US-America to reckon with the gap between the ideal and everyday experience is to focus on something many people can, in the Walzerian sense, identify with; the US-American family. I adopt a definition of a "traditional" US-American family against which the families in the films are measured. A white heterosexual couple is the standard representation of the typical US-American family, with the husband serving as the family's primary provider and de facto head of the household. The woman is the primary "caretaker"; she stays home, looks after the children, and does household chores like cooking, cleaning, and laundry. The couple's child(ren) is brought up with the hope that they will carry on the nation's future by reproducing the same family unit in which they were raised.

Many studies have demonstrated the substantial importance placed on the family in post-WWII US-America (or perhaps the whole latter half of the twentieth century). Scholars from various disciplines (e.g., ethics, religion, gender and sexuality, sociology, history, etc.) have studied the family to correct misconceptions about marriage and divorce, expose unjust and exclusionary practices within the institution, and challenge or explore gender roles.[26] This project

[25] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness,* 8-10.
[26] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992;New York: Basic Books, 2000); Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988; New York: Basic Books, 2017). See also Seth Dowland, *Family Values and The Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University

takes its bearings from such scholars—namely Stephanie Coontz and Elaine May—who, in parallel to the movies I will examine, have also offered a means of correcting these misconceptions about family.

My reason for turning to the family overlaps with the concern to correct the misconceptions about the family but also moves beyond that concern to the family's idealization, capacity for conflation, and role in moral cultivation. The films I examine present the family as a reservoir of potential value yet simultaneously unable to realize that potential; these films juxtapose the idealized institution of the family with the practical and everyday challenges to that ideal. For example, *Bigger than Life* takes an excoriating approach to the nuclear family. Ed Avery, the patriarch of the family, struggles to maintain his suburban home and breadwinner status for his family as a teacher, having to go so far as to moonlight as a taxi cab dispatcher. Already, this financial pressure undermines the idealization of the traditional family but then Ed is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, which upends his and his family's lives and questions whether the idealized family can cope with the unexpected realities of life.

These films show the family as an institution of moral cultivation and boundary blurring.

The family holds an important relationship to moral cultivation in US-America. As Richard B. Miller rightly highlights in *Children, Ethics, and Modern Medicine,* family is crucial to the moral cultivation of children.[27] Family is where children develop self-worth and love, learn how to care for another, and have their first experiences with justice, equality, and fairness.[28] These elements are essential feelings, concepts, and duties that one hopes to see present in their fellow

of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) who makes a compelling argument about the how political right and left claim and appropriate the family for their own ends.

[27] Richard B. Miller, "Conclusion: On Liberal Care," in *Children, Ethics, and Modern Medicine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 268-274.

[28] Miller, "On Liberal Care," 270-274.

citizens. In addition, the family blurs the boundaries between binaries, such as the public/private, which are redrawn, removed, or made more flexible so that we see the two spheres combine instead of distinct spheres. In *Imitation of Life*, for instance, people of color do not have visible private lives; instead, their lives are always public, so there is no physical space where or time when public laws, regulations, or attitudes do not control people of color.

If the ideas of justice, fairness, and equality are centrally conveyed via the family, the nation of which families are a part will inevitably face the challenge of pluralism. This results in inherent tension. Pluralism cannot exist if we do not allow people to express their differing values in life; yet, we must also govern from some consensus. Hence, the public/private divide is its metonym for the challenge of pluralism; the concept acknowledges that people must both allow compromise and cede to the majority while maintaining a realm where they can fully express their comprehensive doctrines.[29] The full expression (with reasonable limitations) of individual values and modes of existence occurs in the private sphere, and a more limited expression of beliefs occurs in the public sphere. The expression of these comprehensive doctrines is limited by the need for consensus among all the people in the nation. Traditionally, political religious ethics scholars have been interested in how the private sphere affects the public and what limitations or requirements exist so that the political decisions, which affect the public sphere, are (supposedly) equal, just, and supported by a majority consensus. My dissertation inverts this concern, focusing

[29] I take this terminology from John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). See especially page 13. I follow the Cambridge Rawls Lexicon definition a comprehensive doctrine: "A comprehensive doctrine is a set of beliefs affirmed by citizens concerning a range of values, including moral, metaphysical, and religious commitments, as well as beliefs about personal virtues, and political beliefs about the way society ought to be arranged. They form a conception of the good and inform judgments concerning "what is of value in life, the ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole (PL 13)" (Paul Voice, "Comprehensive Doctrine," Chapter in *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, edited by Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy, 126–29 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014]).

on how the public sphere affects the private. This inversion is significant when considering the family and the inheritance of family values and roles against the influence of alternative values and norms experienced in the public world.

While traditionally, the public is identified as the space wherein the government exhibits control. Thus we find a distinction between public and private schools; I have adopted an alternative definition in this project. Private refers to the physical space of the home and the property with it. The public is anything outside of this limited sphere of private property ownership. In this project, the home is a space of supposed security, stability, and freedom to express one's comprehensive doctrines. However, as so closely connected to the family, the home expresses visually what at times remains silent or unspoken among the family. The home space can be dramatized to mimic, emphasize, and complement the experiences and feelings of the family or specific family members.

1.5 Appearance and Reality

1.5.1 Tropes

The categories of social criticism and US-American identity are undeniably connected to the category of appearance and reality. However, I now use this category to establish the project's aesthetic and generic elements—tropes and melodrama. The category of appearance and reality might suggest a binary; however, they are relational terms through a cycle of revelation and concealment. Appearance here means a meaning on a literal or textual level. The term reality may imply a notion of authenticity or a singular truth; but, in keeping with the idea that these terms are relational, I want to suggest "reality" is the multiplicity of meaning that exists in addition to the apparent or literal level. I wish to employ the idea of masking to clarify.

If we think of a person wearing a mask, on the one hand, they appear to look as the mask looks. Yet, there is another face under that mask; the “reality” or truth is concealed by a mask. But, in the case of these films, removing a mask only reveals another mask or even an ongoing displacement of one mask with another; revelation leads to further concealment. The notion of appearance and reality is not a simple binary of concealment and truth, and it does not suggest that under the appearance of something is the “real” substance. Instead, it indicates that the reality is the ongoing displacement of one appearance with another; a mask, conceals and reveals a deception or a performance, but removing that mask reveals further concealment with additional or even contradictory deceptions and behavior. A single apparent meaning, or in the case of the mask, the understanding of a single mask, is not incorrect but incomplete.

There is a connection between this idea of various masks or layers of meaning and the concept of tropes. Tropes have been defined in several ways. First, they are "a figure of speech” or thought, “especially one that uses words in connotations beyond their literal meanings…. tropes change the meanings of words, by a ‘turn’ of sense….The major figures that are agreed upon as being tropes are metaphor, simile, metonym, synecdoche, irony, personification, and hyperbole.”[30] Tropes engender a multiplicity of meanings—causing figures to appear to mean one thing while also meaning another. Tropes are frequently used interchangeably with “figures” and “figural” in this particular sense. For the sake of clarity, I have adopted the term figure or the figural meaning, rather than trope, when speaking of the change in meaning and for images and words that have meaning beyond the literal.

[30] Chris Baldick, "trope," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2015), https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1172.

Second, a trope is often understood as a significant or recurring theme, like a motif. I intend this meaning when using the term trope in this project. The US-American family and certain biblical stories are tropes. The US-American family recurs as a trope in the films and it already contains its own figures. For example, the mother can be understood as the biological carrier of a child, but there is a figural meaning of caretaker and homemaker. When discussing the trope of the US-American family in this project, the entire notion of the traditional family—with its internal and conflicting figural meanings—is adopted and then deployed in a new set of circumstances. Thus, the trope of the family can be explored in itself. The embodied figural meanings of the family can be wielded, appropriated, reiterated, etc., so that the family theme is understood anew.

Tropes also have a specific history and meaning in the study of Christianity, as they were part of an interpretative system of typology. Early Christian theologians established a system of scriptural interpretation where "certain events, images, and personages" from the Hebrew Bible are understood as "prophetic types and figures that foreshadow" the life and death of Jesus.[31] In this form of typology, scriptures from the Hebrew Bible are read as if they have four levels of meaning, one of which is tropological.[32] The tropological is also called the moral meaning and is said to refer to the fate of the individual soul. While there appears to be a possible relationship between a more generic understanding of tropes and the Christian theological meaning, the association of the tropological with the moral merits asking whether the move to include biblical stories as a means of improving the moral image of Hollywood films bears any relationship to the history of typology in Christian theology. Such an investigation remains outside the purview of

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[31] Baldick, "typology," https://www-oxfordreference -com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1179.

[32] The remaining three levels are "the literal, the allegorical (referring to the New Testament or the Christian Church), and the anagogical (referring to universal history and eschatology). See Baldick, "typology," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms.*

this project. Typology as a specific manner of interpreting and reading scripture is one I do not adopt wholesale in this project. Instead, I claim, a kind an inversion of this process—rather than anachronistically investing Christian meaning into a non-Christian text, the films in this project adopt biblical stories with all their conflicting interpretative history and appropriate them to function as sources of ethical behavior.

1.5.2. Melodrama

The films in this project are melodramas that attend to the family, the home, and the domestic—ideals that have a mythic function in US-America. The films are not merely a commentary on humans, the state of the nation, or institutions; they present meditations on and provide sources for the ethical challenges facing the United States. There are myriad definitions of melodrama but I build from three figures in the study of filmic melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser, Peter Brooks, and Stanley Cavell to argue for melodrama as narratives that dramatize the difficulty of expression through excess;[33] put differently melodramatic narratives acknowledge the limitation of expression and dramatize that limitation through figurative devices, excessive emotions, and, in film, investing meaning into the nonverbal—lighting, mise-en-scene, costumes, etc. The difficulty of expression dovetails with the above idea of masking; language both conceals and reveals meaning much like a mask both conceals and reveals a face. The ongoing displacement of masks parallels the ongoing displacement or deferral of meaning through the figurative nature of language.

For Peter Brooks, melodrama takes a particular meaning in the post-French Revolution world where the institutions of the "Sacred," the monarchy and church, no longer serve as sources

[33] Thomas Elsaesser offers an overview brief genealogy of melodrama in "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 43-69. First published in *Monogram* 4 (1972): 2-15 There Elsaesser argues that that at its most basic definition, melodrama "is a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks emotional effects" (50). He finds this definition useful, and I agree, because it allows the formulation of "the problems of melodrama as problems of style and articulation" (50). I return to Peter Brooks and Stanley Cavell's work on melodrama below, in chapter two.

or offer access to the truth and ethics.[34] In the absence of these institutions, melodrama "becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era."[35] Melodrama has a surface level and hidden depths; the everyday banal experience covers the conflict between good and evil. Melodrama brings that conflict to the surface with narratives that provide sources of ethical behavior which in turn I argue means they serve as narratives of myth.

Richard Rosengarten's interpretation of Paul Ricoeur's cycle of myths serves to connect melodrama, the difficulty of expression, and narratives of myth. Rosengarten exegetes Ricoeur's theory of myth as arguing that "the experience of the sacred is expressed in myth" and that "myths are symbols in the form of narratives."[36] As symbols, myths acknowledge the limitation of expression to give meaning to the totality of reality. In turn this means there is a limit to myth: "it necessarily lends contingent form to the sacred, and in doing so acknowledges that it is less than fully congruent with the totality of reality."[37] If a myth is to say anything coherent it must be symbolic and that in turn means no one myth encompasses the totality of reality or experience.[38]

Melodrama dovetails with this understanding of myth in two ways that are important for this project. First, if we follow Brooks and melodramas are the mode for uncovering and demonstrating a moral universe in the post-sacred world then they still have a function of lending contingent form to the intangible. As the melodramas in this project are governed by the Production Code, which considers film as enshrining the cornerstones of US-America, then these melodramas are lending contingent form to those "sacred" societal values. Second, melodrama understood as

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[34] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, an the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 14-16.
[35] Brooks, 15.
[36] Richard Rosengarten, "Ricoeur's 'Cycle of Myths' and America's *E pluribus unum:* Election and Inflection or Notes on the One and the Many," *Journal of Religion* 100, no. 4 (October 2020), 467.
[37] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 469.
[38] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 469.

the difficulty of expression relies on figurative devices and narrative excess to enshrine that difficulty; this idea parallels myth as taking necessary recourse to the symbolic if they are to say anything meaningful.[39] Myths cannot lend form to all of reality and say anything coherent nor can melodrama express all meaning in words.

1.6 Genre And Selection of Films

Elsaesser rightly argues that any accounting of cinematic melodrama must bear in mind its historical antecedents—the novel, fairy tales, folktales, morality plays, tragedies, and opera to name a few.[40] I would add to Elsaesser's list, especially for Hollywood melodrama, stories from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The three films I have selected closely relate to one biblical story in particular, the *Akedah* or *The Binding of Isaac.* This story is apposite for demonstrating the difficulties faced by the family and the problem with the assumed benevolence of parents to their children, especially if we base that assumption on parental love. Moreover, the *Akedah* is among the exemplary stories for undermining biblicism as a source of ethical behavior. The relationship between *the Binding of Isaac* and the three films in this project are sourced in theories of genre found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances, Cavell's argument in *Pursuits of Happiness*,

Wittgenstein argues that he can find no better way to describe the similarities in language games than through the idea of "family resemblance."[41] Wittgenstein sees a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" in the different games he is describing.[42] Family resemblances exemplify this complicated network as "various resemblances between members of

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[39] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 467-469.
[40] Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 43-44.
[41] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* rev. 4th ed., eds. P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, transs. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 36.
[42] Wittgenstein, 36.

a family—build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so forth—overlap and criss-cross in the same way."[43] The strength of this model is compared to a thread, "…as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping many fibres."[44] In other words, there is not an essence to a genre but a series of overlapping features which can be combined and compared in endless ways without losing their strength. The idea of the overlapping fibers suggests this project's film selection, while eclectic, remains powerful because of the corresponding relationship the films have to one another.

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell makes an argument for a new genre, the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage. Cavell argues against understanding a genre as a defined by its properties or features. Instead, each member of the genre adds "something to the genre because there is no such thing as 'all its features.'"[45] Advancing our understanding of genre, Cavell offers a cultural or philosophical reason for the genre grouping: "The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of inheritance."[46] Here, Cavell offers another way to think about how the films in this project are connected; how do films in this project inherit the question of the assumed benevolence of parents to their children in spite of the multiple claims upon a family in the post-WWII era of US-America and Hollywood film controlled by the Production Code.

Rosengarten's exegesis of Ricoeurian myth is also relevant here because it has bearing on how to think of the relationship between melodrama and the selection of film. Rosengarten argues

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[43] Wittgenstein, 36.
[44] Wittgenstein, 36.
[45] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness,* 28.
[46] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness,* 28.

that for the Ricoeurian theory of myth, there is a relational element, a necessity to see how the myths relate to each other. However, in order to engage in this relationship, we must choose a controlling myth not because it is first or original but because in trying to avoid such an election we still, unintentionally and in effect, make such a decision. Rosengarten terms this decision election. Thus we must openly elect, and acknowledge the limitations of such an election, a controlling myth from which we can then investigate how these myths "make claims vis-à-vis each other."[47] In making such an election, we admit that there is no "Archimedean point" from which all other myths are spawned. Rather we choose a point from which to begin to think and that point of election conditions our other choices.[48] By electing the *Akedah* as controlling and generative I am able to think about how the trope of the US-American family is reiterated in the films of this project. Put differently, in these films the trope of the family and its capacity for idealization is refracted through the story of the *Akedah*, which raises not only the difficulties of the relationship of ethics to religion but the impossible adjudication of parental responsibility with the wellbeing of children and the impractical notion that love ensures children thrive.

1.6 Chapters:

My project unfolds via a chapter-by-chapter examination of specific films. Chapter two examines is *Night of the Hunter*, released in 1955 and directed by Charles Laughton. This film undermines the idealization of religion as a source of morally upright and benevolent individuals and repeatedly sunders the notion of the traditional family as a bastion of safety and stability. I return to Peter Brooks's definition of melodrama and its close connection to the moral occult, which, in conjunction with Cavell's criticisms of Brooks's work, enables me to posit the film's criticism of

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[47] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 473.
[48] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 472.

basing the moral on the sacred. This assumption enables an insidious preacher, Harry Powell, to hide his evil nature and dissemble his intentions. I will show how Powell's resulting madness and fanaticism corrupt the public sphere and endanger the safety of the family in the private realm. It is not Powell alone who endangers and undermines the traditional family. I argue that *Hunter* defamiliarizes and refamiliarizes the US-American family. The idealization of the roles of the parents in the family leads both the mother and the father to their death and leaves their children at the mercy of the murderous preacher. Powell as the step-father of the two children, John and Pearl, epitomizes the problem with the assumed benevolence of parents to their children. Ultimately, it is not a traditional family but Miss Cooper, a single woman whose own child has disowned her, who can offer safety and stability to John and Pearl.

The third chapter explores *Bigger than Life,* the 1956 melodrama and avowed masterpiece directed by Nicholas Ray. In this chapter, we will see an idealized traditional family, already burdened with financial difficulties and existential doubts, contend with the father's diagnosis of an incurable but treatable illness. The treatment for this illness is a new drug professed to be a miracle, cortisone. Ed, the father, necessarily dependent on the medication develops an addiction that leads to sadistic mood swings and a psychotic episode wherein he attempts to reenact the *Akedah* but with a new ending—the child will be sacrificed and the parents will commit suicide. The retelling of the *Akedah* casts the question of faith in US-American not as one about God per se but as about the "togetherness" of the US-American family. Ed's illness and necessary treatment repeatedly challenge the assumption that togetherness in a family, remaining married and avoiding divorce, is always best for the child[ren] and the solution to familial struggles.

The fourth chapter examines *Imitation of Life,* a famous 1959 melodrama directed by Douglas Sirk. *Imitation of Life* is about two women who form the heads of a family, each woman

with a daughter. Annie is a woman of color and embodies a submissive and religious role, taking on the gender stereotype of the stay-at-home mother/caretaker. Lora, who is white, follows her dreams and becomes a famous stage actress. She is the figure who heads the house and takes on what is stereotypically the role of the male father and "breadwinner." The women and their children play out the dynamic of race relations—specifically questions of passing and segregation—in their public and private lives. Here, I argue for an affective experience in which the viewer grasps the film's keen interest in race relations by discerning the irony used to reveal the negative effects of segregation as well as the inequality between people of color and whites. The inequality between people of color and white people is relentlessly underscored and critiqued throughout the film, deploying at the same time a descriptive, ironic detachment. Indeed, this ironic critique is what Sirk has become famous for and why the film is often characterized as subversive. The tension between Annie's desire for her daughter Sarah Jane and Sarah Jane's own desire to pass as white not only raises the specter of the sacrificial mother, questions whether private beliefs about race can overcome public sentiment, and reframes the question of racial identity through the assumed benevolence of parents to their child [ren].

1.7 Method to the Madness

The methodology of this project is perhaps best understood through the juxtaposition of two scholars, Barbara Klinger and Caroline Levine. Klinger steps into Sirkian scholarship to assert a two-pronged critique: first, the result of such esteem for Sirk and his films have been ordered and controlled by Sirk's comments about his intentions as a director; second, the interest in and veneration of Sirk is in part a reflection of institutional and scholarly interests. Klinger's second critique is aimed at the textualist methodology and its exclusion of cultural and historical analysis. Klinger persuasively argues "that the text itself has no intrinsic meaning….that textual meanings

are negotiated by external agencies…set within a particular historical landscape."[49] Rather than a textualist approach, Klinger moves to a cultural studies approach whose goal is not "to posit new textual meanings or values, but to show how social forces produce meaning and values."[50] At the time of her writing, the lack of cultural studies approaches meant that she could contribute to Sirkian studies by examining how institutional contexts could create an ideological identity for film. Klinger's work is intended to draw attention not only to the need to reconsider Sirk's films and question their seemingly fixed identity but to look at how meaning was attributed to Sirk's films and melodrama more broadly.

The question of methodology Klinger raises places pressure on the focus and methods of this project. Klinger takes particular aim at textualists, arguing that they have not

> sought to fully interrogate melodrama's historical dimensions but instead to establish the aesthetic and political codes of its form. Close analysis has tended to privilege the text itself, 'only mak[ing] use of melodrama's history as it contributes to defining the melodramatic mode,' as Peter Brooks has said in describing the parameters of his own study. In interpretations focused primarily on identifying the narrative and stylistic traits of a genre, history frequently serves as a backdrop against which the vivid formal responses of the individual text are staged. When history assumes this secondary function, eras can appear as monolithic (that is, the repressive Eisenhower years), rather than as times exhibiting complex and contradictory attitudes toward such issues as the family and sexuality.[51]

Klinger's point is well taken, and it is essential to account for contingency and particularity. I am invested in following through a line of inquiry about the family and its relationship to the public/private divide that characterizes much of US-American political ethics' relation to religion, the family, and US-American identity. The historical and sociological knowledge of the

[49] Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xvi.
[50] Klinger, xvi.
[51] Klinger, xii-xiv.

"Eisenhower era" has already benefited from the work of researchers like Elaine May and Stephanie Coontz. The analysis from Coontz's book demonstrates how the "American family" is susceptible to idealization and nostalgia by showing that the idyllic suburban (white) family with a single working parent was not the norm for most US-Americans. Elaine May has argued persuasively that rather than decades since the 1950s falling away from marriage and a standard of domesticity, the early post-WWII years were the anomaly with their spike in the number of marriages, the lower average age of marriage, and decrease in the divorce rate. I build upon these historical and sociological studies and use their findings as a starting point in the investigation of family, religion, and film

Despite Klinger's intervention, I agree with Caroline Levine when she says, "if we cannot generalize, what is the point of our research?" She argues, "even if the most important lesson we learn is the specificity of each historical moment, that too is a general conclusion—one, ironically, that generalizes specificity itself."[52] I take Levine's point here to remind us that while there is difference and contingency, we can still posit claims about a text and its context. Levine argues for a revised formalism, one that is more robust than was found with the New Critics, and thus this revised formalism heeds Klinger's insistence that we must take history and context into account.[53] Levine's claims reassert the import of formal analysis, and that formal analysis can be used to make claims about the text and context.[54]

[52] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), XII.
[53] Levine, XII.
[54] Levine argues that forms cross into the other fields of analysis (e.g. the ethical, political, cultural) and draws on the idea of "affordances" from design theory to argue that forms outside of literary theory can be persuasive, paradoxical, and complex. However, I do not find the move to design theory necessary to ground the claim that forms are ubiquitous (meaning they are in other fields of study than literary analysis), complex, persuasive, and/or paradoxical and thus regard a full engagement of her use of affordances and design theory as beyond the scope of this project.

In response to anticipated criticism of her claims regarding formal analysis, Klinger states that her "my stake in this critique is not to suggest that we overhaul how we approach films in the discipline to rid ourselves of conventional interpretative efforts; I am not sure that any new research paradigm can escape the ritual effects of the institution. Rather, in recognizing academic interpretation as a particular activity shaped by specific critical, historical, and institutional dynamics, I hope to reframe its procedures as relative rather than authoritative."[55] Klinger emphasizes she wants academic criticism to be considered part of the text's history and that its context is accounted for when we look at how a film shapes and affects our understanding of the text it interprets.

This project is motivated by the impetus of both Klinger's and Levine's arguments and views them as complementary. These films are set in a particular era of US-America, both historically and culturally. My formal examination of a few key scenes from the film demonstrates how a film creates meaning outside of dialogue. Including historical data, such as court cases, is not intended to serve as a background for the textual analysis. Instead, it aims to demonstrate how a film may adopt aspects of the culture in which it was produced and use those aspects to reflect and influence the culture and way of life of the people from the time of the film. And through formal analysis, we can observe how a film creates meaning and uses its contextual moment. To put it another way, the text and context are interrelated.

Implications:

The implications for this project are twofold. First, I argue for an investigation into political and religious ethics through aesthetics which shows how aesthetic attention to film provides another source of ethical material to use when considering issues such as US-American identity

[55] Klinger, 169 n. 79.

and values. Second, the cultural turn in a project keenly interested in the relationship between family and religion does not entail a reduction of the complexity of the films. I intend to take the films on their own terms, "reading" them so to speak and attending to their visual detail. Shot-by-shot analysis will accompany the claims made about the representations of family and its relationship to religion. By attending to the films in this manner, I hope to avoid the frequent error by those who are not experts in cinema, which is to reduce the films to their plot while ignoring elements such as camera movement, mise-en-scène, editing style, etc.

CHAPTER 2: MORAL MADNESS: DEFAMILIARIZING AND REIMAGINING THE AMERICAN FAMILY THROUGH *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER*

Approximately halfway through the film, *The Night of the Hunter*,[56] we watch the scene of Willa Harper's murder.[57] The scene begins with an establishing long shot of the room. The door to the room is centered in the shot and on the far wall across from the camera. On each side of the door are two straight lines making up the walls. The top outside of each wall is angled giving the top half of the room a kind of equilateral triangular shape. However, beyond the triangular shape, the lighting gives the appearance that the walls are mimicking curtains which have been drawn aside so that we can see what is happening in this bedchamber, a stage of sorts. The spaces outside of the triangular shape are darkened and the inside of the triangle is lit. We see Harry Powell (played by Robert Mitchum) standing to the right of the door, almost perfectly framed within the straight edge of the wall on the right and the angled wall of the left. His back is to us with his head bent forward as if he is praying. The bed is in the foreground taking up almost the entire length of the

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[56] *The Night of the Hunter* is a film based on a book of the same title written by Davis Grubb (*The Night of the Hunter* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953]). The film is directed by Charles Laughton (the only film which Laughton directed in its entirety) and was released in the United States in 1955. In the following I provide a brief synopsis of the film for those who are unfamiliar with it. *The Night of the Hunter* is about two children, John and Pearl Harper, who are pursed by a murderous Reverend, Harry Powell, because their father, Ben Harper, robs a bank and hides $10,000 in Pearl's doll. Ben goes to jail and while awaiting his execution (he killed two people while robbing the bank), he finds himself bunkmates with Powell, who is in jail for stealing a car. While sharing a cell, Powell learns of the money Ben stole, that Ben's wife will soon be widowed, and the children know the location of the stolen money. When released Powell heads to meet Willa Harper in order to charm her into marriage, murder her, and steal the money for himself. John learns of Powell's intent to find the money and tries to tell his mother but is unsuccessful. Eventually, Willa discovers that Powell is looking for the money and he murders her. John and Pearl still keep the location of the money a secret and are forced to flee down the river to escape Powell's wrath. After several nights of being hunted by Powell, the children's boat drifts ashore and they are taken in by Miss Cooper, a Mother Goose figure who cares for abandoned and orphaned children. The film climaxes with a stand-off between Miss Cooper and Powell and concludes with Powell's arrest and Miss Cooper's success in protecting all of the children in her care.

[57] All references and quotes from this scene take place in: "Willa Hears Harry Talking," *The Night of the Hunter*. directed by Charles Laughton (USA: MGM, 1955), Prime Video, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B001EYVR30, starting at 38:04. I have listed the scene titles offered through my version of the film. But I have also included the time in minutes and seconds as above or in hours, minutes, and seconds, for ease of finding the relevant scenes.

shot. Willa lies in the bed with her arms crossed over her chest and is shrouded in light. If not for her moving lips, we would be unable to tell if she was alive. Her position foreshadows her impending death, as if she already rests in her coffin. This scene alludes to the first bedchamber scene between Willa and Powell but with an ominous change in the relationship between them. In the first bedchamber sequence, Powell had lain in bed praying and Willa stood next to the bed, seeking Powell's attention;[58] now Powell stands while Willa affects a position of submission and death. Willa's position and our knowledge of Powell's murderous history suggests this scene alludes not only to a dramatic theater stage but also to an altar of sacrifice.

When Willa says "Amen," Powell lifts his head and asks Willa if she is done praying. She responds, "I am through Harry." The word "through" carries several meanings. She is through praying, through being married to him, through being deceived by him, and through with her life. Powell turns and takes a step so that he is facing Willa, looming over her, and asks, "You were listening outside the parlor window?" Willa responds, continuing to look straight up, but not at Powell, "It ain't in the river, is it, Harry?" Powell responds by saying, "Answer me." Never looking at Powell, as if she is still praying, Willa continues a kind of monologue, "Ben never told you he throw'd it in the river, did he?" Powell then slaps Willa. We have our first cut in this scene, it is a match on action cut, to a medium shot of Willa as she lies in bed with her head turned to the left. The match on action cut emphasizes the slap as well as Willa's serene reaction—only her head moves to the left. Willa turns her head back to the center of her pillow and returns her gaze to the ceiling, the same position she had prior to the strike. Her face is lit more than the rest of her body with the light shrouding her head.

[58] For the full sequence of the wedding night see scene: "Pearl Considers Revealing a Secret," beginning at 28:01.

We cut to a re-establishing shot of the room. We are noticeably farther away from the bed, characters, and door than in the first establishing shot. Everything surrounding the top half of the room and its triangular shape is dark. On the bed, the headboard and bottom portion of Willa is now dark, while her torso and head remain lit. This gives us a starker contrast between the light center and the dark edges. Powell is still standing next to the bed, but now his head is bent, and his torso faces toward the end of the bed rather than Willa. Powell walks slowly away from the bed to the wall where we saw him in the beginning of this scene. Powell starts his transformation; his back is to Willa, perpendicular to the wall, his head bent back slightly. Next he turns to face the direction of the camera. His head now looks more bent than before, mimicking the angular wall, and his arms are out in front of him. In this position, Powell leaves his head tipped and slowly begins to lift his left arm so that it too bends to take on the shape of the angled wall. The hand that is raised, poised as if it is about to grab something, is the hand of hate (literally and metaphorically as this is the hand tattooed with the word hate).

This moment marks the beginning of Powell's physical transformation as we see the evil of the man who murders women manifest in his body. Up to this point, we have heard Powell talk of murder, seen the legs of a murdered woman, seen him intimidate Willa, heard his violence toward Pearl, learned of his knife, and witnessed a violent and sexual reaction to alluring women; but we have not seen his physical violence. Now we will see how Powell transforms from charming (albeit deceitful) Preacher to murderer. Powell will physically express this change with his body; his movements slow and he conforms to the lines and angles of the room. His action is similar to that in German Expressionist film, where "the expressivity associated with the human figure extends into every aspect of the mise-en-scène."[59] Powell's transformation expresses his violence

[59] Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New Work: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 92.

and evil, which exceeds the plot, dialogue, and his human figure so that it is transferred to the room.

While the transformation is taking place, Willa is still speaking, continuing her monologue about how Powell must have known about the money all along. We cut to a medium shot of Willa lying in the bed, arms still crossed and shrouded in light as she says, "But that ain't the reason you married me. I know that much. Because the Lord just wouldn't let it be." After this last sentence, we cut to a close-up of Powell's head. His head is still tilted so that it matches the angle of the wall and his eyes look away from Willa and upwards. This echoes the film's introduction of Powell, when Powell is talking to the "Lord" and then looks off to the right, away from the camera, quiet for a moment as if he hears someone speaking to him.[60] In addition to the echo of the latter scene, we can also see Powell as frozen in the act of transformation. From offscreen we hear Willa, "He made you marry me, so you could show me the way and the life and the salvation of my soul." For ten seconds Willa speaks from offscreen and we look at this close-up of Powell—he is motionless with his head tilted and (presumably) arm raised. Arguably, Powell is meant to be seen not only as listening to the Lord while poised in transformation but also as transfixed by Willa's words so that they too transform him from an ostensibly good preacher to the embodiment of the figure of evil.

With the end of Willa's above line, the spell on Powell and the camera is broken. We cut to a medium long shot of Powell, suddenly moving with regular speed as he brings his hand down and straightens his head. He reaches to the blinds and closes them (another allusion to the first night Powell and Will are married). Willa continues, "Aint that so, Harry?" As Harry closes the blinds, Willa says, "So you might say it was the money that brung us together." With the blinds

[60] See scene: "Harry Speaks to the Lord," 2:50.

closed, Powell reaches into his jacket pocket, hanging on a chair, and retrieves his knife. We cut to a close-up of Powell's hand as he flicks open the knife with the hand of love. Interestingly, it is the left hand, the hand of hate, that becomes transfixed in the air as Powell transforms, but it is the right hand, the hand of love, that uses the knife to kill. Possibly this inversion of expectation is simply because Mitchum is right-handed. While this explanation is plausible, it seems a rather careless slip in a film that is so highly stylized and attentive to detail. I suggest we see the use of the hand of love as intentional and offering us several possible meanings: 1)Willa moves Powell with her talk of the salvation of the soul, which she learned from Powell, he kills her out of their common love of God; 2) Powell's hand of love is equally violent as the hand of hate; 3) Stabbing Willa is the only act of love, sexual and psychological, that Powell is capable of committing.

Once Powell has his knife, we cut back to the re-establishing shot, and Powell begins walking toward Willa's prostrate figure. Willa is still speaking, "The rest of it don't matter." Powell walks to Willa and places one hand on her right side, the side closest to the camera. If we did not know about Powell's intentions and the knife, this scene looks like an affectionate (or even lustful) husband coming to bed with his wife, perhaps kissing her. As Powell leans his body over Willa, he lifts his right hand straight up in the air. This motion again matches the mise-en-scène. Once more the violence of Powell's act exceeds words and extends to the walls and lines of the room. Powell's arm is first raised straight up and then he angles the knife over Willa, with this final angle blending in with sharp angles in the room. There is a cut to a medium shot of Willa from a downward angle her eyes upward, still not looking at or seeing Powell, her arms crossed over her chest. Willa closes her eyes as the music comes to a climax. This last shot of Willa is shown from Powell's point of view. The cut to Willa creates an eyeline match to Willa's prostrate

body and forces the viewer to see (if not experience) what Powell sees before he simultaneously murders Willa and consummates their marriage.

I find the above scene thoroughly captivating. It dramatizes crucial elements and serves as microcosm for the rest of the film. This sequence utilizes the uncanny spatially as it echoes past scenes that have now been made strange and unfamiliar. Powell's manifestation of evil reveals the virtuosity of the film and its creators. We see how double meanings are employed, which are rampant in the rest of the film. We are reminded of the film's engagement with traditional fairytales with another likening of Powell to Bluebeard—as with Bluebeard, we learn of Powell's nature in a secret room, the bedroom (which is a sexually charged and very private space in the 1950s), and this room is opened with a metaphorical key, Powell's knife. Moreover, the import of this scene is underscored by its seeming to be the moment of Aristotelian recognition and reversal; carefully crafted for the viewer to apprehend who Powell is and expect a change in his fortune.

Yet, most poignantly, this scene forces us to watch Powell's physical transformation. We contend with his murderous rage through the mise-en-scène, which cannot be contained within Powell's body. The careful and elaborate transformation suggests the viewer, along with Willa, must bear witness to the physical change in Powell; that his nature must be revealed in order for us to fully recognize Powell as evil. The extension of Powell's expression of evil to the mise-en-scène shows us how Powell's evil permeates his surroundings, which leads to the defamiliarizing and destabilizing of the family and the home.

The following section pushes forward my concern with melodrama, first addressed in the Introduction, where I provided a definition of the term for this project, its use as a form of social commentary, and connection to narratives of myth. Building from that discussion, I take a closer look at Brooks's foundational text, *The Melodramatic Imagination* and Cavell's criticism of it. I

begin with Brooks and Cavell in order to posit that Powell's morals are dependent on the sacred and that this results in his madness and fanaticism. From there, I contend that Powell's evil as well as his madness and fanaticism are contagious, corrupting people, the public system of justice, the home, and the family. I expand my argument from Powell as a figure of evil and corrupting force to how the family and the home are defamiliarized and then reimagined so that we can have a new understanding of their purpose. Specifically, we will see that the traditional family is incapable of overcoming the threats it faces. Unless it can be reformed so that the focus is on the love, care, and raising of children, it will be torn asunder.

A secondary focus is on the use of tropes and conventions from other narratives and genres, namely fairytales, tragedies, and the Preacher man,[61] along with melodrama. I make use of these genres and conventions to elucidate an experience of the film. However, rather than a debate about the film's genre, I am more concerned with showing the use of these other narrative conventions and genres to underscore that the film has an ethical imperative and that it brings us directly into contact with the US-American ethical inheritance.

After the first section, the argument proceeds along a close reading of several pivotal scenes beginning with the opening scene with Lillian Gish's reading from the Bible and the corresponding look at Powell's dialogue with the "Lord." Then I move to examining the courtroom sequence during Powell's trial, the crowd's reaction to the revelation of Powell's crimes, and the corrupting effect Powell has on the justice system and public sphere. Once I begin explicating Powell's affect, I move to an examination of defamiliarizing of the home and the family. The final confrontation between Powell and Miss Cooper furthers my defamiliarization and destabilization claims and also

[61] Here I am thinking specifically of the Preachers in works like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Flannery O'Conner's *Wise Blood*, and Lewis Sinclair's *Elmer Gantry*. A preacher who at once can offer salvation and guidance to the people while also being corrupt, violent, and/or hiding their sins.

begins the investigation of my secondary concern with the multiple genres and conventions at work in the film. I conclude the chapter with the last sequence in the film, Christmas Day at Miss Cooper's home and her address to the viewer.

2.1 Melodrama: Madness, Fanaticism, and Social Criticism

In the Preface to the 1995 edition of *The Melodramatic Imagination,* Peter Brooks revisits the moral occult and the criticism his claim about its relationship to melodrama has received: "My thesis has been criticized for overemphasizing the ethical dimension of melodrama, its tendency to postulate a 'moral occult': the hidden yet operative domain of values that the drama, through its heightening, attempts to make present within the ordinary. And I readily admit that heightening and sensation for their own sake, a dramaturgy of hyperbole, excess, excitement, and 'acting out'—in the psychoanalytic sense—may be the essence of melodrama without any reference to ethical imperatives."[62]

Given the closeness of the relationship between melodrama and the moral occult, it is striking that Brooks is willing to admit that the essence of melodrama may be expressions of excess without any ethical imperatives. Perhaps then, these excesses are accounted for by a combination of the virtuosity of authors, directors, cinematographers, actors, etc., with the desire to bring interest to the ordinary and everyday. Yet Brooks qualifies his admission, "I would still, however, contend that those melodramas that matter most to us convince us that the dramaturgy of excess and overstatement corresponds to and evokes confrontations and choices that are of heightened importance, because in them we put our lives—however trivial and constricted—on the line."[63]

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[62] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), viii.
[63] Brooks, ix.

Here Brooks suggests we are invested in melodramas, despite any postmodern ironic detachment, because their excesses force us to engage with the meanings we apply to our everyday lives. Brooks's qualification tells us that the moral occult is not necessary for something to be considered a melodrama but those melodramas that are most important to us (as a society and/or individuals) do engage in questions of morals and ethical behavior.

Brooks implies that melodramas of cultural and moral significance must have the ethical imperative where I understand the ethical imperative as the film's attempt to express our moral values, what is good and evil. Brooks's claim parallels my argument that the US-American ethical inheritance is directly available in the films in this project. Yet, my reaction to Brooks's theory of melodrama, which at times seem more like ruminations, shades in the direction of Stanley Cavell's reaction recounted in his work on melodrama, *Contesting Tears.*[64] Cavell finds his own thinking about melodrama influenced by Brooks and there are places of agreement in their claims about melodrama. For instance, both Brooks and Cavell see melodrama as bringing interest to the ordinary and everyday. Despite this consensus, Cavell still questions Brooks's theory of melodrama in a way that directly influences how I understand *The Night of the Hunter*.

Cavell understands Brooks's idea of "the mode of the melodramatic as a response to what [he] gather[s] is understood as a historical event, the loss of conviction in a transcendent basis for the distinction between good and evil. This loss has, on Brooks's account, led to an intuition of the moral occult, a region or source of lost order the melodramatic attests to and is meant to reach."[65] Cavell then proceeds to quote Brooks at length in order to make a point about his theory of melodrama, I have quoted the relevant passages for our discussion:

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[64] Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).
[65] Cavell, *Contesting Tears,* 40-41.

> The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode….The world is subsumed by an underlying Manichaeism, and the narrative creates excitement for its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things….The center of the interest and scene of the underlying drama reside within what we could call the "moral occult," the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality [p. 4,5] […] The melodramatists refuse to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence; and they locate that transcendence in the struggle of the children of light with children of darkness in the play of the ethical mind [p.22] What we have called the moral occult, the locus of intense ethical forces from which man feels himself cut off, yet one he feels to have a real existence somewhere behind or beyond the façade of reality, and which exerts influence on his secular existence, stands as an abyss or gulf whose depths must, cautiously and with risk, be founded [p. 202][66]

This dense collection of text is an excellent summary of melodrama and its characteristics emphasized by Brooks. At the same time, the collection of quotes demonstrates the difficulty of Brooks's text which at times reads more as a series of aphorisms about melodrama than as a theory. Cavell navigates this difficulty in part by raising questions that the reader of Brooks may have found themselves asking. For my purposes, Cavell raises one point of clarification and one criticism of Brooks's theory that I use in my reading of *Hunter*: the site of melodrama and the dependence of the moral on the sacred.

Cavell criticizes Brooks's site of melodrama. He argues that Brooks does not pinpoint melodrama itself because he identifies melodrama as a response to an event, regicide, rather than the event itself as melodrama.[67] *The Night of the Hunter* shows the character Harry Powell, a traveling preacher whose nefarious motives to marry a vulnerable widow are uncovered by her frightened children and demonstrates a melodramatic scenario that spans the entire film. At the same time, *Hunter* presents a melodramatic event, the revelation of Powell's true nature to the

[66] Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, 41. Bracketed page numbers are in the original text, bracketed ellipses are mine.
[67] Cavell, *Contesting Tears, 42.* Brooks admits that melodrama exists prior to the French Revolution but uses that moment to highlight the beginning of what he sees as a specific iteration of melodrama (Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination,*

public. Once the disclosure in the film occurs, we will witness the consequences of an event that fragments a previously coherent public justice system into a public space plagued by fanaticism and madness.

Thus, we find ourselves exploring a film that both accords to and undermines the characteristics Brooks and Cavell identify as part of melodrama; melodrama both exists before and during a specific event but the consequences of the event bear witness to important changes in the moral order. I turn to Walzer and the idea of social criticism to bridge the two thinkers' points and why both are important to my interpretation of *Hunter.* The historical event does for Brooks what the revelation of Powell's true nature does for the viewer in *Hunter*. It creates a moment wherein the status quo changes; no longer can we assume our morality is dependent upon the sacred, and no longer can we take that Harry Powell as a moral paradigm. The melodramatic event marks a particular moment wherein it is crucial to reevaluate the relationship of our values and ethical behavior to authority and dominance. Brooks's melodramatic events bring us into another iteration of social criticism; Walzer argues that we want the approval of others in the way we behave, and so Brooks tells us instead of a divine standard, we now seek support from others to assure us that our behavior is ethical. *Hunter* reveals the fragmentation and chaos that can ensue when we learn what we thought was moral and upright is evil.

Cavell's point of clarification asks why it is a *theory* of melodrama that insists on positing a world of skepticism, fanaticism, and madness when this is the assumption of melodrama itself. In Melodrama, the sacred provides the ground for the moral and thus "plunges" the audience into a world of moral madness.[68] The Production Code's insistence that Hollywood films uphold a

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[68] Cavell is working from Kant here to argue that Brooks's *theory* of melodrama posits the negation of Kant's claim that the moral provides the ground for the religious. "For Kant, to place the moral as the dependent of the sacred is to plunge into one of the various forms of madness he calls transcendental illusions, among which are skepticism,

certain moral standard that depends on US-America's sacred values—namely biblicism, the family, and in *Hunter* civil law—confirms that the melodramas in this project immerse the viewer into that world of moral madness. My reading of *The Night of the Hunter* shows how the film clarifies our hidden attitudes and behaviors toward moral values and institutions such as family. At the same time, the film questions the extent to which the world is truly desacralized, and the extent to which religiosity and faith (both pure and perverse) continue to be powerful.

2.2. Moral Foils: The Introduction of the Forces of Good and Evil

The opening scenes confirm for us that what Powell views as moral, or even acceptable, is based on his conception of the sacred. We are introduced to Powell by Lillian Gish's[69] voice as she reads from the Bible, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing."[70] As Gish reads, the shot dissolves from the scene with Gish's head and torso superimposed over a black starry sky, to an aerial shot of the Ohio River. Gish continues reading, "But inwardly they are ravening wolves," with the end of this line, there is a cut from the Ohio River to a series of houses along the river. Gish begins to complete the verse, "Ye shall know them by their fruits," and we cut again, this time to an aerial shot of a house with a yard and open cellar and a group of children.

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fanaticism, and magic (say occultism)" (*Contesting Tears*, 42). For Cavell, this reversal of Kant need not be an assumption of the *theory* of melodrama because it is the assumption of melodrama itself (*Contesting Tears,* 41-43).

[69] Lillian Gish plays the character Rachel Cooper but, as I will discuss in the concluding section below, we do not yet know her role in the film. Consequently, we see Lillian Gish as Lillian Gish, the famous actress, heroine of several melodramas, perhaps most notorious for her roles in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance.* The connection between Lillian Gish as an anonymous character to Lillian Gish the actress outside of this film is one of Cavellian automatism. Gish carries a pre-existing, automatic meaning, which is then made to fit this new scenario where she is a mythic figure in the sky and later in the film when she is the figure of the asexual grandmother, Mother Goose, and alternative preacher. For more on Cavellian automatism see Dan Morgan, "Stanley Cavell: the Contingencies of Film and Its Theory" in *Thinking in the Dark: Cinema, Theory, Practice,* ed. Murray Pomerance and R. Barton Palmer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 162-173 and Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*: *Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (1971; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[70] All quotes are for this scene are found in "Miss Cooper Teaches the children about the Lord," beginning at 00:01:32.

The camera cuts effect a feeling of increasing focus as we narrow in on the target of Gish's Bible verses. The cuts are timed to Gish's lines suggesting that she motivates the camera cuts.

In the scene, we can hear the children, they are playing hide and seek, dispersing to hide while one person counts. The camera moves to the left, following one child as he goes to hide in the cellar. However, the child stops before entering the cellar and backs up. The camera tracks in until we see a long shot of the child stopping at the open cellar door and his friend (the seeker) running to join him. There is a dissolve to a medium-long shot of the back of the child who was headed to hide in the cellar. We see legs, a woman's lower legs; her calves and feet lie across the top cellar stairs. We cannot see her torso, but her immobile legs combined with the child's stunned stillness indicate the legs belong to a corpse; the woman is dead. The camera continues to track in, as the seeker enters the shot from the right, asking his friend, "What's wrong?" The hider/friend only points to the cellar, the legs, and presumably, the rest of the unseen corpse.

The camera continues to track in on the legs, showing one shoe partially hanging off of the corpse's feet. The seeker yells, "Hey! Hey!" as he realizes the woman is dead. The camera stops tracking in when the legs are in a medium shot. The camera then tracks back out quickly. We see the children all gathered around the cellar door, looking at the body. Then we cut to the aerial extreme long shot of the children looking in the cellar and Gish's voice picks up again: "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit." The shot dissolves and is replaced with another aerial shot of a car being driven along a road. Gish goes on, "Neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit." We cut again to a long shot of the car from the side. We can see that a man dressed in black is driving the car. Gish starts a new sentence with this cut, "wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." Once Gish finishes this sentence, there is a cut to medium shot of Harry Powell.

From the timing of Gish's reading with the camera cuts, we know that Powell is a false prophet. Powell begins his dialogue, and we have a counter introduction to the one we have just received. The dialogue offers us a peek into the mind of the character. The first words Powell speaks are a question asking "Well now what's it to be Lord? Another widow? How many's it been? Six? Twelve? I just remember…."[71]

Powell does not finish this last sentence. Instead, he looks straight and to the left, he pulls his chin toward his chest, as if he is remembering what he has done. Then, he looks up, as if he is hearing the Lord speak to him and touches his hat in a kind of salute. Something has pulled him out of his memory. He continues speaking, "You just say the word lord and I'm on my way." There is a cut to the road Powell is driving down. As if to suggest that Powell is already on his way in accordance with "the Lord's instructions." The shot dissolves back to Mitchum driving the car. This time the camera is angled and positioned at the front of the car looking back and at Mitchum in a medium shot, while he drives. Powell says, "You always send me money to go forth and preach your word" and looks up toward the sky as he speaks. "The widow, with a little wad of bills hid away in the sugar bowl," he says in a soft appreciative voice with a smile.

The shot dissolves to the road Powell drives down. Then we dissolve again, and we see the back of Powell's torso and head in a medium shot as he drives the car. He speaks again, as if he is carrying on a conversation, "Lord, I am tired." Then we cut to a shot looking back from an angle. After this cut, Powell says, "Sometimes I really wonder if you understand." Powell looks back and to his right side. When he turns his head forward and lifts his eyes he begins speaking again, "Not that you mind the killings. Your book is full of killings."

[71] All quotes are taken from "Harry Speaks to the Lord," beginning at 00:02:51.

These lines confirm for us, if we had any doubt from the visual clues, that Harry Powell is the one who murdered the woman we saw in the cellar and that he has killed six to twelve, possibly more, women. The shots of Powell from multiple angles gives a us a feeling of trying to find the right perspective of Powell, suggesting that the camera cannot settle on how Powell should be presented or that we must see Powell from all sides. Powell continues, “But there are things you do hate Lord.” Here Powell begins to look agitated and then continues speaking, “Perfume smelling things.” Powell’s look transforms from agitated to disgusted. He goes on, “Lacey things. Things with curly hair.”

Along with realizing that Powell is the false prophet, we also learn here that his morals, what he deems as right and wrong, are based on his conception of the sacred. Naturally, Powell chooses bible verses that fit his needs but that does not mean what he views as sacred or profane does not tell us what is moral or amoral for him. For Powell, the Lord approves of “killings,” but hates the sexual allure of women—"lacey things” and “things with curly hair.” In turn, we see a kind of fanaticism or madness within Powell. We must wonder, does Powell really believe he speaks with the Lord? In the car, we see him change, stop speaking, and look off to the right as if he hears something. The scene of Willa’s murder also suggests Powell can hear the Lord when he pauses with his head cocked and arm raised. Later, when Powell is about to harm John in the cellar, he again looks up and claims he can hear the Lord speaking to him. Each time Powell seems to hear the Lord, his actions stop, he listens without moving and then continues in accordance with what he has heard. The film does not clearly answer if we are to see this as an act of deceit or if Powell really believes he hears the voice of the Lord. In any case, this open dialogue suggests Powell believes he has access to ongoing revelations of the sacred and tailors his ethics accordingly.

On the other hand, it seems obvious that Powell's idea of the sacred is driven by his desires—in particular by his repressed sexual desire for women that has been displaced or fetishized into a desire to murder.[72] We see a progression of influence; Powell's desires affect or drive his understanding of the sacred and his morals depend on the sacred. In turn this means Powell's desires are channeled through the sacred so that the sacred is used as a medium or source justification for his desires. Arguably then, Powel's morals are actually based on his desires, but this claim does not consider the frequency Powell justifies his behavior through the sacred. We see an example of this justification when Powell justifies his chastisement of Willa on their wedding in biblical language; Powell tells her that a woman's body is a temple for "begetting children," and not for the "lust of men."[73] In another example, before he attempts to harm John, Powell hears the Lord speak to him, presumably telling him exactly what to do to John.[74] While pursing John and Pearl down the river, we witness Powell justify his actions and feelings through a sermon he gives at a peach farm, preaching about ungrateful children and their impending

[72] This statement hints is premised on the work in Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Working from Silverman, I take up her Lacanian based claim that women's perceived lack is a secondary construction to cover that men already have a lack or a castration experience when they enter into language. Here, we can see Powell's aversion to women and their genitalia as part of a castration complex, but it is not a woman's lack of a penis that is problematic but Powell's own experience of the separation in himself with his induction into language. In a more Freudian understanding, we can argue that Powell displaces his experience of castration onto women and his repulsion at women's perceived lack of a penis is replaced with a feeling desire for murder.

[73] What I mean by biblical language is that while Powell does quote directly from the Bible, at other times, he uses language such as "blinded mine enemies," "atonement," "damnation," which sounds biblical and might be taken from various places in the Bible, and appropriates it for his own ends. For example, we see Powell use biblical language in the jail cell with Ben Harper in order to justify his desire for money and the ownership of his knife (Ben Talks about Having Money for His Kids," 9:18). In another scene "Icey Learns Willa Ran Away," 42:46, Powell uses scripture to justify his burning of the fabricated note from Willa and his means for coping with her alleged abandonment.

[74] In this scene, Powell looks upward, away from John and Pearl and says, "The Lords a-talking to me now. He's a saying, 'A liar is an abomination before mine eyes.'" The viewer is given the impression that Powell acts on the orders of God and this is reinforced by the ventriloquizing of God's words in a style that sounds like something we might read in the Bible. ("Harry asks about the Money," 00:52:25).

damnation.[75] Thus, I suggest that while Powell's desires might drive him and his conception of the sacred and by extension the moral, we cannot reduce his morals to dependence on his desires.

The exact nature of the sacred for Powell is only implied. Indeed, Powell avoids naming the religion he claims, instead answering that question (put to him by Ben Harper while they share a jail cell) he professes, "The religion the Almighty and me worked out betwixt us." Powell's religion, professed or not, is a kind of biblicism, which we can infer from his references to the bible and the camp scene with Willa that clearly alludes to evangelical meetings.[76]

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[75] In this scene Powell says, "An ungrateful child is an abomination before the eyes of God" ("John and Pearl Look for Food," 00:59:39). Once more, this is the kind of language that sounds biblical but is not a direct quote. It echoes the commandment to "Honor thy mother and father" and is performed by Powell in a powerful and commanding voice so that the viewers feel as though it has authority from the biblical text.

[76] See "Willa Preaches about Sins" beginning at 00:32:01. There is a breadth of the evangelical tradition that is captured in this scene. First, there is an allusion to "camp meetings" from the Second Great Awakening, where people who were not ordained ministers would lead other's in worship and offer testimony. The camp meetings are perhaps most well-known for taking place during the Second Great Awakening. Nathan Hatch describes what was encouraged in a Methodist camp meeting: "Those who led the meeting made overt attempts to have the power of God 'strike fire' over a mass audience; they encouraged uncensored testimonials by persons without respect to age, gender, or race; the public sharing of private ecstasy, overt physical display and emotional release; loud and spontaneous response to preaching and the use of folk music…." (Hatch, *Democratization,* 50). The display of ecstasy, emotion, and egalitarianism among the races and genders in the camp meetings made them objects of criticism by the more established and conservative religious traditions. While we can see how Willa is partaking of the public sharing of private ecstasy and an overt physical displays and emotional release, we know that a camp meeting known to take place between 1760-1810, is anachronistic for a film about the era of the depression, made in the mid 1950s. The time period of the film, the late 1920s and early 1930s was also a time when evangelicalism was prominent (For the rise of fundamentalism and its difference from or participation with evangelicalism see, for example: George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American* Culture, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006]; Ernest Sandeen *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970]; and Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014]). The film alludes to preachers who traveled the country and had temporary barns and tents erected for their visits to specific cities. The film takes particular interest in Billy Sunday, who was an ex-baseball player turned preacher and made millions of dollars preaching between 1869 and 1935 (Robert F. Martin, *The Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and The Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002], xiii). The most specific reference to Sunday occurs in the scene when Powell and Ben share a jail cell, Powell mentions that if he had the $10,000 he could build a tabernacle to make that "Wheeling Island tabernacle look like a chicken house" ("Ben Talks About Having Money for his Kids," 9:03). Billy Sunday commissioned and participated in the building of a tabernacle in Wheeling, West Virginia, which was completed on February 3, 1912. There is an awareness of the activity of at least famous evangelical preachers and tropes and a likening of Powell to them. Finally, in the mid 1950s, we have evangelical religion returning to the "mainstream" after several decades of seeming alienation (for a full elaboration on the activity of fundamentalists and evangelicals during the 1930s and 1940s, which in turn allowed them to return to the mainstream with powerful influence see, Joel A. Carpenter *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]). We can thus see how the scene of Willa's testimony dramatizes revivalist camp meetings and the film's the no-nonsense, "common man," traveling preacher who influences people through his preaching and community activities. Unwittingly or not, the scene builds upon the tradition of evangelicalism in American religion and its effect on culture.

I suggested in the opening that Powell's physical transformation in Willa's murder scene is a moment of recognition and reversal. Aristotle defines recognition as, "a change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune."[77] The transformation of Powell in Willa's murder reveals his hidden nature, his Bluebeard persona to the viewers. At the same time, this moment begins the change in Powell's fortune. Prior to Willa, Powell's murders had not been connected to him. After Willa's murder, however, Powell begins to face obstacles that he cannot overcome, obstacles such as the children, the river, and Miss Cooper, which eventually lead to his capture and assumed execution. Powell is thwarted by John and Pearl in the cellar, he stumbles on a jar, he cannot capture them because of the mud next to the river, his attempt to charm Miss Cooper fails, and his night of hunting at Miss Cooper's ends with her shooting at him. The revelation of Powell's Bluebeard persona to the camera and audience creates a moment of recognition and reversal with the consequences of the reversal playing out in the second half of the film.

With the reversal also comes a seeming change in Powell's relationship with the sacred as a source for the moral. After Powell leaves the Harper's home to pursue the children down the river, we learn that Powell diverged from his usual behavior, and he killed a man in order to steal his horse. This murder is committed not because the Lord hates perfumed and lacey things but for pragmatic reasons; Powell needs a mode of transportation. Killing the farmer so that he can pursue John and Pearl is not only omitted from the film, it is not justified through divine revelation, biblical quotation, or preaching. The absence of the justification is notable because, as mentioned above, Powell defends his behaviors through these means. Yet, his secretive murder of the farmer for the horse and his threat to the children—not just John and Pearl but Miss Cooper's entire

[77] Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. Malcolm Heath, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 18.

household as he would have to kill all of them if he were to hide the murder of John and Pearl—are left undefended. We can read this in several ways. On the one hand, we can see this as another affirmation that Powell is a false prophet, or false preacher, who claims to do the Lord's work but is only driven by his desire and uses his religion as a convenient ruse to literally "get away with murder." On the other hand, we know from Powell's prayer in the jail that he believes the Lord placed purposely placed him on a path to Willa Harper and the money.[78] We could argue that Powell is doing whatever is necessary to stay on that path and that his actions are still the Lord's work.

Powell's use of the sacred to justify his morals, even if the conception of the sacred and the justification are driven by his desires, offers us a cautionary tale of what happens when one allows the moral to depend on the sacred. Cavell ventriloquizes Kant to tell us that the moral cannot depend on the sacred because to allow that relationship "is to plunge into one of the various forms of madness…." I contend that Powell's dependency of the moral on the sacred for shows the viewer an example of the corresponding forms of madness, namely fanaticism and magic or as Cavell suggests, occultism. We see evidence of occultism (and perhaps even magic) in Powell's assurance that he receives divine revelations; Powell assumes he has access to the supernatural which brings with it knowledge and experience beyond the ordinary. We can see the fanaticism in Powell's morals and conception of the sacred in his obsession with murdering women and money.

2.3. Fanaticism and the Contagion of Evil

Powell's character, while offering us a cautionary tale of what happens when the moral is dependent on the sacred, pushes the consequences of such moral dependence beyond the individual and personal to the public realm. In particular, we see the corruption of the people who were

[78] See "Harry Thanks the Lord," beginning at 00:10:11.

charmed by Powell and the nefarious changes to the justice system as it struggles to handle Powell and his crimes.

During the courtroom scene, we are shown Icey and Walt Spoon, two people whom Powell dupped with great success.[79] After Powell is arrested, we dissolve to a close-up of Icey Spoon, looking disheveled and much less dignified than in our previous encounters with her. She starts shouting "Lynch him! Lynch Him! Bluebeard!"[80] There is a cut to a medium shot of Walt and Icey Spoon sitting among a crowd of people. Then Walt starts shouting and gesturing, "Twenty-five wives!" Icey adds to Walt's statement, "And he killed every last one of them." Then we cut to a medium-long shot, still with Walt and Icey in the center of the frame, but we see the size of the crowd they are among. People are standing against the back wall while others are seated. Icey turns from the camera to address the crowd. At this point, we do not necessarily know the location of the scene, but it is clear we are looking at a place where the fate of Powell will be decided. Other people in the crowd stand up and echo Icey and Walt, continuing to call Powell "Bluebeard." Then the whole crowd stands, shouting various things such as, "Lynch him" and "Bluebeard!" We hear banging in the background, which finally verifies that we are watching a scene in a courtroom.

The next cut is to a medium close-up of John seated in a chair. The picture of Abraham Lincoln, which was present in the previous two court scenes, re-affirms that we are indeed in a courtroom. In fact, this appears to be the same court where Powell was sentenced for car theft and Ben Harper was sentenced for murder.[81] Previously the judge issued justice with Abraham Lincoln overseeing both the judge and judgement, but now we see a dramatic change in the attitude and

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[79] Admittedly, Walt seems to remain doubtful of Powell but Icey's insistence on Powell's goodness, Walt's emasculation by Icey, and Powell's performance of the suffering preacher suppress Walt's doubts.
[80] The quotes for this scene are all taken from "John Gets Put on the Stand," beginning at 1:25:50.
[81] See "Harry watches a Burlesque Dancer," beginning at 4:56 and "Ben talks about Having Money for his Kids" beginning at 7:36, respectively, for the first two courtroom scenes.

temperament of the courtroom, as people continue to yell over the banging gavel. The scene in the courtroom is an example of the defamiliarization and destabilization effected by Powell. The courtroom had previously been a location of order and justice, complete with one of America's most venerated presidents overseeing the proceedings. With Powell's arrest, the courtroom has become a scene of chaos. The judge cannot control the crowd let alone issue a sentence of justice.

Despite the clamorous spectators in the courtroom, a lawyer is attempting to gently question an unresponsive John. The lawyer soon stops pressing John to identify Powell as the man who killed his mother. When the lawyer releases John from the witness chair, we hear more shouting, "Bluebeard! Bluebeard!" from offscreen. Miss Cooper begins to usher John away. There is a cut to a close-up of a gavel banging on a wooden block as the noise in the background has returned to a dull roar. The gavel is a symbol of the courtroom's order and a judge's power. The close-up of it shows us that the tools of order are trying to combat the madness and fanaticism that has filled the courtroom and public. No longer does the gavel wield the power and finality of justice that it did in the earlier courtroom scenes.

The heinousness of Powell's crimes as well as his status as a Preacher and use of religion to hide his nature has proved more disruptive than the legal system can manage. Furthermore, we never see the lawyer's or judge's face, which I suggest indicates that the more abstract concepts of law and justice are the focus of this scene, rather than the agents of the courtroom. At this point in the film, the justice system and its ability to uphold and maintain the moral order has been fragmented and we see only remnants of a previously whole system: the judge's gavel, the picture of Abraham Lincoln, the bodies of people who work for the legal system.

The fragmentation of the justice system suggests that we are in a world where our meanings and values are not provided to us by a universally agreed upon metaphysics or system of belief; in

short, we are in a desacralized world. I mark this fragmentation as a change from the first half of the film, where we saw the justice system uphold the moral order even when faced with the murders committed by Ben Harper. The change in the cohesion of the justice system and the moral order pivots around the revelation of Powell's crimes to the diegetic public. [82] Powell's arrest is to *The Night of the Hunter* what the French Revolution is to Brooks's theory of melodrama; they are the pivotal event around which marks the desacralization of the world.

Once the public knows Powell's crimes, the people do not respond with a confidence in the justice system or examine what it was about Powell that let him be so deceitful. I argue that we saw among most of the characters an implicit assumption that Powell was good and trustworthy because of his vocation; Powell was presumed moral because he preached a recognizable religion. Powell's madness and fanaticism, which stemmed from the dependence of the moral on the sacred, spreads to the public like a contagion of corruption. We can see the fanaticism of the public by comparing Bart's, the executioner, attitude toward his job from the beginning of the film to the end.

Bart is introduced to us after Ben Harper is executed. The camera follows two guards as they walk out of the prison discussing Ben's hanging. The one guard, whom we will learn is Bart, describes the details of Ben's hanging, that he kicked some but was overall "cool."[83] We cut to the guards arriving at the house of the presumed executioner, who answers the other guard's question,

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[82] We have to mark the revelation of Powell's character to the diegetic public as different than the reversal and recognition the viewer experiences during Willa's murder scene. While the viewer is a public, we are a non-diegetic public, separate from the events on the screen, regardless of how they affect us, and are unable to affect the film's universe. The separation of the viewer from the events in the film, both spatially and temporally, is fundamental to film theory and is notoriously mythologized in the story of the first screening by the Lumiere Brothers where people were said to jump out of the way when they saw an oncoming train on the screen. Cavell addresses this separation in his own work on the ontology of film and also uses that separation to theorize about acknowledgement (See *The World Viewed* and "The Avoidance of Love" in *Must We Mean What We Say?* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969] 267-353. Cavell's claims are indebted to Andre Bazin's work, *What is Cinema,* specifically the powerfully influential essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image."

[83] Quotes from the first scene with Bart are taken from, "Harry Thanks the Lord," beginning at 00:10:35.

that Ben took the secret of the money's location to the grave with him, when he, the executioner, "dropped" him.

Then we cut to a long shot of the kitchen inside of the house and hear a door opening. We see a woman stirring a pot and she asks, "is that you Bart?" Bart walks in and removes his coat. There is a cut and we see Bart framed in a medium shot in the left foreground as he looks through a door. Beyond that door, we see two children sleeping. Bart watches then a moment longer and then we cut back to the long shot of the kitchen. Bart walks to the sink and begins washing his hands. He explains to his wife and mother of his children that he thinks he would be better off if he quit his job as a guard. The wife/mother rejects this saying that there is no way he could go back to working in the mines as he would leave her as a widow if another blast happens. Then she tells him that he is always like this when there is a hanging, and that he knows he doesn't have to be there for it. Her comment reveals that Bart has not been honest with his wife about the nature of his job. We know Bart told the other guard that he "dropped" Ben; he is the executioner, not a mere guard, and must not only be present but perform the execution when there is a hanging. Bart purposely keeps the true nature of his occupation from his wife and children so that it does not disturb them and corrupt the purity of his home—an idea we will return to below.

At the end of the film, however, Bart no longer mourns his job of executioner, at least not when it comes to Powell.[84] The sequence with Bart at the end of the film is interspersed with a series of cuts comparing the town and their reaction to Powell's trial with Miss Cooper and the children trying to leave town. We meet Powell and then Bart while the camera tracks along with Miss Cooper and the children following them until they pass the end of the jail. Then Miss Cooper and the others continue out of the frame and the camera stops and then tracks toward the jail door.

[84] For this scene and related dialogue see "The Town is in a Rage," beginning at 1:26:40.

We see police officers escorting Powell out of the jail and down the steps. The camera tilts downward slightly as the men come down the stairs so that the camera is level with them while they escort Powell into a police vehicle. We can hear the crowd from offscreen as they approach the jail where Powell was held. There is a cut to a shot with deep focus. We see Powell and the officers' profiles in the extreme foreground on the left of the screen, they are all seated in the car looking to the right, which is where the camera is pointed. We see the executioner come out of a door, which is the door to his home.[85] The executioner is framed in the center shot, seen through the open window of the police car.

One of the Officers calls, "Hey Bart." He responds, "Yeah?" Then there is a cut to a medium shot from a low angle of Bart. The officer in the car says, "We're saving this bird up for you." Bart responds with disturbing gusto, "This time, it'll be a privilege!" and takes his hat off to the officers. This is the man who is so distraught about his job that he lies to his wife and considers returning to work in a mine, where he faces possible death from an explosion. Now, however, he is excited and feels privileged to execute a man. Adding to our disquiet at Bart's enthusiasm at the prospect of executing Powell is his lack of concern about his job's potential to sully his home. In the beginning of the film, public justice was something presented as necessary, but the home needed protection from the darker parts of that system. Now, however, it is only Miss Cooper who seems concerned with keeping the home protected from the public.

Miss Cooper and the children's navigation of the town after the trial and their flight from the mob shows us a contrast between the public's and private's moral orders. Miss Cooper separates herself and her children from the shattered justice system, choosing to avoid everyone

[85] The sense of space in this sequence is disorienting. Presumably, the door we should be looking at, from which Bart exits, should be the prison door. Instead, Bart comes out his home. There is a Christmas wreath on the door and the windows curtains.

as much as possible while the public grapples with a lack of universal ordering and operates in chaos. A mob headed by Icey and Walt tries to enact an execution—a punishment that was previously shown as a just and reasonable, albeit regrettable, response to murder; now, however, the execution has taken on a fervor and excitement that undermines its efficacy to restore order. Miss Cooper's avoidance of the public will turn into an attempt to keep her own privatized realm—specifically her home and the children—safe from the madness and fanaticism of the public. Here we have an inversion of the common assumption with the public private divide, where rather than curbing the full expression of a comprehensive doctrine[86] from the private realm so that it can be justified and expressed in the public realm, we see the worry that the public realm's practices will influence and corrupt the private realm, in particular the cultivation and safety of children and the space of the home.

2.4 The Uncanny: Defamiliarizing the Home

The concern about the home as a space of purity and safety is demonstrated through the three men who kill people: Bart, Ben Harper, and Powell. Bart and Ben provide a foil to Powell, illustrating how different mentalities about killing affect the space of the home. Powell's influence on the space of the home, namely his ability to corrupt the space, manifests as an uncanny visual experience of specific rooms in the home. The homes Powell penetrates are spaces we have seen in other moments of the film. These spaces are familiar to us not only because we have seen them but also because the space was shown as safe and pure, conventions the film assumes are associated

[86] I take this terminology from John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (expanded edition [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005]). See especially page 13. The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon nicely defines a comprehensive doctrine as "A comprehensive doctrine is a set of beliefs affirmed by citizens concerning a range of values, including moral, metaphysical, and religious commitments, as well as beliefs about personal virtues, and political beliefs about the way society ought to be arranged. They form a conception of the good and inform judgments concerning "what is of value in life, the ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole (PL 13)" (Paul Voice, "Comprehensive Doctrine," Chapter in *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, edited by Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy, 126–29 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014]).

with the home. Once Powell enters the space that was previously familiar, however, those spaces and rooms become unfamiliar. The visual experience creates a feeling of the uncanny. I mean the uncanny in the Freudian sense, where something familiar is defamiliarized so that when we experience it again, the object, sensation, image, etc, is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.[87] The uncanny experience of the spaces defamiliarizes and destabilizes the conventions and beliefs we associate with the home. Before Powell defamiliarizes the space, we see how safety and purity are established as common attitudes and beliefs about the home.

Bart and Ben are foils to Powell because they are variants of the murdering husband. Ben Harper who murders in order to provide for his family. Bart also murders to provide for his family, but Bart's killing is sanctioned by the court and governing laws of the society. Powell, as we know, kills for complicated reasons related to his desires, morals, and the sacred. The similarity between Bart and Ben in their reason for violence is also found in their relationship to their home. In the first scene with Bart, he washes his hands once he is home. I suggest that we see Bart's hand washing as a means of cleansing or purifying himself from the necessary and accepted defilement found in the public realm. He does not want to sully or endanger his home and children. Ben Harper is never able to penetrate his home after he steals the money and kills two men. He sees his children one last time outside, in their yard, where he imparts the knowledge of the money and teaches John one final lesson about what it means to "swear" or make a promise.[88] Once Ben has committed such a vile crime, his access to the home is barred Bart, on the other hand, is able to enter and dwell in the home only because he lies about his profession and undergoes a cleansing ritual upon his return from work.

[87] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental & Neuro* 11, no. 2 (2018): 84-100, http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=135254124&site=eds-live&scope=site.
[88] For this scene, see "Ben Comes Home with Money," beginning at 00:5:10.

Powell, on the other hand, enters the home with a corrupting influence and heedless of how he affects its safety and purity. The murder of Willa, of course offers, an example of Powell's contagious evil, as he defamiliarizes and destabilizes the convention of marital consummation and the sanctity of a couple's bedroom. Willa's bedroom is not a space we see absent of Powell, but we do see a marital bedroom before Willa's death. In the opening, I mentioned how the murder scene echoes the bedroom scene between Powell and Willa on their wedding night. The inversion of Powell and Willa's positions between the two scenes, the repetition of praying, the presence of the knife, and even the closing of the blinds all create a feeling of familiarity. Yet, the inversions between Powell and Willa, from their positions standing and lying to who is praying and finally to who wants to consummate the marriage and the nature of that consummation, defamiliarize the scene and the space of a bedroom so that we have a sensation of the uncanny.

Powell's effect on the Harpers' home is better illustrated in the sequence when Powell looks for John and Pearl hiding in their basement after he has killed Willa.[89] The scene begins with Powell singing his hunting song, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."[90] While singing, Powell leans against a tree (an irony not to be missed!) in the left foreground. This is a long shot with deep focus so that we can see both Powell and the details of the house. We cut to the next shot, still in deep focus and we can see Powell's profile as he calls for the children. In this shot, we see only the left side of the house and the basement windows. Powell pushes off the tree, calling for the

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[89] See "John and Pearl Hide from Harry," beginning at 45:13.

[90] Hymns full lyrics: What a fellowship, what a joy divine, /Leaning on the everlasting arms; /What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, /Leaning on the everlasting arms. /Leaning, leaning, /Safe and secure from all alarms; /Leaning, leaning, /Leaning on the everlasting arms. /Oh, how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way, /Leaning on the everlasting arms; /Oh, how bright the path grows from day to day, /Leaning on the everlasting arms. /Leaning, leaning, /Safe and secure from all alarms; /Leaning, leaning, /Leaning on the everlasting arms. /What have I to dread, what have I to fear, / Leaning on the everlasting arms; /I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, /Leaning on the everlasting arms. /Leaning, leaning, /Safe and secure from all alarms; Leaning, leaning, /Leaning on the everlasting arms.

children as he begins to walk toward the house. Powell exudes the sense of a predator who has trapped his prey. Powell is confident that he can get what he wants from John and Pearl, but he must still find them. As he walks toward the house, there is an iris out to show us that John and Pearl are peaking through the basement window, hiding from Powell. In the background we can hear Powell calling to the children, trying to find them.

After two shots of the children, we cut to a shot of the staircase in the house and a door to John and Pearl's room. The shot is lit by the light from the window, but the scene is still heavily shaded with stark black and white lines. Powell walks into the frame and then ascends the stairs, calling for the children. When Powell ascends the steps, his perpendicular figure matches the banister poles. Once more, his evil exceeds his person and extends into the surrounding scene. Powell passes through the spaces of the home without pause, invading each location that previously offered comfort and safety to the children.

We cut back to the children for several shots before we return to Powell and his search. When we return to Powell, we cut to a long shot looking from the far side of a bed toward the door of John and Pearl's room. This shot creates an uncanny feeling: it is familiar because it echoes the shot of John in front of the window on the night Powell arrives in town; it is unfamiliar because the space of the bedroom has taken on a radically different feeling now that Powell is inside. When we first encounter this room, John stands in front of the window at night in order to tell Pearl a story.[91] We can see the shadow of the window frame on the wall and John stands in front of the window so that he too casts a shadow. While John is telling his story, a large black shadow invades the light coming through the window and covers John's shadow. John is at first scared but then he looks out the window. There is a cut to Powell standing in front of the house, matching the

[91] See "John Tells Pearl a Story," beginning at 00:14:11.

lamppost in his shape and stature. Powell begins to walk away singing his song, “Leaning.” We cut back to John as he climbs into bed, soothing Pearl by saying that shadow was nothing, “just a man.” John had clearly underestimated Powell, as he is in many ways more than a man, but the home provides John with a sense of safety and security so that he is able to go to sleep without worrying about the man outside.

Now when we enter John and Pearl’s bedroom with Powell, his threat eradicates any feeling of safety. He no longer stalks his prey from afar instead, there is a fox in the hen house so to speak. When Powell opens the door to John and Pearl’s room, he enters without hesitation or concern. He walks in and bends down to look under the bed for the children. When he realizes they are not there, he stands ups and heads toward the door, to leave their bedroom. The home has been defamiliarized so that it is now a trap rather than a haven from the dangers of the world.

The other men in the film provide foils for Powell bringing into relief that the root of Powell’s evil is not that he murders. Ben Harper and Powell are murderers, but Ben accepts his fate and his execution creates remorse in Bart. Moreover, even though Ben does not exhibit the kind of guilt and moral struggle we see in Bart, he nevertheless commits his crime out of a sense of duty to his family, the need to provide in a time of scarcity and poverty. Bart must kill as part of his job, but it too arises from a duty to society and enforcement of laws and justice. Powell, however, murders women because of their sexual affront to “the Lord” and justifies his actions because of his personal religious beliefs rather than a duty to others and he is able to spread his corresponding madness and fanaticism to people and homes alike. Thus, Powell’s capacity for contagion and corruption is underscored by Bart’s location when he displays jovialness at the prospect of executing Powell on the steps of his home. In this moment, we see Powell has not only

infected the Harper's home or corrupted a public official but that he has threatened all homes that were previously so carefully protected.

2.5. Refamiliarizing the Family

Along with Powell's threat to the home is his shattering of the structural form and power of the traditional family.[92] I take the "traditional" family to be a married heterosexual man and women and their children; the father is the breadwinner and head of the family; the mother is the caretaker of children, has authority over her children and the domestic space, but ultimately answers to her husband. In the United States, this family unit is the place where the full expression of the sacred myths of the nation (religious freedom, the right to privacy, freedom of speech) can be expressed and nurtured. However, what we see in this film are consistent external threats to the family and the family's inability to overcome those threats without sundering itself. The cleaving of the family begins with Ben Harper, who is willing to murder and be executed if it means he has provided for his children and their future. His actions, while committed from the desire to fulfill his role as breadwinning father, simultaneously breaks the family because it causes the loss of the father figure. Rather than the cohesion and bond among family members working to overcome the scarcity and poverty in the era of the depression, the breadwinning father allows himself to be removed from the family, believing his role and duties fulfilled despite the youth of his children.

Once Ben Harper is gone, Willa Harper is pressured by Icey Spoon to find someone to marry so that she has help raising the children. Icey presses Willa, insisting that "the Lord" meant

[92] This term might not be appropriate here as it is just being introduced in the 50s. But the idea that family is the place people look to in order to see if the nation can overcome obstacles and to reassert their sacred myths, to use melodramatic language, is very much alive and evident in this film, seen in the destruction of the traditional family and the hope of its ability to thwart whatever threat it faces.

children to be raised by two parents, a father and a mother.[93] Willa gives into the Icey's pressure when she meets Powell, not the least because Powell is charismatic and able to charm women. Yet, in marrying Powell, Willa embraces the submissive and dutiful wife, obeying and believing the father figure over her children's claims of his evil until she sees proof of Powell's intentions. Willa's focus moves from the survival of her family to that of purity and pleasing Powell. We know of Willa's desire for cleanliness and purity from her comments to Powell after he lies to her about the location of the money and in the wedding night scene, when she prays to be made clean for Powell.[94] This concern for purity displaces her concern for her children and her primary task as caretaker. In the scene of her murder, we see that Willa does not fight Powell. She is submissive and accepting of his rule. The children are thus abandoned by both of their biological parents: the father, thinking he is unnecessary having fulfilled his role as breadwinner; the mother in her desire to realize the perfection of purity and submission. Ironically, both parents abandon their family while trying to actualize their idealized role within the family. Ben and Willa destabilize the conventions and assumptions associated with the traditional family by illustrating that the ideal family is an impossibility, which sunders itself in the process of trying to achieve the societal expectations.

Icey Spoon's declaration that the Lord intended two people to raise children is a statement of a tradition about Hollywood's American family that must be defamiliarized and destabilized so that the meaning of the family can be expanded and reimagined. Icey's statement that children are meant to be raised by a man and a woman is sardonically proven wrong when the figure who saves

[93] See "John and Pearl Think about Buying Things," beginning at 13:40.

[94] The first comment from Willa is "I feel clean now. My whole body's just a-quivering with cleanness" ("Willa has Concerns about Harry," 24:19). The second comment is said in a prayer, Willa framed in a medium close-up, looks up and says "Help me to get clean so that I can be what Harry wants me to be" ("Pearl Considers Revealing a Secret," 31:03).

John and Pearl and then raises them is a single woman, Miss Cooper. Miss Cooper proves the figure who can protect the family because she does not focus on actualizing a role but instead focuses on protecting the children. The focus on the children also suggests that the true purpose of a family is childrearing. Both Willa and Ben lose sight of the fact that in order to realize the ideal roles in the family they must remain present for the children. This focus on the children is used as the foundation on which to rebuild the idea of the traditional family.

Icey's claims about the fundamentals necessary to raise children as well as Ben and Willa's attempts to fulfill ideal roles in the traditional family bring me to my thesis that the American ethical inheritance is directly available in the films of this project. Icey Spoon's declaration about what it takes to raise children, Ben and Willa's attempt to fulfill idea roles in the family, even Powell's claims about marriage as the purpose for rearing children are all means of talking about an ethical topic, the form of family, that is "implicit in the behavior of ordinary people."[95] *Night of the Hunter's* reimagining of our understanding of the family is an attempt to change and influence our own attitudes and ideas about what constitutes the "traditional" family.

2.6. The Confrontation

Miss Cooper's role in the film is not only to reshape how we define family, she is also the figure of good. Miss Cooper is able to face the figure of evil and even descend and act in the temporal and spatial modes of evil—at night and in the dark—without being corrupted. We see this descent the night Miss Cooper stands guard against Powell's invasion of her home.

The film dissolves to a long shot of the house at night.[96] This shot of the home creates an uncanny feeling, defamiliarizing the home we recognize from the night Miss Cooper told the

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[95] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.
[96] This sequence is in "Miss Cooper sits with her Gun," beginning at 1:20:04.

children the story of Moses.[97] Now we see the house with an air of anxiety, it is under a threat and no longer a place of safety and security. As the scene proceeds, we will learn that Miss Cooper has not called the police to her aid. She will explain why she did not call them later, saying she didn't want "their shoes to dirty up her clean floors,"[98] but her verbal answer is obviously unsatisfactory. Instead, we must consider that the police are not a match for Powell. Miss Cooper is in fact Powell's antithesis and by the conventions of literary fairytales, only she can defeat him. The antithetical relationship between Miss Cooper and Powel is evident in their similarities: they are both figures (of good or evil, light and dark), otherworldly, forces that do not need to perform behaviors necessary to human survival like sleep,[99] and they are both able to tread into the opposite's domain without taking on its characteristics—Miss Cooper is able to take on a darkness without it corrupting her and Powell can use the light to his advantage without it pressuring him to be good.

Returning to the night of the confrontation between Powell and Miss Cooper, in the long shot, we see Powell, all in shadow, sitting on a tree stump inside of the gate, stalking Miss Cooper's house. Powell begins to sing his hunting song, "Leaning," There is a cut to a long shot of the bedroom in deep focus where the kids sleep. Much like Willa in the last scene of her life, the children are surrounded by light as if it is a canopy around their bed, which starkly contrasts the shadowed areas outside of the light. As Powell sings "Safe and secure from all alarms," we linger on the shot of the children. John sleeps alone in the far bed and the four girls sleep in the bed closest to the camera. The words of Powell's song match with this shot, showing the children

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[97] See "Miss Cooper Tells a Bible Story," beginning at 1:11:05.
[98] "The Police Arrive at Miss Cooper's" beginning at 1:25:08.
[99] See "John and Pearl Keep Moving" at 1:04:28 when John asks "Don't he never sleep?"

seemingly safe and secure from all alarms while in fact they are in danger. On the other hand, the children might in fact be safe and secure because they have Miss Cooper.

There is another cut, and we see a medium long shot of Miss Cooper sitting in her rocking chair holding her shotgun. This shot plays with our association of good with light and dark with evil. Miss Cooper's face and the top of her shoulders are completely shadowed. Light seems to emanate from the corner in her house and illuminates her lap and gun, but the light does not come from her. Here we see a suggestion that perhaps not all darkness is evil or that some forces of good must take on aspects of evil. We continue to hear Powell sing his song imbuing it with double meaning. The song is meant to unsettle the people in the house, it both gives warning and taunts them with the lyrics.

We cut back to the bedroom with the kids and see Ruby wake, pause, and then grab the candle next to her bed, as if she is preparing to leave. Ruby behaves as if she is bewitched by Powell's voice, which is in fact how many people respond to Powell. Taken in by his words and singing, Ruby reacts like a moth to light, drawn to something dangerous but unable to stop herself.

We cut back to Miss Cooper in the medium long shot. As Powell sings "What a fellowship," The camera begins to track in toward Miss Cooper and then past her, tracking forward and turning to the right in search of the voice, as if the camera too is drawn to Powell's singing. Powell continues the song, "What a joy divine/Leaning on the everlasting arms." As the camera spots Powell sitting on a tree stump, it stops, framing him in a long shot but not quite centered in the shot. Unlike Miss Cooper, Powell's figure is mostly lit but half of his face remains in shadow. As if at night, Powell is a source of light, or that light is an indication of strength or favor, and Powell is favored in the darkness.

After returning to the establishing shot, we then cut to a medium close-up of Miss Cooper in her rocking chair. This time we look at her mostly from the front. Now Miss Cooper's face is lit, the light comes from behind her rocking chair. She holds the shotgun across her chest, ready to aim and use it when necessary. Powell continues singing, finishing the verse with, "Leaning on the everlasting arms." As Powell begins the song again, singing "Leaning," Miss Cooper also begins singing, "Lean on Jesus/Lean on Jesus." Then they both sing, "Safe and secure from all alarms." As they both sing the word "alarms," we cut to a long shot in deep focus. The camera is behind Powell as he sits on the stump looking in at Miss Cooper whose head we can see while she sits on guard on the porch. The two harmonize, singing "Leaning" and "Lean on Jesus" respectively. Then we cut to the medium long shot of Miss Cooper on the porch but this time she is completely in profile, and we can see out the window to Powell sitting on the stump looking at her. We have a showdown between the two figures of good and evil. Once again, Powell has brought a knife to a gun fight, but he is ostensibly stronger than Miss Cooper. Moreover, we know Powell is willing to kill but we do not know if Miss Cooper is, regardless of her shotgun. This time even though Miss Cooper's head and shoulders are still completely shadowed, the light from the corner creates the illusion that light emanates from Miss Cooper even though she is in the dark. It is reminiscent of the light of a halo.

Ruby enters the shot with a candle and disrupts the darkness, giving Powell time use the light to his advantage and escape from Miss Cooper's sight. Miss Cooper tells Ruby to bring the children downstairs. After a short sequence where an owl kills a rabbit, clearly a sequence rife with symbolic meaning, we dissolve to a medium shot looking straight on at the five children standing against a brick wall.[100] This could easily be a mimic of a mug shot except that none of

[100] This cut marks a switch to a new scene chapter, "Miss Cooper Recalls a Story from the Bible," 1:22:16.

them turn to the side or hold a number. They all look straight ahead at something that we hear pacing off screen. Then there is a cut to a long shot looking straight on at the children. We see that we are in the kitchen, the children are crowded together against the wall between the staircase and the kitchen counter. Miss Cooper marches in front of them, holding her shotgun. This shot destabilizes the idea of the home as a space of freedom. Instead, the home as become reminiscent of a prison complete with an armed guard.

Miss Cooper paces in front of the children and then walks toward the window. We cut to a medium shot of Miss Cooper in profile and see her looking out the window that is above the kitchen counter. She then looks to her right and we cut to an eyeline match, seeing the children all looking at her, their faces blank or perhaps set in anticipation of her speaking. We cut back to Miss Cooper in front of the window. She begins to speak, telling another bible story in a fairytale manner, "Now, there was this sneaking, no account, ornery King Herod." We cut to a long shot, this time from the right of the room, at the base of the staircase. We see the children on the right in profile all of their heads turned toward Miss Cooper. Miss Cooper is mid-turn, faces the camera and begins her pacing in front of the children again, walking toward the camera. She continues her story, "And when he heard tell of little Jesus growing up, he figured, 'Well shoot, there won't be no room for the both of us.'" Miss Cooper pauses in front of the camera, looking for Powell. She turns and we cut to the opposite side of the room, now on the left, looking straight on at Miss Cooper, keeping the 180-degree rule and placing the camera on each side of Miss Cooper's pacing. The camera cuts to capture her pacing rather than tracking with and thus pacing with her which suggests the unseen spaces of the home are unknown and cannot be explored.

Miss Cooper continues the tale, of Herod, "'I'll just nip this in the bud.' But he wasn't sure which of all of them babies in the land was King Jesus. So that cruel old King Herod figured,"

again Miss Cooper has walked straight toward the camera and looks out past the camera in search of Powell who is somewhere offscreen. As Miss Cooper begins to turn, we have a match on action, the camera cuts at the same time Miss Cooper turns. This time the camera is toward the back of the room, much like the establishing shot, but instead of being across from the children, the camera is across from the kitchen counter. The children cannot be seen in this shot. Miss Cooper is framed in a medium long shot. She picks up the story, “if he was able to kill all the babies in the land, he’d be sure and get little Jesus.” Miss Cooper walks toward the camera once more and as she gets close, the camera moves and reframes the shot so that we can see the children in the background against the brick wall. Miss Cooper continues to look offscreen for Powell.

The camera does not track all of Miss Cooper’s movements, instead, it cuts so that we experience Miss Cooper’s search for Powell through her movement toward and away from the camera. The camera cuts also give us a sense of the confining size of the space that is secured from Powell as well as the sense that the home has become a cage and Miss Cooper is a trapped predator, waiting to attack.

We cut back to the medium shot of the children as they listen and watch Miss Cooper. We hear her off screen narrating the story, “And when little Jesus’s ma and pa heard about this plan,” there is a cut to a medium long shot of the children, looking at them from the left, just in front of the counter. We see Miss Cooper walk into the frame and straight toward the children. Her words continue with this shot, “what do you reckon they went and done?” The children begin to offer different answers, but it is John who answers correctly, “They went a-running.” Miss Cooper rests the butt of her gun on the floor and responds, “Well, now, John, you’re right. That’s just what they done.” Miss Cooper looks up from John back to all of the children, “Little King Jesus’s ma and pa saddled a mule, and they rode all the way down into Egyptland.”

John and Miss Cooper continue an exchange until we hear a clock chime in the background. Miss Cooper looks left and the camera cuts to show what is to the left. The shot is a long shot of the room from Miss Cooper's position. We see past the kitchen table and chairs to the far wall where a hutch sits on the left. A shadow begins to move across the wall and then ducks down and disappears, hidden by the light reflected from a mirror. We cut back to the medium long shot of the children against the wall and Miss Cooper in front of them. Miss Cooper continues to look toward the shadow and raises her gun quickly. As she points her gun toward the end of the room all the children turn to look. We hear Powell from offscreen say, "Figured I was gone, huh?" Miss Cooper tells the children, "Run! Hide in the staircase!" All the children run away from the wall and up the stairs, even Ruby (with some extra encouragement).

As Ruby leaves, the camera tracks to the right to reframe so that Miss Cooper is the center of the shot as she asks, "What do you want?" There is a cut to a close-up of the steps, and we see Ruby's feet ascending the stairs and then a cat descends the steps. We hear Powell answer, "I want them kids." There is a cut to a medium close-up of Miss Cooper holding her gun, aiming toward Powell's shadow. The gun is so large it extends beyond the frame. She responds to Powell asking, "What do you want them for?" There is a reverse shot showing the end of the room, now more lit than before as light reflects off a mirror but Powell remains hidden. Powell responds, "That's none of your business, madam." From off screen Miss Cooper tells Powell, "I'm giving you to the count of three to get out of here, then I'm coming across the kitchen shooting!" Suddenly the cat begins screeching, and Powell pops up from his hiding spot, somewhere near the kitchen table because he pops up into the frame in a medium shot. He looks shocked or appalled, either at the cat (which would indicate a crass play on the slang word women's genitalia), or Miss Cooper's threat. We cut to a reverse shot of Miss Cooper in a medium shot and she fires the gun at Powell. We hear Powell

howling, not unlike the cat, from offscreen. As he continues howling, Miss Cooper lowers her gun, shaking and looking scared and concerned. Miss Cooper's gaze moves slowly to the left and then she raises her gun over her shoulder, with the barrel pointing backward, almost as if she plans to hit Powell with the butt of the gun.

We cut to a medium long shot and we see Powell rushing out of the door and watch into the yard with the tree stump he spent the night sitting on. Powell runs across the yard to the barn, howling the whole time. In the background we also hear a phone. There is a cut to a medium long shot of Miss Cooper dialing on the phone and the children standing behind her. John is smiling, almost laughing, while Ruby covers her face in angst. Miss Cooper tells the operator to send the "state troopers" to her place because she has "something trapped" in her barn. Interestingly, Miss Cooper does not refer to Powell as a person here, instead she dehumanizes him, either because she views him as less than human or because of his other worldly, greater than human portrayal of evil. Miss Cooper hangs up the phone and the shot dissolves, ending the sequence.

The conclusion of the climactic battle between Miss Cooper and Powell, good and evil respectively, is anticipated from the opening sequences when Miss Cooper is shown to us as figure among the stars and/or heavens and pronounces Powell as a false prophet. Only by understanding Miss Cooper as the only person able to defeat Powell do her actions before his attack make sense. Miss Cooper does not call the police before Powell returns that night and provides a deflective response when she answers the police's questions about why she did not contact them. One way we can justify Miss Cooper's actions and argue she did not knowingly and purposefully endanger the children in her care is to argue that Miss Cooper doubts the ability of the police to prevail over an evil force as cunning and depraved as Powell. Another reading is that people must only depend on themselves to defend their home and family, the public cannot be counted on for protection.

This latter reading fundamentally rejects the social contract and reason for agreeing to a system of government. Dovetailing with the latter reading, we can go so far as to argue that even before Powell's arrest, the justice system was cracking but not yet fully fragmented. However, there is nothing visually to suggest this reading. For instance, the police officer who arrests Powell in the beginning of the film and the Judge who sentences him are not taken in by his rhetoric or charm. Regardless of the reading we follow, Miss Cooper behaves as if she knows her personal actions and beliefs are not corruptible and can withstand descending into the night to face Powell. As the aftermath of the trial shows, the average person cannot return from confrontation or interaction with Powell uncorrupted.

2.7. Conclusion

What the film does not show us is a clear establishment of the meaning of justice in the filmic universe. Miss Cooper does not depend on the police or participate in the trial, instead resorting to her own resourcefulness to protect the home and family. The lack of this establishment of justice in the diegetic world plays upon the genre and narrative blending nature of the film. This blending moves beyond the conventions of genres and narrative tropes to blend the sources of morality. *The Night of the Hunter* is a melodrama, but it also has allusions to literary fairytales, draws on the characteristics of tragedy, and uses narrative figure of the Preacher man.

We can see the literary fairytale elements in the film's opening sequence,[101] where Miss Cooper's head appears floating in the sky, and she is telling a story to the children foreshadows a

[101] I have used the distinction "literary fairytale" to distinguish it from the oral folk tales. The literary fairytale is relevant here because of the references Bluebeard, which made its literary debut in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* [*Stories or Tales of Past Times*], 1697 in (Maria Tatar, "Bluebeard" in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales,* ed. Jack Zipes, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], online edition). I take my cue for the distinction between literary fairytales and the oral folk tale from Jack Zipes in "Introduction: Towards a Definition of a Literary Fairy Tale" in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*.

fantastical story. Moreover, the claim for the film as a fairytale can be made from the references to Bluebeard and Mother Goose.[102] However, these allusions raise questions about whether such references are sufficient to consider the film a fairytale or simply partaking in the cinematic discourse about Bluebeard. Rather than defining the film as a fairytale, I suggest it partakes of an intertextuality first suggested by Maria Tartar. Tatar argues for an element of intertextuality among Bluebeard films of the 1940s:

> Bluebeard films of the 1940s form an extraordinarily intricate cinematic network, taking cues from each other in such obvious ways that they sometimes appear more closely related to each other than to any primal or original narrative. Like the tales in the folkloric sea of stories, they do not really refer to a foundational narrative but participate in what Roland Barthes called a "serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variation," revising, adapting, and reimagining the story embedded in the previous films. To be sure some of the films nod in the direction of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," but most of them seem to be paying homage to a narrative tradition that is in the air, that has circulated in Anglo-American and European cultures as folktales, folk wisdom, children's story, adult melodrama, and song, and that settled into film as a natural resting place.[103]

Tatar's argument certainly seems to encompass *The Night of the Hunter*, except for the film's anachronistic dating. While other fairytale scholars such as Jack Zipes and Philip Lewis might disagree with Tatar's argument here, I am less interested in fleshing the essence of a Bluebeard tale than how the intertextuality of Bluebeard tales allows us to see *The Night of the Hunter* as a film that is an amalgam of fairytale, tragedy, melodrama, and narratives of the Preacher man. What all of these genres have in common is that they all have an ethical imperative; a moral, a chorus, a desire to make clear our value in a desacralized era. This film accomplishes what Aristotle argued Greek tragedy did for the citizens of Greece. It educates the citizens and brings them to a new

[102] I stand by my argument that Miss Cooper is a mother goose figure based on how we see her: as gather children in her nest, the way she leads them through the town, her in the lead with her goslings following her in a neat row. Simon Callow, author of British Film Classic's *The Night of the Hunter* also suggests Laughton read the novel the film is based on as a "sort of Mother Goose tale" (United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 2000).

[103] Maria Tatar, *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90-91, qutd. in Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 164.

understanding of the world and their relationship to the gods. *The Night of the Hunter* offers us a new understanding of a foundational institution in our democracy, the family, and the danger of basing the moral on the sacred.

We can see the blended genres and conventions in Powell's and Miss Cooper's relationships to storytelling, fairytales, and Christianity. Powell is a minister, one specifically associated with Christianity through visual cues such as the camp meeting. Yet Powell aligns with evil from a fairytale and while he does quote scripture, he also uses modes of dramatization and the persona of a Preacher man to charm his audience: for example, see his telling of the story of Cain and Abel, hate and love.[104] Likewise, Miss Cooper, who tells bible stories to the children uses a vernacular the children can understand and relate to them. At the same time, Miss Cooper is also a figure associated with fairytales, a force beyond the realistic, seemingly supernatural and wise. And of course, there is the alignment of the two figures with two fairytale figures—Mother Goose and Bluebeard. As a result, we have a blending of fairytale and Christianity. By reimagining Christianity in relation to fairytales, *The Night of the Hunter* recasts how we might think of the relationship between the two kinds of narratives and their differing moral provisions.

The conclusion of the film drives home its ambiguous system of morals and the blending of narrative conventions as Miss Cooper offers us a sermon, moral, commentary, and/or ethical imperative in the last sequence.[105] We can see this a sermon by an unofficial but popularly recognized preacher; a moral of a fairytale; the commentary to the audience from a Greek tragedy's chorus, telling the audience what to think about the action; and/or the final revelation the ethical imperative where the hidden values in the moral occult are revealed. We can also see this sermon

[104] See "Harry Visits Willa and the Children," starting at 18:13.
[105] See "The Children Exchange Gifts with Miss Cooper," beginning at 1:28:50 for the scene and corresponding dialogue.

enacting Breen's "moral compensating values." Lillian Gish addresses the camera seeming more like herself than Miss Cooper and attempts to balance the criticisms of religion, family, and the government judicial system shown in the film with her own message biblically inflected message about children. Gish, the paragon of melodramatic heroine during the era of silent film turned shot-gun-wielding child protector, not only holds authority because of her prominence in film history but because her career and change in acting roles figure for the audiences' experiences of change from the depression to the present.

Miss Cooper's address begins on Christmas day in her home. After Miss Cooper has received her gifts from the children, she sends them into the other room to find their gifts. There is a cut to a medium shot of Miss Cooper in front of the stove and she begins the concluding remarks of the film, "Lord, save little children." The camera begins to track in on Miss Cooper as she speaks. "You'd think the world would be ashamed to name such a day as Christmas for one of them, and then go on in the same old way. My soul is humble when I see the way little ones accept their lot." As Gish says this last line, she is in the center of the frame, but she does not look directly at the camera—instead, her eyes are focused up and just to the right. The camera has finally stopped tracking in as Miss Cooper finishes her sentence. She is now framed in a close-up and closes her eyes. Then she reopens her eyes, and looks downward, continuing to stir the soup, "Lord, save little children. The wind blows and the rains are cold, yet they abide." Miss Cooper still looks downward, not acknowledging the presence of the camera.

As if we need proof of the endurance of children, we hear footsteps from offscreen, and Gish turns to look to the left and the camera cuts with a match on action shot to see the children running into the kitchen with their gifts. The camera tracks to the right as Mary, Clary, Pearl, and Ruby run to Miss cooper giving her hugs of thanks. Then the camera tracks to the right as the girls

dash up the stairs. The camera moves slightly to the left, reframing Miss Cooper as she looks to her left through the kitchen door, looking for John. John who has perhaps been the most traumatized child in this film—almost murdered by Powell, made to vow to his father before he was arrested and executed, disbelieved by his mother, abandoned by his mother, father, Uncle Birdie, left to care for his younger sister, and to cope with the realization that his mother was murdered by Powell. John has been given a watch, a symbol of time and endurance.

John yearned for a watch towards the beginning of the film, immediately after the execution of his father but he adheres to his promise to his father not to reveal that he knows the location of the money.[106] Now, John listens to the watch Miss Cooper has gifted him. Miss Cooper comments that it has a "Loud, strong ticker" and justifies the purchase saying that she needs someone to tell her the time. Once more, Miss Cooper justifies her actions with a misdirect—ostensibly, she bought John a watch so that he can tell her the time. Yet the watch is also something that endures; it is a symbol of time, something which abides as the wind blows and the rains are cold. John is persistent and resilient like the ticker of the watch.

Eventually, John makes his way across the kitchen and slowly ascends the stairs and then stops, looking at Miss Cooper. John then walks behind the wall, out of the shot and the camera moves, tracking in and on Miss Cooper, reframing her almost in the center and in a medium close-up. This time, Gish looks at the camera, breaking the fourth wall and acknowledging the camera as she says, "They abide and they endure." Then she looks down and begins stirring the contents in the pot once more. We cut to the long shot of Miss Cooper's house and yard as the film concludes. The final shot is of the outside of Miss Cooper's house, an image of the idyllic Christmas home, covered in snow and filled with a loving family. The final words suggest that we

[106] See "John and Pearl Think about Buying Things," beginning at 12:13.

should rethink our attitudes and behavior toward children. However, the children in the film, would be adults at the time of the film's release. Consequently, we see this address as meant to remind adults that they were once children who endured and/or that they need to ensure their children will also endure.

The final sequence of Miss Cooper's home with its family on Christmas day should no longer be seen as uncanny. Like many Bluebeard narratives, throughout this film, the home becomes a place of fear rather than one of safety and security. We see how the home and its spaces, once a place of sanctuary for Willa, John, and Pearl, transform into a trap, an altar, a stage, and a place of violence. By creating meaning in the rooms and then undermining that meaning with Powell's presence, the familiar meaning of home is destabilized. The home becomes unfamiliar in its transformation. However, this final sequence brings us full circle because the home and the family have been returned to our familiarity albeit with a new understanding and expanded structure.

Overall, we see this film as about family, its conventions, and spaces and makes use of various genres and narrative tropes to suggest that the moral should not be based on the sacred or so inflexible that it results in madness and fanaticism. With the traditional family and its power defamiliarized, we see a new definition of family emerge, where love and care for children are the priority. Through Powell and his corrupting forces, the film sunders the nuclear family in the first half and in the second half it re-familiarizes us with a new idea of family. Likewise, the home is also proven to be a space of danger and as it becomes unfamiliar it too ebbs into a Freudian definition of the uncanny. But the final shot of Miss Cooper's home is presented to us so that we once more see it as a place of safety. Miss Cooper's address (i.e. the moral, Greek chorus's commentary, sermon, and ethical imperative) suggests the abiding and endurance of children is

such that changes to conventions do not hinder them and that institutions like the "traditional family" may not be able to endure or abide unless they are reimagined, even if that reimagining is at first strange and unfamiliar.

CHAPTER 3: BINDING THE US-AMERICAN FAMILY

Like the other films in this project, this one also serves as a form of social criticism. It achieves criticism of the nuclear family through the appropriation of the *Binding of Isaac*, challenging the notion of togetherness, the family and home as the fulfillment of the US-American dream, and the assumption of the Production Code that importing biblicism into film ensures ethical behavior. In the Introduction, I raised the *Akedah* as a generic source, in the Cavellian sense, or as a controlling myth in the Ricoeurian sense al la Rosengarten. In line with this thinking, I suggest that not only is the *Akedah* a melodramatic narrative but that we interpret *Bigger than Life*[107] in light of the *Akedah* so that the multiple claims on the members of the family first illustrated through Abraham extend to both filmic parents, their relationship to one another as well as their child and the family and marriage are seen as the covenant in the biblical story with faith in God recast as faith in the togetherness of the family.

3.0 The *Akedah*

The Akedah is told in Genesis 22: 1–19, where we learn that God has fulfilled part of his covenantal promise to Abraham; He has blessed Sarah, despite her old age, with a pregnancy so that she can bear Abraham a son, Isaac. Isaac is the fulfillment of God's promise to make a "great nation" of Abraham (Gen 12:2 NRSV). Thus, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it appears to threaten the covenant and rescind God's promise to Abraham.

> After these things, God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled

[107] *Bigger than Life*, directed by Nicholas Ray (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD.

his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, set out, and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the faraway place. Then Abraham told his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked together. Isaac said to his father, Abraham, "Father!" He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

> When they came to the place God had shown him, Abraham built an altar and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything; for now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your only son from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." (Gen 22:1-14)

Genesis 22:15-19 concludes the story with the angel affirming, in no uncertain terms, the security of the covenant because Abraham did not withhold his son.

The *Binding of Isaac* is famously explored in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. At the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, imagines a man who, throughout his life, thinks of the story of Abraham with great admiration.[108] This man imagines four retellings of the story where God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Each retelling attempts to understand what Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah were thinking during the fulfillment of this command. The retellings of the biblical story at the beginning of *Fear and*

[108] Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling; Repetition, ed. and trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), III 61, 9.

Trembling suggest a need for commentary, elaboration, and augmentation if one is to understand the story—ironic as the pseudonymous author's name implies silence.

The *Akedah* is ripe with irony. The first verse in the Binding *of Isaac* offers the reader a hermeneutical framework—the following events are a test of Abraham's faith in God not a command to kill.[109] But the characters in the narrative are not privy to this framework thus creating dramatic irony because the audience will understand something that is said in one sense while the characters will understand it in another. Similarly, dramatic irony occurs when the audience can recognize the contradictory or limited nature of the characters' speech.[110] For example, it has been argued that 22:5 offers a clue to the irony and outcome of this test because Abraham insists that "*we* will, and then *we* will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5, NRSV, emphasis added).[111] Here what appears to be a deception by Abraham to Isaac and his servants turns out to be true. The audience, aware of the first verse is able to comprehend the multiple meanings in Abraham's response.

The irony also exists in retrospection. I understand retrospection via Richard Rosengarten wherein the role factors such as "chance, design, and fate play in our experience of the world" as well as our ability to recognize moments of reversals and redirections only reveal themselves after the fact, that is in hindsight.[112] This notion of retrospect suggests that the audience—viewer or reader depending on the genre—may return to a narrative and uses the gift of hindsight to see meaning or new meaning in words, events, or actions that they may have previously missed. Once the reader knows how the narrative ends, Abraham's words more clearly take on additional

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[109] Ronald Hendel, "Genesis," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible Fully Revised and Updated: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), 34.
[110] Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul F. Rouzer, Harris Feinsod, David Marno, and Alexandra Slessarev, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 732.
[111] Hendel, "Genesis," 34.
[112] Richard Rosengarten, *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence*: *Divine Design and Incursions of Evil* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), xii.

meanings that the narrative characters would be unaware of. Abraham's reply to Isaac's question "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering" illustrates this point. Abraham answers, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering" (Gen. 22:8, NRSV). Abraham's answer to Isaac has a double meaning. While Abraham deflects the question—concealing God's command—he also remains truthful because God does provide Isaac, the figurative lamb that Abraham believes is to be sacrificed. Additionally but unbeknownst to Abraham, God will provide a ram to be sacrificed in lieu of Isaac. In retrospect, the audience recognizes how Abraham unwittingly speaks the truth while trying to disassemble.

Even with the notion of retrospection, the *Akedah* lends itself to retellings because Abraham's actions are incomprehensible to most people; the story places religion and ethics in direct confrontation. Moreover, despite knowing how the biblical narrative ends, the reader is not precluded from experiencing its suspense or imagining the anguish experienced by Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah; the seemingly happy ending cannot mask the horror of their experience.

Similar to the first line of *The Binding of Isaac*, the opening scene in *Bigger than Life* offers the viewer a hermeneutical framework for interpretation but it is far more ambiguous. After about one minute and fifteen seconds of opening credits, which establishes the setting as a school where children excitedly exit for the day, we dissolve into a medium close-up of a watch sitting on a desk. It is approximately 3:25 pm. A hand enters the frame and the music changes with this entry, suggesting we attend to this activity. The hand reaches toward the watch but then freezes and struggles in midair before changing direction. The hand moves away from the watch returning toward the body and the camera follows this movement. Then the camera tracks back and we see a man from behind, clutching his neck just behind the ear. We have met the main character, Ed Avery.

This opening with Ed's hand and his reaching for a watch raise allusions to the "hand of God" and the possibility that one can both be elected and afflicted by God's hand. Ed is elected in the sense that he is afflicted with a rare illness as well as in the sense that the camera selects him as the main character of the story. Ed's election is not a blessing; his illness is seemingly as burdensome as God's command to kill Isaac and will entail a test of faith, not for Ed, but for his wife Lou, in the togetherness of the US-American family. The watch raises the idea of one's destiny and lifespan as documented by time. Whether fate or chance, Ed's inability to reach the watch suggests his control over life—imagined or not—has been impeded. Reading this opening scene as a hermeneutical framework for interpretation requires investing biblicism into the film before it is overtly raised, in other words, it requires a certain amount of retrospection. Much like the *Akedah,* the audience must first view and the experience film to appreciate the weight of meaning in this framing.

Both figures—the watch and the hand—were significant in *Hunter* and remain figures of excessive meaning in this film. Unlike Powell's hands, which the audience knew were violent from the beginning, Ed's hand is not yet violent. Also echoing *Hunter*, Ed's hand is not under his own control; Powell's hands were driven by his supposed conviction that he was doing "the Lord's" bidding but we see in the burlesque dance and during Willa's murder that Powell's hands are markers displaced sexual desire. It's an ironic use of hands, which are so often linked to fate, providence, or culpability that both men's hands bear witness to the lack of control over their bodies. While Powell may cultivate his rage and relish his loss of control that leads to murder, Ed's hand marks the suffering that accompanies the loss of control over his body and life.

3.1. The Miracle Drug?

After a significant episode wherein Ed collapses, he is sent to the hospital where we learn he has arterial inflammation which is normally fatal. A new drug, likened to a miracle, cortisone, is prescribed and does save Ed's life. However, the medication is not without dangers and it can have psychological side effects. The doctor warns Ed to contact him immediately if he feels any psychological changes. Despite this warning, Ed does not contact his doctor when he begins to experience memory loss, depression, and euphoria while on the medication. In an effort to stave off the depression, Ed begins to abuse the cortisone leading him to feel "bigger than life" and to behave in a controlling and sadistic demeanor, especially toward his family. I will explore facets of Ed's transformation and its effect on his family and how this change raises issues of social criticism of the family.

Many scholars and critics argue that in the film cortisone is not the cause of Ed's transformation but is instead a catalyst to bring to the surface what is already wrong with Ed's state of mind and the world he inhabits.[113] This idea stems in part from François Truffuat and Éric Rohmer who "both suggested that the cortisone Ed takes for his illness does not create his problem but exacerbates the problem that was already there."[114] Geoff Andrew argues for cortisone as a catalyst in part because of Ray's own claims about the film. "Ray, however, did not intend the film to be about cortisone *per* se, and explained that its real subject was the danger and folly of believing in any kind of miraculous panacea, whether it be drugs, drink, money, psychoanalysis or

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[113] Geoff Andrew, "*The Films of Nicholas Ray: The Poet of Nightfall* (1991; London: British Film Institute, 2004), 104.

[114] Will Scheibel, *American Stranger: Modernisms, Hollywood, and the Cinema of Nicholas Ray* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2017), 41. Scheibel is working from Éric Rohmer's chapter on *Bigger than Life* in *The Taste for Beauty*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, repr. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

religion."[115] Klinger's remarks that Sirk has governed the interpretation of his own work seem apropos to Ray here. Ray's own conviction about panacea does not determine the interpretation of cortisone's effect on Ed. Haughty or not, Ed does not seek out a miracle to solve his life's woes. He is driven to the medication by necessity and remains unaware of the euphoric side effects until he experiences them. My point here is not that Ed is a victim of cortisone and so not to blame for his abuse of the medication. Rather, I wish to draw a distinction between dependency which leads to addiction and then abuse and the notion that Ed wishes to escape his oppressive suburban dream turned nightmare and uses his illness as convenient means to a pharmaceutical outlet.

Robin Wood echoes the above interpretations claiming, "the role of the drug in the film is in fact purely functional it removes inhibitions and releases urges that are already present in Ed. His illness can be read as the product of the inner tension built up by their frustration: it is the illness of man-in-society rather than of a particular individual."[116] While Wood's article offers a compelling read of how Ed's illness is a sickness of society—which in turn offers a means of social criticism of the suburban US-American dream—the interpretation borders dangerously close to blaming Ed for his own illness, especially when he posits that Ed's "first major attack" occurs after the bridge party when he is lamenting the dullness of his domestic life and thus "significantly linking his 'illness'... with his emotional/spiritual frustrations."[117] Moreover, Wood here suggests that "Ray is careful not to account for [Ed's illness] in terms of physical causes."[118] Ed is indeed not ill because he has contracted a virus or been exposed to bacteria. But I would argue that the opening scene—that Wood agrees "the film can be felt to grow out of the opening shot"—suggests

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[115] Andrew, *The Films of Nicholas Ray,* 104. See also Geoff Andrew, "Commentary," *Bigger than Life*, directed by Nicholas Ray (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD.
[116] Robin Wood, "Robin Wood on Bigger than Life," *Film Comment* 8, no. 3 (September-October 1972): 59.
[117] Wood, 59.
[118] Wood, 59.

more than a generalized significance of "the passing of time, of life, and the attempt to dominate it."[119] As I argue above, the disembodied hand which reaches for a watch invokes the notion of election, of being chosen—the hand of "man" afflicted by the hand of God and thus prevents a person from controlling their life and how they experience the passing of time. Here I differ from Wood in and suggest that Ed's illness is not a manifestation of spiritual frustrations but manifestation of the dark side of election and the divine.

Ed's illness raises the question of why do bad things happen to good people. Surely Ed is not the only person in a thankless job, underpaid job who yearns for a more exciting and fulfilling life as promised by the US-American dream. But Ed is the only person afflicted with a life-threatening illness that requires his use of medication with dangerous side effects. This idea that cortisone is only functional misses the very personal and private nature of illness and diminishes Ed's and his family's experience of being inexplicably elected to suffer such an affliction.

Reading cortisone only as a catalyst or functional also displaces any social criticism of the pharmaceutical and medical industry and instead leaves the individual and their choices as the source of criticism. Both Andrew and B. Kite remark that Ray was unable to critique the doctors to the extent he desired because of the medical establishment's sway with the PCA.[120] Yet, the doctors are the ones who emphasize the miraculousness of cortisone and dismiss Lou's pragmatic concerns about its dangers. The doctors insist that it is cortisone that has saved Ed's life and will continue to do so, even after his psychotic break. The doctors speak of cortisone as curing Ed rather than as a treatment with drawbacks. Read in this manner, the film still offers a shocking

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[119] Wood, 59.

[120] Andrew, "Commentary"; B. Kite "*Bigger than Life:* Somewhere in Suburbia," *The Criterion Collection*, March 17, 2010, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1412-bigger-than-life-somewhere-in-suburbia; Patrick McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director* (New York: It Books, 2011), 329.

critique of the doctors and medical industry who champion the notion of miracle drugs and a panacea while their patients suffer the consequences of the medical field's hubristic thinking.

Blaming individuals such as Ed rather than the attitude of the doctors and the pharmaceutical industry is a gesture that seems familiar to films under the rules of the Production Code, which wished to control the presentation of social criticism. This gesture is similar to the changes Breen made to the script of *Black Fury*. Originally a film ripe with class conflict; it critiqued a mine owner for terrible working conditions that forced the workers into a strike. The mine owner responded by hiring "scabs and a private police force of thugs to protect his property. The police ruled with terror."[121] Breen suggested script alterations that eliminated the class conflict "by presenting a humane mine owner and a conservative, legitimate union tricked into an unwanted and unnecessary strike by evil labor agitators."[122] The mine owner still hired a private police force to protect his investments but they were to treat his workers humanely. The police force's violence was the result of a dishonest owner who hired thugs. Breen's rewrite excluded criticism of US-American business and labor management and instead left the blame on evil and dishonest people who tricked participants in the larger industries.[123]

The ease with which Ed is blamed for abusing the cortisone and having repressed egotistical and solipsistic tendencies offers a convenient target of blame in lieu of the medical and pharmaceutical industries. The glorification of cortisone and its ability to save Ed's life overlooks the quality of life the medication can offer Ed and his family. There seems to be little room between the dosage that controls physical pain and does not cause mental anguish. The complex relationship between Ed's dependency and ultimate abuse of the medication and the medical field's

[121] Black, "Hollywood Censored," 119.
[122] Black, 119.
[123] Black, 119.

glorification of cortisone raises questions about the salvation of Ed’s life; is it a miracle, the continuation of a nightmare, or perhaps the everyday reality of the impossible conditions facing families afflicted by medical ailments?

3.2. The Triangular Family

Bigger than Life is well known as a critique of the nuclear family and the US-American suburban life.[124] However, my particular interest in the criticism of the family is shaped by *The Binding of Isaac* and the questions of parental benevolence toward children. The following sequences examine the dynamic between Ed, Richie, and Lou. I mark the changes in Ed’s personality and how those changes are reflected in the mise-en-scène and evoke feelings of the uncanny reminiscent of *Night of the Hunter.* I contrast the family dynamic in this sequence with the opening of the film and show how the changes in familial relationships are figured through the shape of the triangle. The various triangular shapes indicate the lines of closeness and distances between family members.

The sequence begins with a medium shot of the kitchen door that leads to Eds’ study. Lou enters the frame walking toward the door. She is shown in a medium shot and left-facing profile. Lou approaches the door and places one hand above the handle and one hand above that to offer extra control so that the door opens quietly. Lou then peeks around the door into the study. [125]

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[124] Andrew, *The Films of Nicholas Ray,* 104, and “Commentary”; Steffen Hantke, “No Exit: Class Anxiety and Gothic Suburbia in Nicholas Ray’s *Bigger than* Life,” *Journal of Popular & Television* 47, no. 2 (April 2019): 101-9, doi:10.1080/01956051.2018.1533799; Kite, “Somewhere in Suburbia”; Jonathan Rosenbaum, “*Bigger than Life*,” *Chicago Reader*, October 15, 2009, https://chicagoreader.com/film/bigger-than-life; Wood, “Robin Wood on *Bigger than Life*.”

[125] Kite persuasively argues that as the film “reaches it climax, the house loses it continuities and shatters into distinct zones. The door between the kitchen and living room is closed. The former territory is given to Lou, who has to spy on the adjoining room like an interloper now that it has become Ed’s arena…” (“Somewhere in Suburbia). The room Kite identifies as the living room is the room I have termed the study. This room has always seemed to be Ed’s arena but the closed door marks a shift in atmosphere of the home and does indeed create the feeling of “distinct zones.”

Lou's actions are secretive and furtive; she either does not want to be caught looking or does not want to distract Richie and Ed.

As Lou opens the door, the camera tracks in, so it, too, peeks into Ed's study. Lou is now in the extreme foreground of the shot but standing to the right, almost as if she has opened the door for the camera as well as herself.[126] Within the room, Ed is framed in a long shot, sitting behind his desk, with a *Firenze* poster behind him. We can see him from the waist up. He is wearing a white shirt with his staple bow tie. Richie sits on the low sofa at a table, dressed in a red shirt instead of his red jacket to indicate danger or a threat. The hour is late. The kitchen is dark; it's dark outside of Ed's office window, and the only light is from the lamp on Ed's desk.

Richie stands and walks toward Ed to hand him a paper. After submitting his paper, Richie turns away from Ed, looks up toward his mother, and perhaps even shakes his head negatively as if he knows he has gotten the answer to the problem wrong. This also means that Richie knows Lou is watching. As Richie returns to the table and plops down, Ed looks at the paper and questions Richie about his answers. We can hear Ed asking Richie about a common denominator. As Ed begins talking to Richie, the camera starts tracking out to the original establishing shot as we see Lou slowly and silently close the door.

Then there is a cut to a medium shot of Richie sitting at a small desk on a small loveseat. This cut is not quite a match to the action cut, but we swiftly move from Lou closing the door to the scene in the study to the center of that scene. Once Lou is again isolated from the room, the camera transcends this barrier allowing the viewer full access to all the spaces in the home even if

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[126] This shot interestingly grants Lou a voyeuristic quality and a role of "active/looking" rather than the "passive/looked-at" status normally ascribed to women in the films of this era. However, the camera, remaining at Lou's shoulder maintains a more semi-subjective sense of looking than a full identification with Lou's gaze. I return to this idea of semi-subjective looking below when discussing David Bordwell's argument about shot/reverse-shot editing. For the full argument of this active/passive looking dichotomy and how it is split along gendered lines see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975) repr. in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 837-848.

the individual members are not allowed such free movement. We cut to a reverse shot of Ed in an eyeliner match with Richie. Richie begins to answer Ed's question about a common denominator but doubts himself; his stress and anxiety are unsettlingly palpable. He is dressed in a red shirt and based on the number of crumpled papers on his small desk, he has been attempting this task for quite some time. Ed is disappointed; Richie has answered the question incorrectly. Indeed, Richie knows he has answered the question incorrectly, but he is so concerned to please Ed he cannot think through the problem.

This shot/reverse-shot (SRS) exchange between Ed and Richie is worth noting as, more often in this film, we will see a shot/reverse-shot sequence without any point-of-view cutting. David Bordwell argues the fallibility of depending on point-of-view cutting to define SRS editing: "*Shot/Reverse-shot* cutting assumes that the series of shots alternate a view of one end-point of the [180 degrees] line with a view of the other. Typically, shot/revers-shot editing joins shots of characters facing one another, but it need not. The same principle applies to vehicles, buildings, and any entities posited as being at opposite ends of the axis of action."[127] Here Bordwell has made clear that SRS cutting is not the same as "point-of-view cutting." For Bordwell, point-of-view cutting is "a comparatively uncommon case of eyeline-match cutting." Point-of-view cutting shows something the character is looking at offscreen; "the second shot shows what the character is seeing, but more or less from the character's optical vantage point."[128] Point-of-view cutting forces the audience to see as if they are looking through the eyes of the character. Bordwell laments the recent definition of SRS in "a conversation scene as taking the second shot 'from the first

[127] David Bordwell, "Space in the Classical Film" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1985), 56-57.
[128] Bordwell, "Space in the Classical Film," 56-57.

character's point-of-view.' Hollywood shot/reverse-shot cutting is more properly what Jean Mitry calls *semi*-subjective: we often look over a character's shoulder."[129]

Bordwell has made clear that SRS is not simply cut between two characters in a conversation scene, nor does SRS require point-of-view cutting. I emphasize this exchange because it is one of the few moments of point-of-view cutting among more "semi-subjective" SRS editing. Without the point-of-view, the SRS emphasizes the relationality between the family members. The point-of-view cutting in this scene with Ed and Richie emphasizes the individuals' feelings. We, as viewers, are forced to experience how Ed and Richie see one another. This forced subjectivity rather than the semi-subjectivity creates a different kind of relationship between the family members for the viewer. The point-of-view cutting attests to the growing opposition between Ed and Richie and the increased tension in their relationship.

The interaction between Ed and Richie, with Lou having to watch from the shadows, sharply contrasts the scene between Ed and Richie in this same room earlier in the film. Like *Night of the Hunter*, *Bigger than Life* also creates a sense of the uncanny. In *Night of the Hunter,* I argued about defamiliarizing the nuclear family through the uncanny and refamiliarizing it with new forms and content, thus offering a more extensive notion of the family, focusing on the care of children. In *Bigger than Life,* the uncanny defamiliarizes the valorization of togetherness and the vilification of divorce. It also raises children's vulnerability to their parents by turning the fathers in *Hunter* and *Bigger than Life* into monstrous or demonic figures.

The film's first fifteen minutes engender familiarity with a specific version of Ed by beginning the film with an introduction to Ed's professional and familial life. Beyond just Ed, the film's opening also takes the viewer on a tour of the spaces in Ed's home. As Kite and Wood argue,

[129] Bordwell, "Space in the Classical Film," 56-57.

the house and the feelings associated with specific areas in the house reflect Ed's personality.[130] Once Ed takes the cortisone, his personality transforms while other elements of Ed's life—his home, clothes, occupation, etc., remain unchanged. Meanwhile, the spaces in the house become smaller and more confining despite the open floor plan.

The scene we will compare to Ed's authoritarian teaching program occurs in these opening fifteen minutes. After Ed has collapsed from a pain attack, he learns he must go to the hospital. Having packed and prepared to leave, Ed descends the stairs, suitcase in hand, encountering Wally and Richie sitting on the steps below. Once Wally has taken Ed's bag and departed toward the car, we see a medium shot of Richie and Ed at the foot of the staircase. Ed turns to Richie, who is quietly and patiently waiting to learn what is happening. Ed moves away from the bottom of the stairs, placing one arm on Richie's shoulder and guiding him into the study area. The camera pans to the left as the two walk into the study, keeping them centered in the frame together or just following their movement. Ed proceeds up the fireplace, and steps to the right, maneuvering around Richie, to the right, so that he and Richie can face each other. Then, we cut to a medium shot of Ed and Richie, now in profile, facing one another. Here we have a connection between father and son through touching. Ed leans over slightly, extending his left arm to the camera so that his hand rests on Richie's shoulder. Richie, in turn, stares intently up at his father. Indeed, in the entire time Ed has guided Richie to this location, he has not removed his hand from Richie's shoulder.

As in *Hunter*, Ed's hands are also emphasized and essential. Above I argued for seeing the first scene with Ed as an allusion to the "hand of God" and the idea of divine election. Ed's hands here are benevolent which sharply contrasts Ed's hands later when he tries to murder his son.

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[130] Kite, "Somewhere in Suburbia"; Wood, 57.

There is a correlation between hands as tropes of agency and the two men who think they have a special relationship with the divine; Powell believes he is in direct contact with the “Lord,” Ed will eventually think he is greater than the biblical God. The figuring of fathers as the biblical God to their children means that children too can be subject to experiences of horror and hardship that Abraham experienced but at the hands of their biological fathers; Abraham was subject to God but Isaac was in turn subject to Abraham. The Production Code may use biblical stories and allusions to improve the overall image of morality and decency in Hollywood films, but the chosen patriarch, Abraham, does not offer the traits considered ideal in modern parents and this is manifested in how the children suffer at the “hands” of their fathers.

The conversation Ed and Richie have is one about inheritance and familial roles. This scene's “teaching” portion occurs after Ed has bequeathed his football to Richie, and Richie has left to find a bike pump to inflate the ball. We cut from the profile shot of Ed and Richie to a reverse shot, so we now stand behind Ed, looking over his shoulder. We see Richie return from the hall closet, bike pump in hand. He hurries back into the room and says, “I brung the needle valve.” Ed corrects Richie in a joking and pleasant manner, saying, “well, sit down, hold the ball, and ill bring some air into it.” Richie smiles, correcting himself, saying, “ok, brought,” as he and Ed slowly move to the left of the screen toward the small couch.[131] The camera pans to the left with Ed and Richie, leaving us in a reverse shot but with a different angle—now a semi-subjective point of view, looking more at Richie as he talks to Ed, who remains in profile. Once there, Richie sits on the couch while Ed sits on its arm. The positioning on the couch creates an idyllic image of father and son—Richie holds a football and looks up at his father.

[131] *Bigger than Life,* “Glory Days Gone,” 00:14:09-00:14:14.

Ed and Richie are pleasant during this exchange. Ed's correcting of Richie is gentle but still obeyed. This version of Ed is a kind and patient teacher and father. Ed's compassionate teaching style, the lighting, semi-subjective cutting, and obvious affection conveyed between father and son create a warm, open feeling despite the uncertain circumstances of Ed's health emergency. Returning to the scene of Ed's new education program, we can see the stark contrast between Ed and the father/son relationship. The transformed Ed replaces the once understanding and kind teacher-father. Now Ed embodies a teacher fixated on strict discipline, obedience, and achievement. This father expects a son to submit to his every cruel whim. As Ed transforms, so do the spaces in the home. Once a bright place of father/son bonding and bequeathment, the study turns into a claustrophobic space of darkness and strict authoritarian education.

In the film, Ed gives Richie another math problem. Richie must correctly solve a problem before the lesson can end. As Ed recites the problem, he stands and the camera cuts to a long shot, on a diagonal line from the room's opposite corner. This kind of shot creates a sense of depth and breadth that will work to emphasize the shallow alternative shots that retain range so that the viewer feels claustrophobic as if the shot is inescapable.[132] The camera remains stationary as Ed

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[132] Ray was known to have studied architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright, which some scholars have suggested contributed to his skill with CinemaScope. Kite argues, "Ray often spoke of Wright in later interviews, saying his own predilection for the long horizontal lines of the CinemaScope frame might be an indirect reflection of the architect's influence ("Somewhere in Suburbia"). Wood comments on Ray's skill in using Cinemascope and its effect: "…and what Welles was to deep focus, Ray was to CinemaScope. The 'Scope frame gave a new acuteness to his architectural sense: he both uses the inherent horizontal emphasis of 'Scope and fights it by an equal insistence on the vertical. The constriction of the frame (a shot showing the whole length of the body has automatically the effect of a long-shot) repeatedly intensifies our awareness of the characters' sense of entrapment" (Wood on *Bigger than Life*, 56). Likewise, Andrew echoes Wood's claims, arguing that beginning with the first hospital scene, "Ray diminishes the frame—to create a claustrophobic sense of entrapment—by filling large parts of the screen with blocks of black. The horizontal compositions that have so far suggested a sense of security are replaced by diagonals that convey the idea of chaos, tension, and instability. These motifs will return again and again as the film continues ("*Bigger than Life*,"105-106). For additional interpretations of Ray's influence by Wright see: Bernard Eisenschatz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey*, trans. Tom Milne (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011); McGilligan, *Nicholas Ray*, 31-48; Will Scheibel *American Stranger: Modernisms, Hollywood, and the Cinema of Nicholas Ray* (Albany, NY: State University New York Press, 2017).

stands and walks away from the desk toward where Richie sits on the small sofa. As he crosses the room, Ed's shadow is vast and imposing.

Ed rounds the sofa, patrolling the room until stands behind Richie. Then, Ed leans forward, surveilling Richie's work from over his shoulder. Unlike earlier, Ed does not touch Richie's shoulder. Instead, he looms menacingly over Richie as the overwrought child tries to work out the math problem. The lack of physical touch but close proximity exacerbates the tension in the room while emphasizing the change in Ed; he no longer offers gentle affection or compassion to Richie. Even though Ed continues to dress in the same grey suit (although he is not wearing the jacket), bow tie, and white button-up shirt, works in the same vocation and instructs his son in the same room Ed is different. The simultaneous feeling of familiar and unfamiliar engenders the feeling of the uncanny.

As Ed leans forward and downward, we have a cut to a low-angle medium shot of Ed and Richie. Richie is framed in a medium close-up as he is lower than Ed and closer to the camera. Conversely, Ed is taller, framed in a medium-long shot because of the low angle. This shot eliminates the depth while retaining the breadth of the previous shot creating a sense of flatness and inescapability from Ed's imposing figure. Moreover, this shot recreates the hierarchy we saw when Ed and Richie sat on the same couch pumping up the football. The visual familiarity creates expectations that are dashed by the strangeness and horror of Ed's behavior. Ed's shadow is seen on the wall behind him; large and menacing, it echoes Ed's behavior. This shadow is often commented on as monstrous but also looks distinctly animalistic.[133] Whether monstrous or

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[133] Andrew, "Commentary." In his chapter on *Bigger than Life,* Andrew argues, "On the level of the film, the film is subtle and entirely realistic in its portrait of Ed's growing psychosis; in visual terms, it achieves an altogether more complex form of accuracy, with precise compositions, clashing colours and Expressionist lighting combining to take the film into a nightmarish Gothic horror which matches the family's *subjective* experiences….[for instance] when Ed is forcing Richie to do the maths problem over and over again, his shadow on the wall behind him—diagonally disfigured to resemble a terrible, preying monster that towers, ready to pounce, over Richie—is an exact

animalistic, the hybridity serves to emphasize the feeling of the uncanny. Ed is both human and inhuman. [134]

We linger in this uncomfortably stifling shot of the father looming over his son for almost forty seconds. The lack of cut exacerbates the sense of stillness and oppression and concretizes the feelings of helplessness and imprisonment. We wait, "on pins and needles" for something to erupt or change. Then Lou enters the room. She stands with her hands behind her back, as if she is petrified in the full sense of the word. Lou is terrified and possibly immobilized because of her fear. Her immobility also suggests that she is petrified in the sense of concretion or the transformation of matter into a stony substance.

Lou interrupts Ed's development program to remind Ed that it is late. As she enters the room Ed stands up and crosses his arms; the three family members form the shape of an isosceles triangle, which figural communicates the relationships of the family members. Lou stands on Ed's left (on the right of the screen for the viewer). The distance between Lou and Ed is the shortest. There is an almost straight line between Ed and Richie, which enables Ed's shadow to literally overshadow Richie, reminding the viewer of who controls Richie's fate and barring Lou from directly interacting with Richie. The longest distance of the triangle is the diagonal line between Lou and Richie. Lou's entrance into the study spatially unites the family, bringing them all

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embodiment of the boy's fears about his father," (*The Films of Nicholas* Ray, 107). See also Kite, "Somewhere in Suburbia."

[134] This reading could be pushed further to argue this shot foreshadows the possibility of Ed as demonic. The association with the demonic is raised again during the *Akedah* retelling when Ed turns on the TV and carnival music fills the house. Moreover, the question of the demonic draws on *Fear and Trembling* where Kierkegaard posits two different types of paradoxes, the paradox of the divine and the paradox of the demonic, both which require faith in the absurd. Abraham is in the paradox of the divine. In this paradox, Abraham is moved from the universal, i.e. the ethical, to a place where he is, as a single individual, above the ethical and in absolute relation with the absolute, God. Conversely, one can be in the paradox of the demonic if one starts as a single individual above the universal via sin. This paradox is exemplified in *Fear and Trembling*, through the story of the merman. Parallels to the story of the merman could be drawn with both Ed Avery and Harry Powell. However, a full interrogation of the paradox of the demonic and Kierkegaard's philosophy as it relates to Ed Avery and Harry Powell is beyond the scope of this project. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, ed. and trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Problema III, specifically III 144, III 161.

together. However, their proximity does not translate into a sense of togetherness. Instead, Ed's dominating presence fragments the family into two distinct relationships; one between father and son and the other between husband and wife. Ed remains at the center of both relationships which is underscored by his position in the triangle from which he dictates the nature of the family members' relationships.

Ed's response to Lou's reminder about the hour, "I'm hungry too," verbally reveals the shift in Ed's parenting concerns. Ed no longer tries to guide and protect Richie as a parent and instead elides the difference between him as an adult and Richie as a child. Francis Truffaut argues that Ray's films have a similar hero in them: "For Ray's hero is invariably a man lashing out, weak, a child-man when he is not simply a child."[135] We see this idea of a child-man several times throughout the film (e.g. when Ed and Richie are playing football in the house) but here it takes particular form as Ed dismisses the difference between a child and an adult man. Ed uses his own body as a guide for his son's tolerance and needs. This line of thinking is ironic because Ed's health and body have already proven faulty as a baseline and avoids the fact that Ed's cortisone intake affects his stamina.

Lou persists in trying to persuade Ed to end Richie's schooling session but only succeeds in exposing how Ed's good intentions toward Richie are now rooted in convictions about the faults of children. She attempts to appeal to what would have been pre-cortisone Ed's empathy and fatherly love. She reminds Ed that Richie did not even eat lunch and pleads, "Look at him; he's falling asleep." Unlike Ed, Lou clearly empathizes with Richie and is worried about his well-being because, as she reminds Ed in her next line, he is "just a child." Ed becomes frustrated with Lou's objections and rebuffs her saying, "My profession is teaching. I happen to know something about

[135] François Truffaut, "A Wonderful Certainty," trans. Liz Heron, in *Cahiers du Cinéma, The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 107.

children. They're born bone-lazy. Just as they're born greedy and untruthful." Lou responds, "Aren't you expecting too much?" Ed lectures Lou in response, "The human brain, properly developed, is capable of doing ten times what will ever be required of it."[136]

At this point in the sequence, Ed holds a pencil in his right hand, and as he responds to Lou, he uses that hand to punctuate his points. While his material body suggests one meaning behind his actions, his shadow suggests a darker intent. Ed continues to rebuke Lou's attempt to intercede on Richie's behalf: "Lou, my concern is solely for Richard's future." As he says this, Ed gestures, and his corresponding shadow on the wall pantomimes a stabbing motion, transforming the pencil into a knife. Ed then says, "I'm prepared to sacrifice everything for that," he turns toward Lou and asks, "any objection?" Ed's shadow stabbing Lou foreshadows his murderous intent during the *Akedah* retelling. We must wonder if the "everything" Ed plans to sacrifice for Richie's future is Lou. Pairing Ed's response to Lou with the actions of his shadow reminds us of the world of *Night of the Hunter,* where the home is a prison, the husband/father the hunter, and the children/wife are the prey.

Ed's rebuff of Lou calls into question her role as a caretaker and mother which is manifested by his barring her from Richie and the distance between the mother and son in the triangular shape. Seemingly defeated by Ed, Lou prepares to leave the room. Yet, Lou's surrender appears to be a form of masking, a performance. She pretends to agree with Ed's ideas and rules, but her eyes convey her lingering concern and worry for Richie. Her eyes flash up at Ed in frustration at his stubbornness or anger at him for interfering with her relationship with Richie. Once Ed is again focused on Richie, Lou's eyes shift, toward Richie, expressing the distress of a desperate mother who cannot reach her son who sits just feet from her.

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[136] For full sequence and quotes see: "Ed's Program," 01:06:55-01:12:01.

After Lou exits, Ed remarks, "never a moment's peace" Ed walks out of the frame, and the camera very slowly and slightly tilts down to recenter Richie in the frame. But the camera has remained stationary for almost two minutes. The long, static take, in addition to the shadows, lighting, and dialogue, emphasizes the building strain and disconnection between Ed and Lou, as well as the sense of foreboding at Ed's increasing authoritarianism. Within the next few shots, Ed realizes the time, and if, at first, we think he realizes that he has lost track of time and has been too harsh with Richie, we quickly learn we are mistaken. Ed's attention to the time reminds him to take his cortisone.

As Ed makes an excuse and exits, we return the re-establishing shot of the room on the diagonal angle. Lou stealthily and quickly opens the door when she hears Ed leave. It appears that despite her chastisement, she has not been cowed by Ed's harsh words. Alternatively, perhaps, Lou's concern for Richie takes priority over her fear of Ed. Lou walks into the room carrying a glass of milk. We cut to a medium shot with Richie and Lou framed in the foreground. Lou instructs Richie in a hushed whisper to drink the milk. Richie takes a drink with a milk mustache and looks up at his mom, crying.

Despite Lou's earlier alienation from Richie, in Ed's absence, Richie quickly confides in his mother and seeks comfort. He breaks down and sobs, "I can't do it." We cut to a medium close-up of Richie looking up at his mom, eyes squinting, as he tells her, "I hate him, mom. I hate him." Lou begins to console Richie; sitting next to him as he moves over to make room for her on the couch. Lou and Richie's positions provide the setup for a shot/reverse-shot exchange. The sequence continues with a cut looking over Lou's shoulder at Richie. Lou tells Richie, "Now you listen to me. You've got to understand this as if you were a grown person. Your father doesn't mean to act this way." Lou's comment here tells us that she is not blaming Ed for his actions. She

sees him as a victim of his medication—the pills make him act this way. At the same time, the conversation between Lou and Richie overtly raises the question of whether Ed is the same person as he was before the cortisone. This idea both plays on the sense of the uncanny and raises a question about the legitimacy of marriage when one find their spouse is no longer recognizable but a stranger.[137]

Rather than fulfill the shot/reverse-shot expectation, there is a cut to another re-establishing shot of Richie and Lou. Compared to the earlier shot, this one is farther away and the extra distance allows the viewer to see that the glass of milk sits between Lou and Richie on the table, forming a triangle, the milk substituting for the absent parent, Ed. In the former triangle, Ed and Lou were shown closer together as they both looked at and talked about Richie, but Lou was barred from Richie by Ed's shadow. Now, Lou can fully touch and reach Richie because Ed is physically absent from the room. As Lou and Richie sit talking, they form the base of an isosceles triangle, where they are the closest together, and they share an equal distance away from the milk/representation of Ed. Here, Ed's absence creates a sense of familial togetherness whereas above, when the family was together Ed's presence fragmented the family.

The focus on the milk here and in the following scene offers a glimpse of how excessive meaning and social criticism are placed onto elements in the scene. Milk becomes figural for both parents and their relationship with Richie. There are multiple layers of meaning to the milk that are relevant here. Pasteurized milk became widely available in the 1950s as a way to reduce the contamination of diseases and human illnesses caused by raw milk.[138] Milk thus holds both a

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[137] This latter idea stems from Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Henrik Ibsen's play, *The Doll House* and corresponding argument in *The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), see especially 19-24.
[138] "Raw Milk Questions and Answers," Food Safety, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated January 4, 2023, https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/rawmilk/raw-milk-questions-and-answers.html.

nourishing and poisonous connotation. Thus, as a stand-in for Ed, milk raises the idea that Ed's illness can contaminate and poison his family. In the hands of Lou, the milk is nourishing. The duality of milk—as poisonous or nourishing—figures for the intended benevolence of parents toward their children. Parental love and intentions while intended to nourish and strengthen can cause harm and even poison the relationship between parents and children. Finally, this household staple becomes symbolic of the family's idealization with its potential to both support and nurture or harm and blight children

In the absence of Ed, Lou can explain to Richie what she has learned about the side effects of Ed's medication. Lou explains, "it's those pills, and if he stops taking them, he'll…his awful pain will return. Now we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?" Now seeming to understand, Richie replies to his mother, with a cut to the previous shot "Gosh, no." Rather than cutting again or as expected, we listen as Lou says to Richie, "then you and I must be very careful not to upset him." Then we cut, again not to a reverse shot but to the reestablishing shot. Lou continues telling Richie to "keep loving him, with all our hearts, no matter what he does." Then in a less placating and false tone, she says, "now we'll see Doctor Norton on Monday." The cut to the reestablishing shot offers us a glimpse of the two sides of Lou's thinking. On the one hand, she has defended Ed to Richie and insists that she and Richie must unconditionally love Ed regardless of his behavior. On the other hand, Lou wants to change Ed's behavior by contacting Ed's doctor. Lou simultaneously holds two contradictory positions: they must love Ed no matter how he behaves and they must contact the doctor to change Ed's behavior. At this point, Lou's faith in her family and their togetherness seems contingent on returning Ed to his former behavior. In the denouement of the film, we will see Lou embrace faith in the togetherness of the family in a manner similar to Abraham's faith in God when he commanded him to sacrifice Isaac.

Lou's insistence on waiting for Dr. Norton rather than his substitute tells us that Lou is concerned with the public perception of her family. We see this also when Lou and Wally discuss Ed after his PTA meeting performance. During this discussion, Lou tells Wally that she does not want people to think Ed is seeing a psychiatrist. Public perception and to a lesser degree the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality clouds Lou's judgment.[139] She wishes to keep private the unraveling of her family and Ed's mental health, so much so that she will not confide in a substitute doctor. It's important here to realize that Lou is unaware of the severity and danger of the situation. While she has finally learned that the medication is causing Ed's erratic and sadistic behavior, she was not privy to the conversation between Ed and Dr. Norton, when Dr. Norton stressed Ed must contact him if he feels any unusual mood swings. Lou does not realize that Ed's increasing psychosis is a danger to her and Richie. Instead, she has the attitude of managing the problem until it can be privately rectified.

Richie finishes his milk and wipes off his milk mustache at Lou's urging. When Ed returns, Lou hides the glass of milk as she exits the room. She has defied Ed and offered nourishment and care to Richie, as her motherly and caretaker role insists she should. At the same time, she has broken her submissive wife role. She has chosen to care for Richie, in at least his small way, rather than submit to Ed. She differs from Willa Harper in this behavior but is not so bold as to seek "public" help for their dilemma. Richie having been given a break, refreshment, and an explanation of Ed's actions can suddenly succeed at his schoolwork. At last done with "school," Ed and Richie go to the dinner table for a late-night meal.

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[139] The idea that this film dramatizes the problems with the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality is well remarked on and is noted as one of reasons Ray was interested in the film. See: Andrew, "Commentary" and *The Films of Nicholas Ray,* 104; Eisenschatz, *Nicholas Ray,* 271; Scheibel, *American Stranger*, 40. Hantke argues in a slightly different point while still making mention of the desire to keep up appearances: "Clearly, the film tells us, the economic shortcomings endured by the family produce not only the social pressure to keep up appearances. More importantly, they produce psychological stress capable of dissolving the social bonds within the family" ("No Exit," 103).

3.3 Together but Divorced

The next sequence builds from the previous one and takes something as normal and mundane as eating dinner and serving milk, and invests it with meaning about familial relationships, parental power and authority, the threat of divorce, and the difficulty of remaining together as a family. We cut from the study to an establishing long shot of the dining room table framed between two pillars. The pillars form an open doorway and frame table in the center of the shot. Ed and Richie walk into the shot, with their backs to the camera, having just walked from the study, instead of walking through the kitchen, which is Lou's domain. Ed continues to restrict Lou and Richie's interactions.[140]

The camera begins to track in as Ed and Richie reach the open doorway. Ed walks behind Richie, to the right, toward the head of the table. Richie walks to the left, ultimately going around his mother to sit in the middle of the table, and Lou will sit across from Ed at the other end of the table, closest to the kitchen. We can observe the dinner table as Lou serves the food and Ed and Richie find their seats. The table is covered in a drab white tablecloth; the meal seems modest with soup, vegetables, bread, and milk.

The end of the table where Lou will sit, the left side of the table, draws the eye when compared to the right end where Ed will sit. Our vision is drawn to Lou's end of the table because more dishes and food are on that side. Lou and Richie's water glasses are closer together, and in particular, the milk jug sits on the end corner of the table between Lou's and Richie's chair. The table arrangement may seem like luck, but as the scene progresses, the table arrangement will complement the camera's cutting to communicate to the viewer the changing status of the

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[140] The analysis of the dinner scene and corresponding quotations are taken from *Bigger than Life,* "Missing Milk," 01:12:06-01:14:18.

relationship in the family. The milk jug, however, will serve a different purpose—showing a change in power dynamics and parental authority based on its location on the table.

The camera, tracking in as everyone finds their way to the dinner table, stops moving when the scene is framed in a medium shot. This framing works as the establishing shot for this sequence. The camera stops moving and tilts slightly down, as if we, the viewer, are standing and watching the family eat dinner. The CinemaScope in this shot makes the dinner scene feel overwhelming and even binding, we are unable to look away. The chairs at the two far ends of the table are arranged in a way that makes the length of the table and chairs virtually equal to the size of the frame. The two walls in the background are starkly devoid of ornamentation, and the white curtain and neutral yellow-tan color are muted enough to focus attention on the table.[141] Of note, Richie is positioned in the middle of the shot and halfway between the two ends of the table, standing out because he wears a bright red shirt.

Lou had served Ed first, then Richie. She does herself last, and as she sits, we have a match on action cut to a medium shot of Richie and Lou. This cut creates an alliance between Lou and Richie together. While Lou was serving dinner, Ed nodded his approval toward Richie's correctly solved math problem he has stored in his pocket. Despite this approval from Ed, this sequence does not create an alliance between Ed and Richie through framing. The emphasis on Lou and Richie together happens just after we see a family arranged in a flat isosceles triangle: Ed and Lou are farthest apart but seem to be close to an equal distance from Richie. Then a cut places Lou and Richie together, giving the impression of a scalene triangle rather than an isosceles, and enables us to see Lou and Richie look at each other as co-conspirators. The milk on the end of the table

[141] Kite compares the dinner table sequence to previous one in the study: "Shadows are banished when the family gathers in the dining room, but the stiff frontality of the composition hangs mocking quotes around it, and the scene becomes a parody of domesticity, some demon-haunted re-creation of a glossy ad.

between Lou and Richie signifies their shared secret and bond. But Ed will shortly discover their deception. Unfortunately, the jug is visibly missing milk. There is a ring stain above the current milk level, and milk also stains the jar where it had been poured out for Richie earlier. These seem like small and unnoticeable details; who would see or care about such a thing? However, the tension in the scene is so extreme that the stained milk jug feels like a beacon calling attention to itself. Lou's earlier foresight to tell Richie to wipe the milk from his mouth is absent in this scene as she forgets or does not realize the need to hide the evidence of her defiance of Ed's parenting.

Once Lou is seated, she nods to Richie, who begins a prayer of thanks for dinner. We then moved to a shot of the dinner table, where the three family members were still seated in an isosceles triangle. The camera has been moved so that it is lower and is now staring directly at the table rather than tilted downward. The table and the parents seated at it remain in line with the breadth of the frame. After praying, everyone looks up from their bowed heads, and Lou begins serving glasses of milk. Then there is a cut to a medium shot of Ed as he stares intently down the table toward Lou. In this sequence, we will see a shot/reverse-shot exchange absent any subjective point-of-view shots. Instead, the semi-subjective cutting offers the viewer a chance to feel caught in the middle of a family dispute. The camera is positioned across from Richie at the center of the table. This initial camera position reminds us that Richie is caught between his parents. As the scene continues and the cutting commences, the camera looks from one end of the table to the other, creating a feeling of watching a sports spectacle where the power is volleyed from one end to another instead of a ball. Initially, the camera positioning places Richie at the center of the parental match and enacts a feeling of being caught between two poles.

Initially, the three people seated at the table are depicted as being in an isosceles triangle, with Richie's parents' distances from him being equal and Lou's distance from Richie being the

greatest. To symbolize the bond between family members, cutting creates a scalene triangle. In scalene form, we see Lou and Richie are closest together. The next shortest distance is between Richie and Ed. Finally, unlike the former scene, in this one the longest distance is between Ed and Lou. In the next cut. However, the reverse shot of Ed, Lou and Richie are framed together as Lou continues to pour the milk. Such framing creates the impression that Richie is on the side of his mother and against his father. Lou finishes pouring the glass of milk, sets it down in front of Richie, and reaches for her own glass to fill with milk. In this interaction, Lou and Richie do not even look toward Ed's end of the table. Instead, they either remain focused on one another or keep their eyes downcast. The secret that Lou and Richie shared in Ed's study carries over to their relationship at the table. We cut back to Ed at the far end of the table. His brow is furrowed as if he is confused or contemplative. Finally, after approximately sixteen seconds of silence and milk pouring, Ed rather abruptly demands, "Give me that pitcher." Ed reaches his hand out toward Lou's end of the table, pushing into Lou's space with Richie.

There is a cut, and the viewer is volleyed back to Lou and Richie's end of the table. Now Lou looks up directly at Ed, frozen; once again, she seems petrified. Ed's arm reaches into the frame as he leans forward to take the pitcher. Ed's disembodied arm looms like his hand at the beginning of the film; Now it is the arm of God that Ed's reach evokes, requiring acquiescence and the milk as an offering. Ed transcends space here in ways Lou cannot. While Lou must sneak into the study in Ed's absence to help Richie, Ed can enter any space of Lou and Richie's. He can transcend the spatial boundaries of the home and the symbolic boundary of the mother/son relationship. Such power evokes the question of Ed's similarity to God in that he seems omnipresent.

Despite her anxiety and fear, Lou is unable or unwilling to disobey Ed. She leans forward and hands Ed the pitcher. As the pitcher reaches Ed's writing, Richie finally turns and looks at his father. We can see that Richie remains at the center of the table and that framing evokes the feeling as if he is closer in the distance to his mother. The milk jug is the center of this frame, and in the handoff from one end of the table to the other, the milk jug covers Richie's face as it passes from one parent to the other. Lou and Richie have lost their secret bond, and Ed interferes with the closeness of their relationship by taking the milk jug. We cut to reestablish shot while the milk is passed. The reestablishing shot reestablishes the power dynamic between the two parents as is figured in passing the milk from one end of the table to the other.

Ed and Lou lean back to their respective table ends, and Ed positions the pitcher on the corner of the table between Richie and him. Richie, meanwhile, reaches for his glass of milk to take a drink. Perhaps Richie is attempting to forestall the discovery of his and Lou's deceit by drinking the milk. But, before Richie can take a sip, Ed demands, "give me that glass." The duration between Ed's demands is ten seconds amplifying the suspense of Ed's discovery of Lou and Richie's secret. Ed reaches over and takes the glass from Richie. As Ed leans back, there is a match on action cut to the medium shot of Ed. He begins to pour the glass of milk back into the pitcher. As he begins to pour the milk, there is another match-on-action cut to the reverse shot of Lou and Richie. Ed's hands are just visible in the extreme right foreground of the shot, emphasizing the action of pouring milk. Lou and Richie stare at Ed's hands with apprehension as their secret is slowly revealed. Once he has finished emptying the glass, Ed raises the pitcher so that it is just to the right of Richie, almost superimposed over his face and torso. We cut back to the shot of Ed as he looks at the pitcher and then in the direction of Richie, and then his eyes shift to Lou. Another fifteen seconds pass before Ed sets the pitcher on the table and breaks the silence with sharp

criticism, “How stupid to suppose you could hide anything from me.” Then Ed begins to tap on the glass pitcher as he continues, “Quite obviously, one glassful has already been poured out of here. What became of it?”

After asking his question, we cut to the reverse shot of Lou and Richie. Richie looks in Ed’s direction and bravely responds, “I drank it, daddy.” Lou then injects, “It was my fault, Ed. I brought it to him while you were upstairs.” As Lou says this last part, her voice quiets, and then she rushes a bit as if struggling with her confession. Lou’s eyes flick up to Ed and back down during the final words of her testimony. There is a cut to the shot of Ed staring intently back at Lou. Rather than an outburst, Ed calmly responds, “Lou, it would be better for all of us if you clearly understand one thing. I will not tolerate your attempts to undermine my program for Richard.” Mid-sentence, we cut to the reverse shot of Lou and Richie as they weather their chastisement. Lou responds quickly and quietly, “yes, dear”, nodding to emphasize her agreement.

There is a cut back to Ed. Now Ed begins to show signs of anger, speaking faster and with hate, “Be so good as to not speak to me in that hypocritical tone.” As the tension reaches its fever pitch, the cutting tempo increases, adding to the suspense and building a sense of foreboding as Lou tries to stave off Ed’s impending eruption of fury with submission. Ed’s vitriol only worsens while he chastises Lou and disparages their marriage. “I see through you as clearly as this glass pitcher.”

While Ed continues his tirade at Lou, I pause to see what he has just suggested and how the film amplifies his sense of superiority. In the hospitalization segment early in the movie, Ed is given a glass of barium that looks indistinguishable from a glass of milk. In that scene, the barium Ed drinks allow the doctors to see through Ed with the help of X-Ray technology. In this sequence, it seems as though Ed has gained a version of the power of medical technology; Ed, too, can see

through people, but rather than see through them physically, he sees through schemes and machinations. Ed's disembodied arms and hands complement his seeming omniscience with omnipotence. While not yet at his most megalomanic in this sequence, Ed's seemingly superhuman abilities are cast against a concern regarding what kind of supernatural force Ed is manifesting—one of good or evil.

While Lou continues to show reverence, Ed escalates his outburst. Nevertheless, a cut in the middle of his tirade lets the audience observe how Ed's words and deeds affect his family. He continues, "If you assume that all this sweetness and meekness will fool me, "Yes, darling," and "No, darling," a cut to the reestablishing image of the entire family disrupts the concentration on Ed during the outburst. He says, "I see through you as I can see through the glass pitcher." Between Richie and Ed, the milk is on the table. Richie and Lou's relationship has been shattered by Ed removing the milk, removing Lou's role as a caretaker, and forcing them to focus on Ed rather than one another. Richie is now entirely focused on his father instead of his mother. Lou sits rigidly in the meantime, her head tilted slightly toward the camera as if Ed's words physically struck her face.

While the reestablishing cut interrupts the focus on Ed alone, it does not stop or even slow his condemnation of Lou. He blatantly insults Lou, saying that if she thinks her fake demure and compliant behavior will fool him, then "You are an even bigger idiot than I took you for. Let's clear this up one and for all," Ed slams his hands on each side of his place setting as he yells this last line, "I'm staying in this house solely for the boy's sake. As for you personally, I'm finished with you; there's nothing left."

At this point, the camera begins to track in on Richie as he stares at his father, assailing his mother. The focus on Richie here offers the viewer a glimpse into a child's observation of a

marriage dissolving. Non-diegetic music starts with the camera's movement. The camera tracking lasts almost ten seconds until Richie is framed in a medium close-up with the milk. Richie is upset, mouth slightly agape, breathing a bit hard like he might cry. Oblivious to anything but his anger, Ed pushes onward, cruelly detailing his lack of love for Lou "Our marriage is over; in my mind, I've divorced you. You're not my wife anymore; I'm no longer your husband." There is a cut to Ed. He was leaning back and taking a breath to recover from his torrent of words. However, Ed begins to look confused after his outburst. He brings his hands together and then abruptly separates them, looking down and then off to the side. It is difficult to tell if Ed is aware of what he has just done and whether he is in control of his actions. We cut to the reverse shot of Lou and Richie. Lou flicks her eyes to Richie and then down. Richie turns his head slowly from his father to the other end of the table toward his mother, gauging the relationship between his parents. Lou is now devoid of power, at the mercy of Ed, and no longer seems able even to buffer, let alone protect Richie from Ed's growing psychosis.

Then there is a cut to a medium close-up of Richie and the milk jug; together, they form the center of the frame. The milk, the source of contention between the parents, the offering Lou made to Ed, and the symbol of Lou and Richie's secret together is again invested with new meaning. Now the milk sits only with Richie; Richie, like the milk, is a source of contention between his parents and another offering that Ed will later expect of Lou. The reign of terror Ed, and his severe patriarchal obsessions with male performance, which include football and math problems, are also reflected based on his impact on Richie, rather than just being entirely for his own sake. In several of their characteristics of Ed, Richie has been left hurt and alone, missing the proper and lovely father he used to have. He felt shame and disappointment after being dismissed by Ed's new authoritarian trait. Now that Lou is devoid of authority, the power of the milk is

passed to Richie, who will try to protect his mother in the film's climatic sequence by destroying Ed's cortisone.

Interestingly, Lou's response to Ed's abuse is not shown outside of Richie. As Ed is berating Lou, telling her in his mind, it's as if they are divorced; we do not track in on Lou to see the effect of the barrage of abrasive and abusive words. Instead, the camera tracks in on Richie, indicating that such abuse is measured in its impact on children regardless of adult victims. By placing Richie in the center of the table, the sequence concretizes the tug-of-war feeling some children experience during a divorce. Moreover, Richie no longer sits outside Ed and Lou's secret relationship in this sequence. We can compare the intense focus on Richie and his location in connection to his parents between this moment at the dinner table and earlier in the film when Ed collapsed before going to the hospital. In that scene, Richie's shadow and body remain distinctly separate from his parents in their bedroom, showing the viewer that Ed and Lou's relationship does not always include Richie.[142]

At the dinner table, however, we see that Richie is a central point of a tug-of-war between his parents, shown in the establishing shots as the tip of a flat isosceles triangle. There is an equal distance between Lou and Richie and Ed and Richie but a greater distance between Lou and Ed. However, Lou and Richie are repeatedly framed together with Ed remaining separate during the cutting. This cutting technique creates the sense of a scalene triangle, where none of the sides is the same length: Lou and Richie appear to sit closer together, while the distance between Ed and Richie is farther than Lou and Richie. The distance between Ed and Lou remains the most distant. This family arrangement conveys Ed's growing alienation from his family and Lou and Richie's growing closeness as they try to weather the effects of Ed's medication. The tension in the home

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[142] See *Bigger than Life, "*Tensions Grow," 00:11:57

grows with Ed's increased abuse of cortisone. The dinner table triangles show us how Richie is now the central and primary connection between his parents; he no longer resides outside their privacy. The healthy nuclear is corrupted and divorced despite their ostensible togetherness in the same residence.

3.4 Binding the Family Together

After the volatile dinner scene, Ed, Lou, and Richie attend church and listen to a sermon about the prodigal son. When they return, the film begins the leadup to the overt re-telling of the *Akedah.* In the entryway of the home, Ed begins pontificating about ethics, his own superiority to that of the "sanctimonious stuffy-shirt" minister, and flips through a Bible he removes from the mantel in the study.[143] Richie meanwhile tries to dispose of Ed's cortisone but is caught, "red-handed" by Ed. Ed then prevents Richie from calling Dr. Norton to disclose Ed's volatile behavior by cutting the phone cord and locking Richie in his room. The scissors used to cut the phone cord and Richie's confinement foreshadow Ed's reading and the recreation of the *Binding of Isaac.* Richie's confinement figures for Isaac's binding to the altar. Ed's scissors will be transformed into a knife like the one Abraham uses when preparing to sacrifice his son.

Despite his anger, Ed expresses concern about the change he perceives in Richie. Ed believes Richie is becoming something other than an innocent and submissive child. Ironically, and unnoticed by Ed, Richie's lying and sneaking mimics Ed's own behavior when he stole a prescription for more cortisone. Ed's desire to do what is best for his son has been shown throughout the film. In addition to his sadistic education program, discussed above, at the beginning of the film, he showed this concern by trying to shelter Richie from seeing him suffer

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[143] *Bigger than Life*, "God Was Wrong," 01:16:08.

in pain. Ed's benevolence as a parent has transformed throughout the course of the film, warped by the cortisone, so that now he will convince himself that the best avenue of protecting Richie is to murder him.

After Ed has closed Richie in his room, there is a cut to Lou hanging up the phone (she has tried to contact Wally to seek help for Ed's spiraling behavior), and we hear Ed begin to read the story of God visiting Sarah (Genesis 21:1-7).[144] Lou walks next to the staircase, and the camera tracks back as she advances. While Lou is walking toward the base of the staircase, we hear Ed coming down the stairs, continuing to read from the Bible. The camera pauses momentarily as Ed and Lou reach the staircase's base. They are shown as if parallel, each moving toward the same destination but coming from different locations just as their thoughts stem from different concerns. Ed remains standing a couple of steps above the base of the stairs. The camera tracks back to follow Lou as she moves toward the closet to get her coat and attempts to leave the house to find Wally. Ed continues reading but looks up as he sees Lou opening the closet door. This shot frames the two characters, so they are each on the far side of the frame, in opposite frames of mind. Ed realizing Lou is preparing to leave, manipulates her into staying, against her initial protestations, by saying "Please darling," Ed displays affection toward her after his vitriolic outburst the previous night.

Ed has been telling Lou he is worried about the change in Richie—suggesting he could go so far as to commit murder. In an exchange of shot/reverse shots, we are looking at Lou, framed in a medium close-up when Ed reaches his hand, disembodied as it was in the beginning of the film, toward Lou to draw her toward him. We cut to the reverse shot, Ed and Lou now framed in a medium shot together, with Lou facing away from the camera, as Ed insists they must save Richie

[144] For the following scene and quotes see "God was Wrong," 01:19:54-01:27:18.

from becoming irredeemably evil. With the next cut, back to the reverse view, looking at Lou, she responds that she has “no idea” what he is talking about. Then he begins to read from the Bible, tracking the lines he reads with the scissors:

> “Take now thy son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering, upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” And Abraham rose up early in the morning and took Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. [145]

It is important here to note that while Ed does read the interpretative framework, while descending the staircase, when he recounts the story here, reading it Lou, he skips it and begins with God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. As such, Ed’s interpretation does not convey the idea that this command is a test and everything will be righted in the end. Instead, it means an all-powerful God commanded his elected servant to murder his son for no reason. As Ed reads this story, Lou reacts with distress and horror at realizing what Ed is suggesting. Ed, oblivious to Lou, begins to perform the story, stretching out his own hand that holds scissors as he reads “Abraham stretched forth his hand.” He then punctuates the words ‘he took the knife to slay his son” with a stabbing motion. This stabbing motion reminds us of Ed’s shadow in the study. No longer is Ed transforming into a monster, his shadow unmasking what lurks inside him, Ed has metamorphosed; he is the monster. Just as Powell’s true intentions were not revealed until it was too late, here, too, it seems as though Lou has realized the scope of Ed’s threat to her and Richie too late.

[145] The Bible used for this reading appears to be a King James version although I have quoted the film directly with its small variations from the current King James version. Ed’s reading begins at 01:21:23.

Ed stops reading at the place in the story where it says, "and [Abraham] took the knife to slay his son." While reading, Ed has maintained his position in the house, standing on the first or second step of the stairway. The stairs, like the entryway, are a place of transition:[146] they lead to either the upstairs or the downstairs, but they are not meant to be dwelt upon. Ed is in a transitional place both physically and mentally: he is between the top and bottom floors; between inaction (thinking of murder) and action (committing a murder); between sane rationality and psychotic irrationality; between a concerned, caring father and an angry, malicious man; between reading the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and enacting it. The stairway also indicates the connection of polarities. Ed is between the top and the bottom floors, on the stairs, the pathway which connects opposites. Likewise, Ed is on an intellectual pathway to justify the murder of his son as a means of saving him.

Lou tries to tell Ed that he did not read the whole passage, that God saved Isaac. Ed, however, marks the page where he concluded his reading and framed in a medium close-up, decisively declares, "God was wrong."[147] Lou, stands at his side looking up at him, the banister between a barrier separating their emotional states. Ed's declaration, "God was wrong," is ambiguous and complex, with multiple levels of meaning. At the most straightforward and literal

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[146] Eisenschatz discusses the importance of the staircase in the Avery home saying, "The Avery's two-story house is built around a staircase leading from the ground floor—hallways, living room, kitchen, and study, all communicating and permitting various routes—to an upstairs comprising two bedrooms and a bathroom (Eisenschatz, *Nicholas Ray,* 279). V.F. Perkins addresses the importance of the staircase in *Bigger than Life* making his own argument and quoting Ray: "In *Bigger than Life* upstairs suggests both the possibility of normal family life and the temporary retreat from responsibilities into a dreamland. In Ray's own words, 'the upstairs were areas of possible refuge, serenity, and joy.' Travel posters decorating the walls become more exotic as they progress from Grand Canyon by the front door, to Bologna, on the top landing. Upstairs represents, the aspiration of the middle-aged, poorly paid schoolmaster to 'get away sometime'" (V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972; Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1993), 91. Perkins point about the travel posters is undermined by the Firenze poster in the study and Rome poster in the dining room. Wood echoes, Eisenschatz and Perkins arguing, "The complex role architectural features can play in Ray's work can be typified by his use of the staircase in *Bigger than Life.* The staircase connects (as Victor Perkins suggests) the upstairs world of private dreams and escape with the downstairs world more vulnerable to the intrusion of reality" (Wood, 56).

[147] *Bigger than Life,* "God Was Wrong," 01:22:08.

level, the declaration means that God should not have saved Isaac from being sacrificed by Abraham. More complexly, this statement could mean that Ed, who feels he knows more than everyone, is "bigger than life," knows more than God and can pronounce judgment on God. Alternatively and seemingly unintended by Ed, his statement evokes the sense that God was wrong to command Abraham to sacrifice the promised son and fulfillment of the covenant. God appears to be retracting his promise to Abraham that he would provide Abraham with numerous descendants, beginning with a son born by Sarah. Another way to understand Ed's charge is to say that he reveals an issue within the story itself. The biblical narrative ends with Isaac being saved but not explaining how the domestic family can recover and live in harmony. Nor does the story dwell on the father-son relationship after Abraham almost kills his son. Ed's charge that "God was wrong" is a claim that the story ends unsatisfactorily.

Ed's reading of the story also omits four verses that include the conversation between Abraham and Isaac and emphasize Abraham's fatherly while they walk to the place of sacrifice. The four verses foreshadow the ending of the story, that Isaac will be saved, and are replete with the dramatic irony, discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In addition, Ed's omission excludes the impossible adjudication of Abraham's different roles and relationships--called upon to obey God and be his servant and called upon by his son to be a father. Ed's choice to omit these verses allows him to avoid contending with the impossibility of Abraham's position where he must choose to honor one role or the other and reduces Abraham's decision to one of strictly forthright obedience rather than obedience to God and hiddenness to Isaac.

After Ed pronounces God's wrongness, Lou attempts to go upstairs and find Richie, but Ed prevents her. Ed says that he knows what Lou is thinking, that in "this same book it is written, 'Thou shalt not kill." Ed agrees to this argument, saying that Richie will remain innocent and that

he and Lou will "take the guilt" and "incur the damnation" in "mercy to the boy." This scene continues in the entryway with Ed up a couple of steps from the bottom floor. The space itself continues to underscore the actualizing of Ed's violent transformation as well as his plan. The viewer realizes Ed has finalized his plan when he attempt to proceed upstairs, rather than linger in the transitional space.[148]

Lou begins to stall Ed when he turns to head upstairs to Richie's room. She asks him to go for one last walk before they kill Richie and then themselves. Ed tentatively agrees but then presses Lou to find out how far they will go. Lou walks to the coat closet as she tells him just to the end of the corner. Ed steps down to the bottom stair and asks Lou, "To the corner with the police station?" Lou turns to Ed and sees that he is down the stairs at the door she has just opened. She starts screaming, "Ed, no!" as Ed locks her in the coat closet.[149] Ed then runs from in front of the coat closet to the front room with the television. We cut and see Ed in a long shot as he turns on the television. He walks away from the television, toward the camera and waits in the doorway for the television to turn on. Before the TV begins makes this noise, we hear Lou screaming from the coat closet. Once the television elicits sound, Ed walks out of the doorway and out of the shot's frame. The shot lingers momentarily on the room, juxtaposing the cacophony of carnival on the television with Lou screaming from the coat closet for Richie to run away.

There is a cut to a medium shot of Ed. He has taken the scissors he was using to mimic the actions of Abraham while reading from the Bible. He stands at the side of the stairway banister, opens the scissors, places them over the Bible and the banister, and breaks them in half. The Bible falls to the ground, and the camera follows it as it hits the floor with the words "Holy Bible" visible. The Bible has reached a new place of lowness, the book sits at the base of the stairs, devoid of

[148] The quotations in this paragraph can be found: *Bigger than Life*, "God was Wrong," 01:22:46-01:22:55.
[149] For quotations see: *Bigger than Life*, "God was Wrong," 01:24:36-01:25:08.

respect. Rather than a source of ethical behavior, the Bible has become a means of justifying the destruction of the family. The film goes so far as to show the book assisting in the creation of the tool to commit the murder.

There is a cut to the top of the stairs, and Ed begins to run up them. Once ascended, Ed passes the camera and out of sight. We cut to an establishing shot inside Richie's room, across from the door. Richie is on left side of the frame. He is folded on bed, resting on his knees but bent over with his head down, almost as if praying. The door opens, and Ed bursts into the room but then stands in the doorway with the knife in his hand. Richie looks far enough over his shoulder to see that Ed has opened the door and leans back, revealing what he has been bending over the football. Richie takes the football and extends his arm backwards, offering the football to Ed.

This football is essential and represents inheritance and futurity. As discussed above, when Ed is first preparing to go to the hospital, he takes Richie into the study and tells him that he must take care of his [Richie's] mother while he is away.[150] As we know from above, when Ed is talking to Richie, his face is superimposed over the football, almost as if the football is what is coming out of his mouth instead of words. Yet his words are essential and imbue football with overt significance. Ed gifts the football to Richie which symbolizes their connection. Richie inherits Ed's role in life and in the household; Richie is meant to succeed as his father succeeded in eh football game, become responsible and head of the house, and care for his mother in Ed's absence. Ed's futurity is embodied in Richie, he has passed along his yearnings and moments of success to his son. Thus, when Ed bursts through Richie's room at the end of the film and Richie offers the football, he is offering, perhaps unknowingly, to sacrifice his inheritance from his father. Moreover, he provides a replacement for himself in the sacrifice by offering that item symbol of

[150] See *Bigger than Life*, "Glory Days Gone" 00:13:49-00:13:53.

his relationship with his father. As this is a retelling of the *Binding of Isaac*, much like a ram was provided to be sacrificed in place of Isaac, an object is offered to be sacrificed in place of Richie.

There is then a cut to Ed in a medium close-up, looking intense while holding out the knife/scissors. There is another cut, an eyeline match showing what Ed sees; Richie kneeling on the bed with his back to Ed, offering the football behind him. Ed's vision begins to falter, we see from Ed's point-of-view as the room grows and shrinks in size and comes in and out of focus. Richie finally turns and looks at Ed while still offering the football. There is a cut back to Ed as he raises the knife and screws up his face preparing to kill his son. The camera suddenly tracks in on Ed suddenly, the screen fills with red, and Ed covers his eyes. The red washes over the entire frame and Ed's face for several seconds. Then there is a cut back to the establishing shot of the room, We see Richie jump off the bed while Ed leans, frozen against the door with one arm up and the other covering his eyes. Richie runs out of the room. We cut to Ed in a medium close-up and see him rubbing his eyes and moving his head back and forth. Ed removes his arm from his eyes. There is a cut to Ed's point of view, the bed is empty and the football rocks back and forth on the floor. There is a cut to a close-up of the front door lock being busted open and then a cut to the top of the stairs. Wally rushes in and up the stairs while Richie completes his escape down the stairs. Ed and Wally fight until Wally knocks Ed unconscious.

The story of Ed, Lou, and Richie is incomplete, but the attempted reenactment of the sacrifice of Isaac has concluded. Ed has chosen to interpret the story of Abraham's command to sacrifice Isaac for his ends which appropriates the biblical story and offers a new meaning of parental love and benevolence. Ed, at this point, sees himself above God, and opposes the order and rule of God, going so far as to declare God is wrong, a shockingly subversive line given the rules of the Production Code. Nevertheless, this statement does not mean that Ed is without faith.

Ed's faith is in himself and the correctness of his beliefs. As Kite argues, there is an inversion of the sacrifice of Jesus—who died for the sake of others and in Christian theology will atone for the sins of others whereas Richie is to die to preserve his innocence and his parents are to atone for their own and Richie's sins.[151] But there is also a new modulation of the Binding of Isaac in terms of parental benevolence. Isaac was to be sacrificed because God commanded it, that is because of Abraham's unyielding faith in God. In the film, Richie is to be sacrificed because of Ed's unyielding faith in himself and his ideas. But only Ed casts his reasoning in parental terms, Richie must be sacrificed to preserve his innocence, Ed wishes to save Richie and incur Richie's sins on himself. Abraham chose to obey God's command despite his fatherly love for Isaac which remains secondary to his relationship with God. Ed chooses the opposite of Abraham, declaring God erroneous and prioritizing his fatherly love, and yet the result is shockingly similar, both men almost murder their children. Regardless of love or intended benevolence, the child in the story suffers at the hands of their parents.

Ed's declaration that "God was wrong" is contrasted with the red that covers the screen and allows Richie to escape the room. In retrospect, we realize this red is meant to visually convey Ed's cerebral hemorrhage, but regardless of the health explanation, this red can be understood as a divine intervention to save Richie. In the biblical story, an Angel intervenes and Isaac is saved,

[151] Kite, "Somewhere in Suburbia." Kite's interpretation is supported the references to Easter vacation that begin the film and Eisenschatz's reminder that the final crises—beginning with Ed's refusal to allow Richie lunch when he misses a football pass, proceeding to Lou's learning about the side effects of Ed's medicine, worsening with Richie's endless math problems and Ed's outburst at the dinner table, and reaching its apex when Ed tries to sacrifice Richie—"is anchored within the space of a weekend" (Eisenschatz, *Nicholas Ray,* 279). The passion of Jesus is not only overtly evoked in with the reference to Easter but is thought to occur over a weekend in correspondence with Passover, much as the crises here and Ed's eventual awakening hinges around a weekend. Although, Ed as the resurrected figure further inverts the Christian theology with the sacrifice and resurrection of the innocent son. The typological interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, raised in the Introduction (see p. 19-20), are likewise inverted because Isaac who would normally figure for Jesus is not sacrificed or resurrected. Andrew, in a slightly different vein, argues that Ed can be allegorically interpreted as "Satan who challenges God's power" (*The Films of Nicholas Ray,* 109).

here Ed seems providentially afflicted with another acute health crisis, which intervenes to save Richie.

After Ed is knocked unconscious by Wally, Lou looks at Ed and then walks out of the shot. There is a cut to the entryway, and Lou picks up the Bible from the base of the stairway and moves to call the doctor, placing the bible on a table before making the phone call. Lou raises the Bible from its fallen place on the floor, suggesting it does not belong in such a lowly place. However, this is also a return to order; the biblical text regains its status after being used to justify an act of murder. This shot also emphasizes that Ed's plans were not carried out despite his claims of God's wrongness, the biblical story prevailed, and the son was not sacrificed. Perhaps we can feel the Production Code's compensating values at work here, but as in the Binding of Isaac, does this righting of the place of the Bible fully recompense the power of Ed's subversive line, "God was Wrong."

3.5 Faith in the Family

The *Akedah* trope as a test of faith is reimagined through the notion of the family in the penultimate sequence of the film. The test of faith in God is recast as a test of Lou's faith in the togetherness of the US-American Family. In the concluding scenes of the 1956 melodrama *Bigger than Life*, Lou Avery meets with doctors to discuss her husband's health.[152] The scene begins with a dissolve to a medium-long shot of Lou and her son Richie in a waiting area of the hospital. A wall divides two rooms, as though looking at two sides of different worlds and experiences.

On the right, Lou and Richie sit on a leather couch in a functional but uncomfortable waiting room. They are alone in the room. A lamp helps illuminate the room, giving the illusion of soft light and a sense of "after hours" and "nighttime." Lou sits upright, arms wrapped around

[152] The following sequence and quotes are from "On the Brighter Side" 01:27:22—1:28:03.

Richie and her head resting on his. Richie, also upright, leans into Lou; they are both asleep. On the left side of the partition sits a nurse at a desk with a classic 1950s nurse cap. She appears to be working by lamplight. A staff member with a mop and bucket crosses the boundary between the rooms, reminding us that the spaces are connected if only traversable by select people. The man begins to mop and walk between where Lou and Richie sit and the coffee table. The camera repositions, panning slightly to the right so that the camera remains attuned to Lou and Richie. The mopping rouses Lou and then Richie. The man apologizes for disturbing them as he continues past them with his mopping. Richie remarks, "Some people work awful late, don't they?"[153]

Lou laments that Richie should be in bed by now. Richie asks what time it is. Lou looks around the room for a clock but does not see one. Along with the missing clock, there is a distinct lack of windows in the room, creating disconnect from the passage of time except by one's own sense of fatigue. For anyone who has spent time in a windowless hospital waiting room this is a recognizable feeling; the inability to orient oneself to the time by daylight while also suffering under the pressure of endless waiting—where the passage of time does not mark a sense of progress toward a definitive end but rather how long you have already endured.

From behind the wall, a nurse begins to walk toward the camera and thus through the waiting room. Lou stands and calls, "Oh nurse" but the nurse seems to ignore Lou and continues walking. Lou moves to intercept the nurse but is too late and watches with palpable irritation as the nurse strides away. Lou's character adeptly enacts the frustration and annoyance familiar to those who have waited for hours in a hospital, hoping the next person who comes near will have

[153] Here, the film makes subtle reference to race. The man working in the menial job is a man of color. Thus, when Richie says "some people" it comes across as racially motivated, even though the nurses and doctors are obviously still working. One might ask, why is the comment not made about them? This small comment also demonstrates Richie's naivety about the life and working routines of people of color. See *Bigger than Life,* beginning at 01:27:21 for Richie's comment. Andrew offers insight by explaining that Ray casts people of color in small side roles as an effort to combat the racial inequality of the time ("Commentary").

news or an update; she bites out her comment, "Nurses are always in such a hurry!" Lou returns to the couch where Richie remains seated and sits down again, sighing and remaining vexed.

Against this backdrop of suffocation, Lou and the doctors exchange a rather striking and disturbing conversation about the status of Ed's psychosis and Lou's role in his recovery and maintenance of his future health. This penultimate sequence is a critical example of where biblical tropes are appropriated and used to shape both the diegetic characters' and viewers' understanding of the concept of family. The push for faith and togetherness in the family suggests the valorization of marriage and family regardless of the dangers or suffering which accompany the union. Such a valorization houses the miraculous not in the field of medicine but in the family. In the face of all impossibilities and reasons to the contrary, faith in the togetherness of the family is treated by the diegetic characters as a panacea.

3.5.1. On the Brighter Side: Acknowledgment and Avoidance

For our purposes, we jump forward slightly to when Dr. Norton, Lou and Ed's family doctor, joins Lou and Dr. MacLennan in the waiting room area while Richie remains on the couch but close enough to eavesdrop on the adults.[154] Dr. Norton walks into the frame from the left, his back remaining to the viewer as he walks up to Lou's right. Lou now stands slightly back but between Dr Norton on the right point and Dr. MacLennan on the left. Lou, noticing Dr Norton as he approaches, turns to him and asks, "Dr. Norton, how is Ed?" Still, with his back to us, Dr. Norton replies, "He's still under sedation." Dr. Norton turns so that he is in profile to the camera, and Lou directs her attention away from Dr. MacLennan to speak with Dr. Norton. Trying to pull information from two men whose body language implies no sense of urgency or alarm, Lou responds with exasperation, "Well, I know that. You've had him like a dead man in there for over

[154] The following analysis runs 01:28:22-01:31:24 in *Bigger than Life*.

thirty hours." The length of time Lou has been waiting to find out if her husband is still psychotic is staggering. Thirty hours of not knowing if your life partner will continue to try to murder you and your child is a lengthy time to wait, and the doctors' nonchalance only exacerbates Lou's impatience for answers. She then asks, "But how is he?" The doctor responds infuriatingly, "Lou, you've been courageous up to now." Bored with the conversation, Richie sneaks around Dr. Norton and walks out of the frame in the direction from when Dr. Norton first arrived. The camera begins to track in as Dr. Norton speaks. He continues, "Don't go to pieces." Lou disregards the paternalism in Dr. Norton's words and responds calmly, "I am not going to pieces, sir!"

After this sentence, we cut to a medium closeup of Lou, looking at her over Dr. Norton's shoulder. This cut prepares the viewer for an exchange between Dr. Norton and Lou in a shot reverse shot sequence. Looking at Dr. Norton in the face, Lou recites her identity and demands answers, "I am Ed Avery's wife and I want to know what's happening to him. Yes?" Lou's helplessness here is palpable. She is Ed's wife, has a child with the man, and knows him, arguably, more intimately than anyone else. Yet, she must assert her identity about him, and only about him, to justify her right to know about his status and treatment and stop the implication that her behavior borders hysterics.[155] Indeed, given the excess and extremes of what Lou and her family have just endured, it seems Dr. Norton and his cadre are underreacting. Lou, however, does not pause to let the Dr. Norton interrupt or scold her. She demonstrates competence, "For instance, why all these sedatives?" Lou's hands appear to be placed on her hips by how her shoulders move and how her elbows become visible in the shot. She drops her hands from her hips and exclaims, "I am not

[155] My reading here differs from Kite who argues that in Lou's outburst, "her words are perfectly reasonable, but under Ray's direction, Barbara Rush bears down on them with a hysterical ferocity matched only by Ed himself during his highest flights." Unlike Kite, my reading emphasizes Lou's frustration with the paternalistic treatment by the doctors as she waits thirty-six hours before learning the status and prognosis of her husband who tried to murder her, their son, and himself. Thus, Lou's reaction does not seem exaggerated, uncontrolled, or inappropriate, given the extreme of the situation. Moreover, the claim of "hysteria" while relevant for melodrama reads as sexist given the extreme duress of the circumstances. See Kite, "Somewhere in Suburbia."

precisely an idiot! What are you hiding?" Dr. Norton responds calmly, perhaps even patiently as if speaking to an unruly child: "Nothing."

Despite Dr. Norton's reply, the mise-en-scène tells us Dr. Norton is hiding something, namely that Ed remains a danger and in danger. After Dr. Norton's response, there is a cut to a medium-long shot of Richie standing under a red light outside a white door. This cut interrupts our expectations of traditional cutting in a conversation. An off-white door and wall span the width of the CinemaScope frame, starkly contrasting with the now seemingly warmly-colored waiting room. The off-white wall evokes a sense of sterility, even mental institutes with strait jackets and rooms with padded walls. The red light remains lit as a warning of danger and a signal to stop. The stark coloring alone informs the viewer that Ed's outlook is far less optimistic, unlike Lou and Richie's visits to the hospital earlier in the film.[156]

The present scenario—the physical separation, stark spaces, suffocation of the waiting room, judgment of doctors, and insecurity of Ed's health—may offer the viewer a glimpse of the future of the Avery family. Richie looks toward where Lou and Dr. Norton are talking, again listening to the conversation with the viewer. Offscreen, Dr. Norton says, "Ed's in good physical shape." Richie, either bored with the adult conversation or unable to concentrate, paces in front of the door barring him access with a "No Visitors" sign. We hear Lou persist with her questions, "Well, what's happening to him now? Is he in pain?" Dr Norton, "No." Richie turns to face the adults again. Paying attention, perhaps, to the questions he can understand. Lou, "But?" Dr Norton, "We've kept him under sedation to give him every chance to recover." Offscreen, Lou asks, "[Recover] From what?" Richie paces back to the other side of the door, reaching for the door

[156] Kite "Somewhere in Suburbia," offers an engaging reading of this earlier hospital scene. For additional interpretations of the first hospital scene see also Andrew, "Commentary" and *The Films of Nicholas*, 105.

handle. As if hearing that Ed has been granted the conditions for a full recovery, Richie is encouraged enough to touch the door handle.

With the return to the expected sequence of the shot/reverse-shot between Lou and Dr. Norton, we will now learn, via dialogue, the information shown to us in the mise-en-scène of the previous shot. We cut from Richie with his hand on the knob to a reverse shot from Lou of Dr. Norton talking to Lou. Answering Lou's question, "Recover from what?" Dr. Norton replies, "From the psychosis induced by the cortisone. He's had a deep, refreshing sleep, and we may find him bright and alert any minute now." Then Dr. Norton looks away from Lou and says, "However." Lou anxiously interjects, "Yes?" Dr. Norton remains pensive momentarily, then continues, "Well, I can't promise he will be the Ed you've always known. By that, I mean that he may be psychotic." Indeed, it seems the off-white walls were meant to invoke the image of strait jackets, padded rooms, and the feeling of danger and fright. There is a cut to a close-up of Lou looking stunned and distraught as she tries to comprehend the whole meaning of Dr. Norton's words. After several seconds of silence, she asks, "You mean out of his mind?"

Then we cut to a medium close-up of Richie; he looks about to cry. Richie stands below the flashing red light jutting out from the off-white wall. His red coat and white shirt complement the shot's color scheme. There are myriad meanings the red and white colors evoke; I shall name only a few possibilities. The red and white reiterate the hospital colors. Colors of cleanliness and purity against the color of blood, warning, and danger. We also have the allusion that the red flashing light here is reminiscent of the lights on top of an ambulance. The Red Cross's colors are red and white, another evocation of healthcare assistance. The dating of the film, 1956, means that the nuclear arms race and Cold War were well underway. Hence, red can also allude to communism, the Soviet Union, the second "red scare," and even the idea of "red alerts," warning

of an imminent nuclear attack and the end of known civilization. The red in this scene recalls the fascinating red which covered the screen during Ed's psychosis. That red covering is supposed to indicate that Ed is experiencing a cerebral hemorrhage, but it also enables Richie to escape before Ed can "sacrifice him." Red, as evocative of blood and sacrifice, ties nicely to the overt religious theme of the film's previous sequence.

The myriad ways of interpreting the color sequence illustrate the breadth of discernable meanings in the film. However, the cut to Richie, his reaction to learning that Ed may be permanently psychotic, emphasizes the ambiguity of meaning. The viewer remains uncertain of Ed's fate, and while the color scheme evokes potential interpretations and foreshadows various outcomes, there is no certainty of what will happen next. This ambiguity in the meaning of the mise-en-scène complements the uncertainty of Ed's mental stability and the status of Lou and Richie's relationship with him.

From the medium shot of Richie, there is a cut to a reverse shot of Dr. Norton. Still breaking the grave news to Lou, he says, "Lou, I've always been frank with you, and I'm not going to change that now." He pauses briefly, then continues, "When Ed opens his eyes, he may not recognize us. Could you prepare for that? But if he can remember everything that happened and face it, he'll be all right." Once again, the shot to Richie anticipates what Dr. Norton will tell Lou. But I suggest it is prudent also to take a moment to appreciate what Dr. Norton has just told Lou. It is unclear *if* Ed will recover from his psychotic state, but Ed must also remember *and* face what happened. Put differently, Ed must acknowledge, in the Cavellian sense, his actions to his family and admit his responsibility and guilt rather than engage in avoidance; he cannot keep the knowledge of his actions and their consequences to himself, he must reveal his culpability to his

family.[157] Ed could physically and mentally recover but choose to avoid the ramifications of his actions, going so far as to abandon his family. In other words, Ed's recovery is not guaranteed to reunite the family.

After Dr. Norton's news, there is a cut to a close-up of Lou. If before she looked stunned and distraught, now she seems dumbfounded and horrified. She slowly turns to the left, looking away from Dr. Norton, perhaps toward Richie and the room where Ed is locked away. We see tears in her eyes, and she struggles to maintain her composure at this news. Then Lou looks up, seeming to clench her teeth and inhale, the kind of gesture familiar to people who have tried to stifle overwhelming emotion and tears. She looks back down, her chin wobbling. The close-up of Lou lasts just over thirty seconds, with almost twenty seconds of that time showing a silent Lou struggling to maintain control of her emotions. This long pause on the close-up forces the viewer to watch Lou's reaction or look away from the screen, mimicking the inescapability of Lou's helplessness. Much like Lou was forced to helplessness in the face of Ed's suffering, the viewers are forced to watch Lou suffer helplessly. Lou cannot escape the situation; thus, the camera does not cut to an alternative spatial location.

The helplessness shown by Lou here merits consideration because of its scope. Lou cannot cure Ed or successfully argue with the doctors about his medication. At this point in the film, Lou is not presented with any tangible way to help Ed. The helplessness that ensues from her position—unable to evade the consequences of Ed's medical condition—is perhaps the most obvious. Lou's helplessness, however, also has a decidedly Cavellian tenor to it as Lou cannot do and suffer what is Ed's to do and suffer is. Lou cannot stop, cure, or even treat Ed's illness. Lou cannot suffer for

[157] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 257.

Ed; she can only suffer alone, along with Ed. They are united in their separate suffering.[158] At this moment, the notion of togetherness in marriage and family is recast as a union of isolated suffering.

Toward the end of the close-up, Lou's facial expression indicates she has decided something, and her eyes follow suit as Lou looks back toward Dr. Norton. Although she understandably still has tears in her eyes and a rough voice, she maintains her composure, deciding, "Doctor, I want to look on the brighter side." From off-screen, Dr. Norton replies, "By all means, Lou." Lou takes another deep breath and says, "If he comes out of this…I mean, the way we all want him to, what will you give him instead of cortisone?" Dr. Norton replies from offscreen still, "There is no, instead, Lou." Finally, there is a cut to the reverse shot of Dr. Norton as he persists in his explanation to Lou, "Cortisone again. Only Ed's misuse of the drug brought about this condition. This time it'll be in carefully prescribed dosage, which you must supervise." We cut back to Lou, who now appears angry. She begins protesting, "But if this drug is so dangerous." Dr. MacLennan interjects from offscreen, "All drugs are potentially dangerous." The Doctors' dismissal of Lou's concern about the danger of medication—defending the utility of medicines over its risks—reminds Lou and the viewers that Ed misused the drug; Ed is to blame. On the one hand, this sidestepping accords with the claims that Ray could not include as much social criticism of the medical and pharmaceutical industry as he desired. On the other hand, the blame on Ed seems to offer a solution favored by the Production Code Administration wherein the responsibility for a situation is displaced from a societal structure or industry onto the moral failings of an individual.[159]

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[158] Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," in *Must We Mean What We Say*, updated edition (1969; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 339.
[159] Black, "Hollywood Censored," 119-121.

Then Dr. Norton picks up where Dr. MacLennan ended, saying, while offscreen, "Cortisone is the only thing that could have saved his life, Lou, and it'll do so again. But it needs faith." The pronouncements by the doctors are nothing short of staggering, not only because of the overlaying of religious language with medicine but because of the ease with which the doctors tell Lou the new circumstances that will govern her life. The callousness with which the doctors dismiss Ed's suffering and the permanent changes to the Avery family contains an implicit critique of the doctors, the pharmaceutical industry, and the notion of medical miracles. There are costs and even harm that accompany medical care and medication. At last, a doctor admits that Avery's life has permanently changed: cortisone is a miracle drug only in that it will enable Ed, or at least a version of Ed, to continue living. Ed will live but he will also suffer because of his illness, and his family will suffer along with him. The Averys' life before Ed's illness is gone, dead even, as Ed would be dead without his medication. This becomes the unalterable "reality" of Avery's life and with that shift comes helplessness to affect change on a personal level and to control life's radical contingency of life. *Bigger than Life* deftly shows the vulnerability and powerlessness a medical ailment causes not only for the person afflicted but for their friends and family.

Dr. Norton has also placed Lou in an impossible situation where she must adjudicate competing claims on her as a mother and wife. Lou is left bound to a family where at best she can manage the treatment of an illness via a medication with deadly side effects and, at worst, remains victim to the abusive and fatal whims of a man dependent upon cortisone. Whatever decision Lou makes will determine Richie's future. Remaining married and supporting Ed through his illness places Richie at the mercy of Ed as much as it does Lou. Should Lou heed her duties as a wife and commitment to her marriage or her role as a mother and protect her child?

The overlaying of medication with the topic of faith steers the direction of the remainder of the conversation. This redirect by Dr. Norton can easily underemphasize the full scope of what he has just told Lou. In the best-case scenario, where Ed fully recovers, and the Avery family is happily reunited, Ed's future remains bleak; his condition delimits the possibilities of his life to either an early death or a medication that can potentially remake his psyche. In a worst-case scenario, Ed recovers but remains severely psychologically unstable, and thus the Avery family's life will look markedly like what Lou and Richie are presently experiencing. Dr. Norton's crowning line, "But it needs faith," is aligned with a cut to a medium-long shot of Richie, standing next to Ed's room door. The pairing of the dialogue with this cut to Richie offers us more than one option for understanding what the "it" is that needs faith. At first, we may think Dr. Norton is telling Lou she must have confidence in the drug. However, this cut suggests that more than just the drug needs faith; the family itself needs faith.

Next, there is a cut from Richie to the establishing shot of Lou and the doctors. Dr. Norton asks, "Do you have faith, Lou?" We cut to the close-up of Lou as she responds to Dr. Norton's question, "Yes, I have faith, Doctor…faith in my husband…in my son…in the family we *can* be together. And that is why I… I want to stay close to him… in his room… at his bed, by his side… so that when he opens his eyes and sees us… he'll know we have faith in him."[160] Lou's response to Dr. Norton's question demonstrates her faith by insisting that her family can remain together, and that togetherness can overcome those obstacles that seek to tear the family asunder. Lou does not suggest any faith in herself only in her family. Indeed again, Lou identifies herself only in relation to her family; she fully embraces the caretaker role and wants to perform that role for her husband. Dr. Norton seems satisfied with Lou; she is no longer demanding answers but persuading

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[160] For this dialogue about faith, see *Bigger than Life,* 01:30:42-01:31:19.

the doctors by using the expectations of her biblically conditioned familial role as wife and mother and the individual associated with the private, i.e. the home and the family.

Much as the conclusion to *the Akedah* does nothing to reconcile the domestic tensions between the three family members—Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah—the insistence on faith does little to assuage the concern of the more pragmatic viewers. As shown above, togetherness does not mean the family is united; the family can indeed be divorced while together in the same household. Moreover, faith in the togetherness of the family resulted in a psychotic break and a family annihilation near miss. Indeed, Lou's persistence in remaining together ironically aided the calamity in her family. Yet, Lou's response to Dr. Norton's questions attests to her faith and makes it all the more extreme and even absurd in the Kierkegaardian sense. She faces the impossibility of her situation and insists that her family will be together, in spite of the irrationality and previous experience to the contrary. Through faith in togetherness, her family will be returned to her as Isaac was returned to Abraham. Lou's insistence is not a simple desire for the improbably or child-like naive that experience will dash. Rather Lou irrationally (and against the ethical implications of endangering her child) believes the impossible—togetherness will mend Ed's health, heal their trauma, and keep her child safe; it will restore her family.[161]

Reconciliation

The overt retelling of the *Akedah* risks overshadowing the allusions to other biblical tropes. For instance, Ed's biblical reading before he stumbles upon the *Akedah* paints Lou as overly concerned

[161] This notion of the absurd is taken from Kierkegaard's "Preliminary Expectoration" in *Fear and Trembling*, specifically where Kierkegaard suggests to have faith that one will get the impossible occurs "by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible" (III 97). Kierkegaard also draws the distinction between the aesthetic emotion of a young girl who naively remains assured she will have her desires fulfilled and faith by virtue of the absurd, which consists of the "unshakability of faith in full recognition of the impossibility" (III 98).

with the material: "Lou, 'take no thought, saying, what shall we eat? Or what shall we drink? Or, wherewithal shall we be clothed?'"[162] This reading of Ed's, while "cherry-picked" to support his delusions and arguments, appropriates a biblical concern of disordered priorities. Ed's reading dovetails with the trope of the story of Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters whom Jesus visits:

> As they went on their way, he entered a particular village where a woman named Martha welcomed her into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feed and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42. NRSV). [163]

In the story of Mary/Martha, Martha incorrectly prioritizes her world work and misses the importance of attending to Jesus and his message while he remains alive and accessible on earth. Lou's attention to the practical and material concerns figures for Martha's attention to the tasks. Ed accuses Lou of being too focused on her studies, like Martha and indeed, throughout the film, we see Lou attending to many jobs. For example, in the sequence after the dinner party, Lou ignores Ed's sexual advances, focusing on cleanup.

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[162] For quotations see *Bigger than Life,* "God Was Wrong" 01:16:18-01:16:23.

[163] The version in Luke remains more pointedly focused on the tension between Martha and Mary. In the Gospel According to John, the actions of Mary are question not by Martha but by Judas. A similar point is made about not valuing transitory material possessions but also, it potentially foreshadows Jesus's death (this interpretation is offered by David K. Rensberger, revised by Harold W. Attridge, "The Gospel According to John," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible Fully Revised and Updated: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge et al. [(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 1838]. Text of John: "There they have a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used it to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me'" (John 12:2-8 NRSV).

However, the disorder of Lou's priorities is often in direct response to Ed's disordered priorities. In the scene following the dinner party, however, Lou's singular focus on her work is means of avoiding Ed, whom Lou has caught in a lie and assumes is having an affair. In the sequence after the dinner party, Lou is perhaps more susceptible to the charge of being like Martha rather than Mary as she is falsely assuming Ed is the one with disordered priorities when indeed Ed's lies are meant to spare Lou any guilt about their finances or the need for her to work outside the home. However, distracted by her insecurities, Lou misses that Ed's behavior has possible explanations outside of a challenge to monogamy. In other words, as with Martha, Lou is so focused on her work, her feelings of betrayal because Ed has lied to her, that she misses there is something larger at stake, Ed's failing health.

As the plot develops, however, Lou's focus on the material and the practice becomes more understandable because she must balance Ed's cortisol-induced behavioral change, such as excess spending heedless of budget constraints. Ed's insistence that he need not be concerned with material and experimental conditions is not a reordering of priorities but rather a belief that these mundane restrictions no longer apply to him—he is "bigger than life." Lou, consequently, is left to balance Ed's excessive and irresponsible behavior lest they lose the stability and security necessary to sustain the togetherness of their family.

Yet, Lou's affinity with Martha and her disordered priorities is raised when she speaks with the doctors after Ed's psychotic break. The doctors rebuke Lou for her anger about the dangers of the medication; Lou is once again focused on the wrong priority. The doctor's redirection to faith pushes Lou to express her confidence in her family, their togetherness, and her desire to attend to Ed to prove her love and faith; she embraces the role of Mary. By embracing the role of Mary, Lou is now ready to see Ed. Indeed Lou's reordering of her priorities coincides with Ed's awakening

and Lou and Richie's permission to see Ed. This reordering of Lou's priorities shifts the culpability for what has happened so that in addition to Ed, Lou shares the blame for their suffering because of her own biblically inflected shortcomings.

Once in the room, Ed slowly regains consciousness. At first, he talks of Abraham Lincoln, but then quickly remembers the biblical Abraham. Ed admits his wrongdoing and much like in the Binding of Isaac, the audience is offered a "happy ending." The final image of the family shows the father in the middle of the bed with his grinning wife and son on either side. This image of a united family is undermined by their location—they remain in a hospital, a space for treating illness, injury, and emergency. Much like the righting of the place of the Bible or the saving of Isaac, the image of the smiling united family attempts to mask the unresolved problems and horror of experience. Nothing here has been resolved—Ed is still ill and dependent on cortisone, Isaac was still tied to an altar; the family remains bound to its impossible idealization and adjudications.

CHAPTER 4: THE AVOIDANCE OF RACE: RACIAL IDENTITY, LOVE, AND KINSHIP IN *IMITATION OF LIFE*

Thus far I have argued the films in this project critique both the assumed benevolence from parents toward their children and that this benevolence can overcome the competing claims of authority on family members. In *Night of the Hunter*, we saw a preacher who, to the diegetic characters, appeared to be the height of respectability, kindness, and ideal for a husband and father. Yet, this man used presumptions about his profession to manipulate, lie, and murder so that he could gain access to vulnerable children. *Bigger than Life* showed how a father's overconfidence, self-assurance, and distorted interpretation of benevolence led him to nearly destroy his family through murder. In this film, *Imitation of Life,* directed by Douglas Sirk, we will see yet another variation of the US-American family, one I will term a kinship system because this family diverts from the traditional biological and gender dynamic of the previous two films.

As in the other two films, the young people in this film are susceptible to or negatively impacted by the presumptive goodness of their parents toward them. In *Imitation,* the family remains an institution that shapes a child's identity with the parents prescribing a role they think best for their children to inherit. But what of the children's desires? The children wish their parents to acknowledge, in the Cavellian sense, the identity they have chosen for themselves. What happens when the life the parents envisioned conflicts with the identity and decisions the children choose for themselves? In this chapter, I interrogate the conflicting desires of mother and daughter, Annie Johnson and Sarah Jane Johnson. Born into a strictly biracial diegetic world, light/white-skinned Sarah Jane wishes to identify as white despite having a black mother. Sarah Jane's friends and family who know her mother do not acknowledge her as white. Annie wishes for Sarah Jane to embrace life as a black woman; to take pride in her blackness rather than accede to the public

notion that white people are superior to people of color. Sarah Jane rejects Annie's view of race, pursuing a life where she can be seen as white. The conflict between Sarah Jane and Annie culminates in an emotionally charged disavowal of one another so that Sarah Jane can realize her wish to be identified as white. Annie's acknowledgment of her daughter's identity and decisions leads to the dissolution of their biological family. Race proves a barrier that familial love and the benevolence of parents to their children cannot overcome.

4.1 Engaging a Sirkian Film

Imitation of Life is among Douglas Sirk's most notorious films. Some consider some to be a masterpiece. Others regard it as deeply flawed, even quasi-racist. Sirk has been called the "Father of the Family Melodrama", and it is challenging to engage in Hollywood melodrama without attending to Sirk, his influence, and his legacy. According to Barbara Klinger, Sirk's renowned prominence began with the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* and its critics' interest in auteur theory in the 1950s and 1960s.[164] In the early 1970s, however, a period Klinger calls "the boom period," there was a burgeoning interest in Sirk, as is evidenced by the many sources writing about his films.[165]

For example, a special issue of *Screen* was dedicated to Sirk, the publication of John Halliday's interview with *Sirk on Sirk,* and essays published in England, France, Germany, and the United States.[166] Of the myriad of scholarly publications around this time, two essays, by Thomas Elsaesser and Paul Willemen are critical. As I argued in the Introduction, Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama" is not only fundamental to the

[164] Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.
[165] Klinger, 6.
[166] Klinger, 6.

study of melodrama for cinema scholars but also helped establish Sirk as one of the master practitioners of a style that orients itself around the mise-en-scène.[167] Paul Willemen's article, "Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System," coins the term "Sirkian System" and outlines five points of internal contradictions in Sirk's films that must be understood to analyze Sirk's films.[168] Both essays have contributed to establishing the idea of a Sirkian system of critique, of Sirkian irony, and Sirkian films as using conventional Hollywood filming techniques only to subvert them. This idea of a Sirkian system of review fits nicely within Walzer's model of social criticism; however, before I address that connection, we must first understand Klinger's concern and complaint about the lasting power of the Sirkian scholarship from the 1970s and how it relates to the argument in this chapter.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Klinger's intervention in Sirkian scholarship stems from a two-pronged critique: one, the result of such esteem for Sirk is that the reception of his films has

[167] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 43-69

[168] Briefly recounted with examples from *Imitation of Life* the five points of contradiction are: 1) "Displacement and discontinuities in plot construction," displacements occur, for example, when the supporting roles tend to outshine or draw more interest than the leading roles such as Sarah Jane being of more interest than Lora in *Imitation of Life*, and discontinuities occur when the forced happy ending ostensibly pleases the crowd but cannot resolve the internal contractions of the film; 2) "Contradictions in characterization," suggests a duality or multiplicity to a character that undermines a neat division of opposites, Annie is often shown as passive and even perpetuating quietism but at the end of the film, we learn with the casting of Mahalia Jackson she has connections with the Civil Rights Movement; 3) "Ironic use of camera-positioning and framing" is when the camera suggests the opposite meaning of what is being said verbally, I will discuss this type of irony below; 4) "Formal negations of ideological notions inherent in the script," Sarah Jane's repeatedly flaunts her white skin and is identified as white until someone learns she has a black mother, these images undermine the neat division of the biracial society in film; 5) "Irony in the function of camera movement," is described by Willemen as a contradiction between mobility of the camera meant to implicate the viewer and distance from the actors meant to evoke a sense of detachment (Paul Willemen, "Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System," in *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk Director*, ed. Lucy Fischer [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991], 276. First published in *Screen* 13, no. 4 (December 1972): 128-134). Willemen argues that this last element of the Sirkian system, the tension between mobility and distance, is perhaps the most dynamic "because it underpins the very notion of Sirkian spectacle: people put themselves on display in order to protect themselves" (Willemen, "Sirkian System," 277). We will see this idea of putting oneself on display as a means of protection in Sarah Jane who shows off her white skin as means of ensuring her identification by others as white rather than black.

been ordered and controlled by Sirk's comments about his intentions as a director; two, that the interest in and veneration of Sirk is in part a reflection of institutional and scholarly interests. Here, we will focus only on the first prong of her critique. The first of Klinger's critiques is rooted in the claim that Halliday's interview was perhaps the most influential source that drove critics to approve of Sirk's work.[169] In this interview, Sirk "provide[s] key information about his background and the philosophical and creative intentions behind his films" and draws on the history of tragedy and such authors as Euripides and Shakespeare to discuss the aims of his films as critique aimed at the bourgeoisie and the family.[170] Because of this interview and the early scholarship so indebted to it, "through decades of theory and criticism, Sirk's films assumed a fixed identity as transgressive based largely on their formal characteristics."[171]

I begin with Klinger's intervention by insisting that Sirk's assertions are not privileged over and above any other interpretative claim. For example, the below argument about irony is not based on Sirk's claim that he used irony but on the definition of irony and the presence of elements in this film that create irony. Yet, the contextual evidence does not displace my reliance on the film's formal characteristics; this reliance shows I am still participating in the tradition of finding Sirk's films transgressive. I do not want to avoid this charge. *Imitation* is an ambiguous film, and at times it is indeed transgressive. At other times, specifically in its flagrant display of romantic racialism, it unironically embraces and recreates normative assumptions. My aim here is not to prove that Sirk's films are/are not transgressive, Klinger's critiques are/are not correct, or the field of Sirkian scholarship is/is not riddled with institutional objectives; rather, my aim is to show how

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[169] Klinger, 7.
[170] Klinger, 7-8. Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday* (1971; repr. London: Faber & Faber, 2010), http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780571343201.ch-005.
[171] Klinger, xiv.

the formal elements of *Imitation* destabilize norms about the family through irony, the uncanny, and ambiguity in order to make space for social criticism.

4.2 The Irony of it All or Social Criticism

Irony is how *Imitation* is commonly seen as subversive and critical but is, as Klinger argues, often controlled by Sirk's own claims in his interview with Halliday.[172] The difficulty of irony in the case of Sirk is that it becomes easy to take Sirk's interest in the figurative device and apply it to the film at any moment when something has a double meaning. We want to feel as though we are in on the critique, on the side of Sirk, the *eiron*, rather than the *alazo*n. This desire reaffirms Sirk's position as authoritative on his work and controlling the discussion of the meaning in his films. The desire not to be the *alazon* may urge a viewer toward precisely the situation that Klinger critiques, where we take Sirk's interpretation and stated intentions as the definitive guide to understanding the films he directed. Sirk's definitions and construal of meaning, however, are not more authoritative simply because he directed the film.

While Sirk suggests his understanding of irony as "structural" and harkens back to Greek tragedy, specifically Euripides,[173] I return to several basic definitions of irony, namely tragic, dramatic, and rhetorical, to create space between Sirk's claims and my own. Tragic irony occurs when "events follow a course despite, and often because of, characters' attempts to control their fate. The audience sees a course of events unfolding, despite the characters' efforts to command their destiny."[174] Sometimes, tragic irony is combined with dramatic irony. Dramatic irony occurs

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[172] Klinger, 8.

[173] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk,* qtd. in Lucy Fischer, ed., *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991) 229-230. See also, Jon Halliday, "America II: 1950–1959," in *Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 83–141, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780571343201.ch-005.

[174] Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul F. Rouzer, Harris Feinsod, David Marno, and Alexandra Slessarev, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). 732.

when "a character speaks in such a manner that the audience or reader recognizes the limited or contradictory nature of his/her/their speech" and more complex forms are when a character hears something or understands it in one sense while the audience hears or understands it in a different sense.[175] We see the dramatic irony in Annie's nature but only in retrospect. It is not until the end of the film or a second viewing that the viewer can confirm Annie, at times, play-acts the role of a passive, servile maid. The casting of Mahalia Jackson and her prominent connections to the Civil Rights Movement enables the viewer to realize that Annie's passivity and servility are a kind of imitation or what I call masking.[176] That is, Annie dons different masks, such as the figure of a mammy, so that her behavior accords with the expectations and desires of the white folks around her. The dramatic irony occurs because the diegetic characters understand Annie's actions in one sense, while we, as viewers, see the "limited and contradictory" nature of Annie's activities around the white people she serves.

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[175]*Poetry and Poetics,* 732.

[176] The casting of Jackson works as a powerful signifier for the Civil Rights Movement. Her presence singing at Annie's funeral, an act she would repeat at Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral years later, suggests Annie not oppressed or a victim of Christian quietism but active in the Civil Rights movement possibly via the Black Church. Mahalia Jackson was a famous gospel singer born in 1911. She moved to Chicago when she was 16 and released her first album in 1934, but her 1947 album, "Move on Up a Little Higher" made her famous. She was the first gospel singer to perform in Carnegie Hall. Jackson met Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy at the 1956 National Baptist Convention. King asked Jackson if she could perform in Montgomery "for the foot soldiers of the newly successful bus boycott." After joining King for the third anniversary of Brown v. the Board of Education, she often appeared with him, singing before his speeches and for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) fundraisers. King wrote in a 1962 press release from the SCLC that Jackson "has appeared on numerous programs that helped the struggle in the South, but now she has indicated that she wants to be involved on a regular basis" ("Jackson, Mahalia," on The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/jackson-mahalia). Most famously, Jackson is said to have encouraged Martin Luther King Jr. in the impromptu "I have a dream" portion of his speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Originally, the "I have a dream" section was not in the speech. In his book, *Martin Luther King Jr., and the Theology of Resistance,* Rufus Burrow argues why he is compelled to believe the "lore" that Jackson was the source of King's improvisation of this last portion of the speech. It is said that in a moment of disruption or distraction, after telling the crowd to return to their homes "knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed," Jackson shouted to him 'Tell 'em about your dream, Martin. Tell 'em about your dream'" (Rufus Burrow, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* [Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland &. Company, 2015] 159). Marina Heung reads the casting of Mahalia Jackson as significant because it marks the funeral sequences as different from the rest of the film saturated with mirrors and imitations and undermines the work of Lora and Sarah Jane in their roles as performers (Marina Heung, "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?': Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*," in ed. Lucy Fischer, *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 322.

Along with dramatic irony, we also see the essential rhetorical irony—where the meaning is the opposite of what is said, written, or in this case, shown. This kind of irony happens when the showgirl from Moulin Rouge tells Sarah Jane, "We'll get you! So, honey child, you had a Mammy!"[177] The irony of this scene is both dramatic and rhetorical when we consider Annie as a Mammy.[178] On the one hand, Annie has become a Mammy for Sarah Jane rather than a mother. As a white woman, Annie could not be Sarah Jane's mother but a caretaker as she was for Susie. Thus, having a Mammy all her life means that Sarah Jane has had a mother who was a Mammy, for others. But As Greta Ai-Yu Niu astutely notes, Sarah Jane's response to the showgirl, "Yes—all my life," also tells the viewer that "she recognizes Annie as her own mammie (mother) and as a Southern styled mammie."[179] The word mammy is rhetorically ironic because it takes on oppositional and double meanings in this context.

Sirk's comments about irony have perhaps clouded our ability to see that while certainly containing irony, the film is at least as well captured by another literary trope: ambiguity. Put differently, Sirk's comments have engendered in viewers, scholars, film critics, etc., the assumption that whenever something in the film seems ambiguous, there must be irony and we have missed the cue. There are moments in the film where despite the possibility of irony, we, as the 1959 or contemporary audience, are left with ambivalent visual clues to answer the possibility of more than one conflicting meaning. In these moments, rather than search for stability through authorial intent, I suggest we allow the discomfort to persist and undermine the desire for stability.

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[177] Lucy Fischer, ed., *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1991) 141. Fischer offers a shot-by-shot analysis along with the dialogue of the entire film. I have used her text to cite places only of quoted dialogue in this chapter. While I did compare my shot-by-shot analysis to Fischer's, the analyses in the chapter remain my own.

[178] Marine Heung defines the archetypal meaning of Mammy in her essay, "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?'" (310).

[179] Greta Ai-Yu Niu, "Performing White Triangles: Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' and *Imitation of Life* (1959)," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (August 2005), published online August 22, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200590461846, 142.

Put differently, we allow the figurative devices to perform and maintain their destabilizing and defamiliarizing function.

4.3. The Legacy of US-America's Racial Crux

Sarah Jane's racial identity is raised repeatedly throughout the film, from her claim that Jesus is white like her, to her insistence that she is white to her boyfriend, to her shouting at the mirror during her last interaction with Annie. These moments tell us that Sarah Jane identifies as white and wants to be identified by others as white rather than black.[180] But how does Sarah Jane's racial identity affect the claims about the US-America family? The framing of Sarah Jane's attempts to pass recreates a racial binary where one is identified as either black or white. Interestingly, this framing aptly identifies the crux of US-America race relations—the persistence of a racial binary wherein whites are erroneously elevated and falsely assumed superior over and above all other racial identities. In other words, the kinship network in this film and their struggle with race functions as a metonym for US-America and it's struggle with race relations.

For a more robust understanding of race relations in the United States, I take my definition of race from Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*. Omi and Winant argue, "Race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interest by referring to different types of human bodies."[181] This definition, as Omi and Winant point out, does not support the idea of race as a biological or ontological essence, nor is it in support of the

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[180] When speaking of race relations as shown in the film I have opted for the terms black and white. This terminology is reductive in that it does not account for the range and richness of identities of people excluded from the "whit" racial identity and who would likely now be considered "people of color" or part of the BIPoC community. I acknowledge that the black/white dichotomy does not accurately represent the historical diversity of people in the United States in 1959; however, the terms do convey the strict racial binary of the film. Thus, when speaking of the racial identities of people in the film I use "back" and "white" and when referencing the non-diegetic word I use "people of color" and white.

[181] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2015), 110.

claim that race is an illusion. Instead, this definition recognizes the deeply ocular component of race. While this emphasis on visibility might "invoke seemingly biologically based human characteristics (so-called phenotypes), selecting these particular human features for racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process."[182] Put differently, there is nothing intrinsic about, for example, hair type, skin color, bone structure, etc., that determines a person as part of a specific race. Instead, we have created categories of race and placed people with particular characteristics into a category based on what we see. From there, these characteristics that contribute to the categorization of a person become essentialized.

On the other hand, saying that race is an illusion overlooks the very real and impactful consequences of racial categorization and the effect that categorization has on the everyday life of people. While race is a construction, to pretend that race does not exist is to overlook the personal and institutional discriminatory practices under the guise of equality or colorblindness. Omi and Winant argue that "the categories employed to differentiate among human beings along racial lines reveal themselves, upon serious examination, to be at best imprecise, and at worse arbitrary…. they are not meaningless."[183] Behaviors such as racial profiling show that race, constructed as it may be, still informs the behaviors and practices of people. Thus, to say race is an illusion becomes overly reductive and ignores the past and present discrimination, injustice, and prejudice that characterizes race relations in the United States.

To conceptualize race—as the categorization of distinct types of human bodies based on perceived physical differences and the identity and social practices that are then ascribed to those categories—is not to suggest that race is by any means stable. It is the instability and constructed quality of race as well as the practice of racialization that both recent and past viewers experience

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[182] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 110.
[183] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation,* 110-111.

when watching *Imitation.* Racialization is "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group."[184] For example, we can think of the racialization of black women as sexually exotic and alluring. Sarah Jane, ironically, makes use of this racialization but does so to showcase her white skin and identity. Yet, between Sarah Jane and Susie, Sarah Jane is the only daughter who expresses such sexuality; Susie, conversely, is shown as sexually naive, always dressed in a doll-like manner and making a list of questions to ask her mother, including "how do I make a boy like me and should I let him kiss me?"[185] The contrast between Sarah Jane and Susie demonstrates the instability of racial identity; nothing about Sarah Jane's physical appearance suggests she is black. Yet, because of her black heritage, Sarah Jane is shown as sexually tempting in a way that feeds the stereotype of black as exotic and alluring.[186]

Despite Sarah Jane's white appearance and upbringing, Annie's blackness consistently signifies Sarah Jane as black to the people in the film. Moreover, while Sarah Jane may self-identify as white, laws at the time would have classified her as black. The strict binary between people of color and whites reflects how states identify someone's race and the racial hierarchy accompanying the identification. As Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma argue, "Racial groups in the United States have historically" been—and continue to be—"stratified into some form of racial hierarchy."[187] "American society has developed a norm to classify individuals who straddle the socially constructed boundaries of black and white. In other words, Americans created a systematic and legally codified answer to the question: Who is black? This classification norm is formally called *hypodescent* by anthropologists but is more commonly known as the "one-drop

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[184] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*,111.
[185] Fischer, *Imitation of Life,* 103.
[186] Thomas Cripps, laments the change between 1934 version of *Imitation of Life* and Sirk's 1959 rendition because of the reduction of this character to sexual stereotypes (*Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 270).
[187] Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David L. Brunsma, *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 3.

rule."[188] Thus, the one-drop rule identified any person as black, with "one drop" of black blood in their heritage. This meant people who appeared white but had a black grandparent or great-grandparent were still considered black.

The one-drop rule was partly developed to maintain the "purity" of the white race and to categorize and reckon with mixed-race children.[189] In keeping with the idea of "one-drop," mixed-race children were identified as the racial group of their lower-status parents.[190] Laws prohibiting miscegenation show how the one-drop rule was "codified" into law and how those laws were meant to maintain the purity of the white race. In the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. The Commonwealth of Virginia*, Chief Justice Warren noted the Appellants' argument against the constitutionality of Virginia's 1924 Act to Preserve Racial Integrity because it "extends only to the integrity of the white race. While Virginia prohibits whites from marrying any nonwhite (subject to the exception for the descendants of Pocahontas), Negroes, Orientals, and any other racial class may intermarry without statutory interferences."[191] Despite the claim that laws such as those in the Racial Integrity Act assumed an "even-handed" approach to preserving the purity of all races, it is only the white race that is prevented from interracial marriage.[192] Here, we can see the grounds for the binary definition of race in US-America as black vs. white, which is dramatized in *Imitation*, and how anxieties about white racial purity masqueraded under the guise of "separate but equal."

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[188] Rockquemore and Brunsma, *Beyond Black,* 3.
[189] Nikki Khanna, "If You're Half Black, You're Just Black: Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One Drop Rule," *The Sociological Quarterly* 51, no 1. (Winter 2010), 98, http://www.jstor.com/stable/20697932.
[190] Khanna, 98.
[191] Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1, 11 (1967).
[192] Loving v. Virginia, 388 U.S. 1, 11 (1967).

4.4. The Doll Test and Racialization of the Home

Based on my analysis of the below sequences, I maintain that Sarah Jane and Annie live in a world that precludes them from finding a space where their actions and those around them are not perceived through a prism of racialization. In these sequences, Lora and Susie recreate the inequality and inferiority that Sarah Jane and Annie live with daily. In other words, we see the dramatization of racial disparities. Separate is unequal, and seemingly supra-racial ideals and institutions, such as the US-American nuclear family or the home, are bound by race.

The first sequence where we see divergence in experience between white and black children is in the recreation of what are now two infamous moments during the Civil Rights movement: the first is "doll test" that was used in the *Brown v. The Board of Education;* the second is the requirement that people of color occupy the spaces in "the back," which was notoriously opposed by Rosa Parks and brought to the forefront of the Civil Rights movement during the bus boycotts. The doll test is a psychological experiment run by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark. In the experiment, children of color preferred a white doll over a black doll because they thought the white doll was superior. It provided evidence that segregation negatively impacted the value children of color had for themselves and helped persuade the Supreme Court of segregation's harm.[193]

The doll test is recreated in *Imitation* on the first night Annie and Sarah Jane stay with Lora and Susie. The recreation of a test used in a public institution of justice, a courtroom, now invades Lora's small apartment, establishing an osmotic line between the public and private realms. The doll test scene begins after Lora shows Annie the only available room she can offer, which sits in the back of the house just off the kitchen. Lora walks away from the room, out of the kitchen, and

[193] Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

into Susie's room to get blankets and pillows.[194] The camera follows Lora into Susie's room but stops moving when it has centered Sarah Jane and Susie in a medium shot. The two girls sit on Susie's bed with an open box containing two dolls between them. Susie offers Sarah Jane one of her dolls, Nancy, a black doll. After the offer, we cut to a medium close-up of Sarah Jane, the camera positioned over Susie's right shoulder.

Susie holds aloft the offered toy, which positions the doll in the center of the shot between the two girls. This shot serves as an example of the dovetailing of the excess of political meaning that Omi and Winant discuss with melodramatic excess in the mise-en-scène raised by Elsaesser. The issue of race is not stated in the dialogue, but instead, that meaning is displaced onto the dovetailed excesses; the visual shows the viewer that the issue of race will always form a barrier between the two girls. As the film progresses, the viewers will see Sarah Jane raised in similar circumstances to Susie, i.e., nurtured by Annie, controlled by Lora, and surrounded by the materialism of white culture, but the opportunities and expectations for the two girls remain markedly distinct because of their racial difference. Sarah Jane's behavior, attitude, and looks cannot overcome the racial divide between the two girls, so poignantly represented with the shot of a black doll held aloft.

In response to Susie's offer, Sarah Jane shakes her head no, declining the doll. Susie persists with her offer, saying, "It's a present. Mommy just got it for me." She hands over the doll, eventually setting it on the box of toys in Sarah Jane's lap. Sarah Jane replies, "I want that one," There is a cut to see that she is pointing at the white doll Susie holds in her lap. Susie replies, "Frieda's my friend! I've had her all my life!" Susie's reply here can be seen as a child refusing to

[194] The sequence of the doll test and dialogue runs 00:09:08 to 00:09:47 in Douglas Sirk, dir., *Imitation of Life*, NBC Universal, 1959, Prime Video, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B008QWSQPK.

gift another child her favorite toy. Yet, Frieda is white and even if Susie is unaware of the meaning, her attachment to Frieda can also be seen as her attachment to whiteness and as the affirmation of the superiority of whiteness. Susie has been white all her life, just as she has had Frieda all her life. For Susie to give up Frieda is to relinquish the symbol of her inborn privilege if not outright acknowledge that there is a racialized reason for her desire to keep Frieda.

The doll test shows how the film's visual elements overtly raise the issue of race and how Susie is blind to or unaware of the politicized and racialized meaning the black doll holds for Sarah Jane. Susie repeats this naiveté later when she tries to deny that people would spit at Sarah Jane's hypothetical white-skinned children if they knew she had a black mother. Sarah Jane refuses the black doll because it is viewed as inferior to the white doll but also because by taking the black doll, she will signify what she would like to keep as a secret, her own racial identity as black and thus supposed inferiority to the people who are white. Susie's complete ignorance as to why Sarah Jane may not want a black doll bears witness to the naïveté and blindness of the white people in this film whose race does not lead to the same experience of racialization and politicization in either the public or private sphere. Indeed, the blindness we see in Susie shapes the meaning of "colorblindness" in the film. Susie's "colorblindness," does not mean she is blind to the racial categorization of bodies but that she is blind to how objects and experiences are different for Sarah Jane because she is identified as black. *Imitation* recasts the meaning of colorblindness so that the concept functions as social criticism; it indicates the need to acknowledge that one's racial identification predicates their access to and experience of US-American myths such as freedom and equality.

Cavell's distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment helps clarify how Susie's ignorance and Sarah Jane's rejection of the gift relate to racial identification and the experience of

US-American mythologies. Cavell argues: "The concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated…. A 'failure to know' might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness."[195] Susie, in this case, perhaps simply does not know why Sarah Jane would reject the black doll, this is a piece of ignorance that we may grant a six-year-old child. However, Susie's failure to know is indicative of her white race when compared to Sarah Jane's response. Sarah Jane also a young child, eight years old, is deeply aware of the potential meanings of the doll. She acknowledges this meaning by rejecting the black doll in favor of the white doll. On the one hand, this scene suggests that racialization is not at the forefront of white children's experience, while on the other hand, black children are always aware of racialization. Put differently, Susie accesses the US-American mythologies without having to know the barriers of racialization Sarah Jane is forced to acknowledge daily.

Despite Susie's objections, Sarah Jane takes Frieda from Susie, and Susie calls out for Lora. Susie crawls over the bed as Sarah Jane maneuvers herself off the bed and turns away from Susie. The camera pans to the right with Susie so that we see Lora coming out of the doorway, carrying blankets and pillows. The camera stops with Lora framed in the doorway in a medium shot and Susie in the foreground on the left. Susie cries that Sarah Jane "took my doll." Lora smiles in response, walking around the end of the bed; the camera remains stationary so we see Lora in a medium-close-up from a low angle. The framing of Lora from a low angle imbues her with power and authority and establishes a racial hierarchy in the home. Lora is the figure at the top of that hierarchy, followed by Susie, then Sarah Jane, and finally, Annie. This hierarchy in the home is

[195] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean what We Say*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 263-264.

reiterated throughout the film, most notably in the apartment after Sarah Jane is caught passing at school and on the stairs in the suburban home after Frankie assaults her.[196] In each circumstance, the viewer is reminded of the racial hierarchy that extends beyond the public sphere and infiltrates the "private" home and family. This power of race to infiltrate the home creates a sense of the uncanny; rather than a space that enables the full expression of comprehensive doctrines or a sense of security and comfort to all who reside in the space, public perception of race transcends the public/private divide, enters the home and imbues the people and space with racialized meaning. Racialization has the effect of recasting the meaning of space and actions in the same manner as Powell and Ed in *Hunter* and *Bigger than Life,* respectively.

After the authority imbuing shot of Lora, there is a cut to the first of a shot/reverse shot sequence: the camera looks over Lora's shoulder at Sarah Jane next to the bed, and Annie is now standing in the doorway. Annie scolds Sarah Jane, "Sarah Jane, where's your manners?"[197] Annie walks into the room and takes the doll from Sarah Jane, telling her, "Now, give it back!" Sarah Jane replies, now upset, "I don't want the black one!" Annie ignores Sarah Jane's comment and reaches toward Lora to take the blankets and pillows. Lora explains the spat between the girls, "It's been a long day, and they're both tired and cranky." Annie eagerly agrees, "Yes, Miss Lora. Everything will be alright."

Annie and Lora avoid addressing why Sarah Jane rejects the black doll but irony abounds in the absence of acknowledging the racial issue. The film creates an ironic means of avoiding race—whereby the visual and the dialogue work in connection to show what is not said or vice versa. As viewers, both past and present, we are privy to how the dialogue avoids naming the issue

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[196] For a shot or the hierarchy after Sarah Jane is caught passing see, *Imitation of Life,* 00:34:55*;* For the depiction of the hierarchy on the steps after the assault by Franke see, 01:21:28.
[197] The dialogue here begins at *Imitation of Life,* 00:09:34.

of race while the visual elements repeatedly confront us with it. Lora has offered an excuse for Sarah Jane's behavior which avoids the real issue facing Sarah Jane, that she, like many of the children in the doll test, wants the white doll because she views it as superior. Sarah Jane wants to be seen as white, and unlike Susie, because Sarah Jane has a black mother, any association with something black, like a doll, reveals her relationship to her blackness. Lora's platitude is perhaps dismissible on politeness, she avoids engaging in racial politics with a stranger. At the same time, Lora sits atop the racial hierarchy in the home, she can choose to avoid the issue of race as a matter of decorum. Likewise, Annie tries to hush Sarah Jane and reassure Lora that they are grateful for what she can offer them. She, too, avoids the issue of race but her reason stems from her lack of power in the racial hierarchy; Annie is at the mercy of Lora's generosity and power.

The reference to the doll test ends, but the sequence continues and shifts to focusing on a generalized expectation of segregation, that people of color are relegated to "the back."[198] Picking up in the film where I left off, Annie shepherds Sarah Jane out of Susie's room, hoping to avoid any further conflict that could jeopardize Lora's hospitality. We cut to a medium shot of Annie and Sarah Jane as they exit Susie's room. Sarah Jane is crying. Annie then walks past Sarah Jane, leading the way to their room; the camera is focused on Sarah Jane and pans to the left with her movement. Then we cut to a shot inside Annie and Sarah Jane's room. The camera is still tuned to Sarah Jane, she is in a medium close-up, and the camera is level with her rather than Annie. As they enter the room, Sarah Jane complains, "I don't want to live in the back." Then we cut to a reverse shot looking in the room at Annie in a medium shot as she looks at Sarah Jane. The camera is elevated now, so it is level with Annie rather than having to tilt upward as it did with Lora in Susie's bedroom. While the camera gives Lora an angle of power, Annie is denied the same

[198] The sequence and dialogue can be found in *Imitation of Life,* 00:09:47-00:10:00.

authority. Sarah Jane, still crying, now asks, "Why do we always have to live in the back?"[199] Annie hushes Sarah Jane's question and begins to pull her into the room, the camera tilts downward, and we see Sarah Jane drop the black doll on the floor. The camera remains focused on the doll, but we can see Annie's foot and the base of the door as she closes it. The shot fades, and the sequence ends.

With Sarah Jane's comment about not wanting to live "in the back," we again see how the private space of a home is politicized and ruled by the public's relationship with segregation. Sarah Jane's comment echoes the complaint of many people of color who were forced to ride in the back of buses, trains, and cars, use separate back entrances to buildings, and endure inferior conditions in all aspects of life. Put differently, Sarah Jane's comment raises the specter of inequality and injustice that pervades the lives of people of color. As viewers, we are not given an indication that Lora purposely gives Annie and Sarah Jane a room in the back of the house because she identifies them as black; instead, this room happens to be the only other one available in the small apartment and is initially meant to be a temporary arrangement. Nevertheless, Sarah Jane negatively reacts to what is arguably a generous offer on the part of Lora—she is, after all, housing two homeless strangers for a night—for the same reason she rejected Susie's gift of the black doll. Her identification by others as black affects how she perceives her identity and the value of her life.

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[199] In her interpretation of the film, Heung contrasts the claims of Omi and Winant about race causing class difference (see 168 n 215 below). She claims "failing to recognize the multiplicity of factors converging to dictate Annie's social status, the film chooses to isolate, as a central dynamic in her characterization, only her race (Heung, "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?'", 311-312). Heung's argument holds merit, however, it seems to underemphasize the historical changes taking place in post-WWII US-America, where class and ethnic distinctions are displaced onto racial difference. For example, Elaine May, argues "From a prewar nation made up of many identifiable ethnic groups, postwar American society divided rigidly along the color line. The children of immigrants identified as outsiders before World War II became 'white' after the war, gaining access to the privileges and opportunities that whiteness bestowed, such as life in the suburbs (*Homeward Bound,*11).

4.5 An Excess of Meaning

The claim that racial self-identity is different from racial identification by others raises facets of the public/private divide. Omi and Winant address the public/private divide (P/P) to argue for a change in how racial meaning is constructed in the post-World War II era: The "*politicization of the social*: the overflow of political meaning and awareness into the arena of everyday and emotional life, which had up to then been a largely 'private' and depoliticized sphere"[200] underlines how race politicizes questions of self-identity and how people of colors' identities and bodies are politicized not only by a state with implicitly racist systems but also in all spheres of their existence, including the home, family, market, doctor's office, school, etc. Their thesis, however, implies that political significance and awareness did not first appear in daily and emotional life until after World War II and generalizes the experience and definition of the private sphere as being depoliticized until that time. In a footnote, Omi and Winant admit part of the validity of their assertion:

> This isn't entirely accurate, of course. Since the beginning of racial slavery, there has been a fiery societal critique of racism and slavery, albeit the phrase was not used.
> The works and speeches of Douglass, Wells, and Cooper make this clear. "First-wave" feminism also included a social critique because it focused on women's lives rather than merely the right to vote. Nonetheless, our assertion is valid because, on the whole, pre-World War II movements were much more restricted by the very laws, practices, and conventions they wanted to challenge. Earlier protest cycles have never seen the present civil rights movement's appeal, penetration into daily life, appeal to the young, or institutional support.[201]

[200] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2015), 110.
[201] Omi and Winant 157n23.

Omi and Winant admit that their claim is “not strictly true” but insists that something is new about the post-World War II era. Here I would like to sidestep the historical argument—where I would suggest that Omi and Winant would have been better served to argue for a new iteration of a phenomenon that results from the convergence of cultural and social circumstances that enabled the historical protest movement to succeed in ways heretofore unseen. Instead, I argue that what Omi and Winant are gesturing toward can be understood as a reformulation of the P/P and dovetails the impetus of melodramas at this time.

In the Introduction, I discussed melodrama and worked from the most basic premise and definition by Elsaesser, Cavell, and Brooks to argue melodramas are narratives that dramatize the difficulty of expression through excess. Using Rosengarten’s exegesis of Ricoeur, I argued the difficulty of expression in melodrama parallels myths' difficulty “to lend contingent form to the sacred.”[202] Myth acknowledges the “limitation of expression to give meaning to the totality of reality”[203] and relies on the symbolic to say anything meaningful. Likewise, melodrama cannot express all meaning in words and relies on figurative devices to enshrine the excessive meaning.

I see Omi and Winant as highlighting that the P/P lends contingent form to US-America’s mythic narratives of pluralism, freedom, and equality; however, the P/P is limited because it is symbolic, it is necessarily incongruent with the totality of reality of the experiences of people living in US-America. The politicization of the “social” or the overflow of political meaning into the everyday and emotional life of the people in the United States reveals not simply that the P/P is a limited symbol or a flawed conception but the gap between US-American’s stated ideals and the lived reality of its people. The P/P is reimagined during this time because US-America faces social criticism that undermines its mythic narrative as a pluralistic nation of freedom and equality.

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[202] Rosengarten, “Election and Inflection,” 469.
[203] Rosengarten, “Election and Inflection,” 469.

Imitation participates in the social criticism of the nation by examining whether black people have access to private life. The nuclear family, which resides in the private realm, is inaccessible to black people and binds black people to inherit a predetermined racial identification. If Sarah Jane and Annie are not offered a private life, then any expression of a secret identity becomes, if not impossible, then at least difficult to achieve. Personal racial self-identity collides with racial identification and the inability of the P/P to delimit the politicization of the personal lives of black folks. Sarah Jane, for example, identifies as white and wants to be identified by others as white, regardless of her heritage. Yet, because of her black heritage, she is not free to express this identity unless she reinvents herself, escaping from anyone who knows her kinship network—Lora, Susie, Steve, and Annie.

In a more extreme version than Sarah Jane, Annie does not even seem to be granted a private life. The viewer, along with Lora, is reminded that Annie's private life is not visible but also questions whether we have noticed this invisibility until Annie rebukes Lora, and perhaps the viewer, for not asking about her life outside of Lora's service. *Imitation*, thus, exposes not only the constructed quality and arbitrariness of racial categorization and identification but also dramatizes how excess transcends and divulges the P/P limitations.

Below, I analyze several sequences from *Imitation* to show that the film expresses an awareness of the public and institutional conceptions of race. These institutional references, juxtaposed against the inner workings of Annie's and Lora's kinship network provide opportunities to examine how the "nuclear family" perpetuates segregation and enables the inheritance of racial inequality. More than mere expressions of awareness, I argue *Imitation* critiques and subverts the status of race relations, aiming at the ill effects of segregation and the arbitrariness of race. Working from a critical position in the Walzerian sense—where an external

code, rule, or law, is looked to as a social ideal and used to evaluate a society's behavior—I argue *Imitation* employs a strict racial binary in order to critique it through the conflict of Sarah Jane's racial identity and identification.

4.6 Disavowing Family, Building Self-Identity: Sarah Jane's Passing at School

The racial binary in the film reminds us of the lasting power of the one-drop rule and the codification of white purity laws into state constitutions. The binary shown in this film does not mean that historically people could not hold a middle ground or reject the focus on racial identification.[204] In the world of *Imitation*, however, Sarah Jane does not have access to a middle ground; she must choose to identify or be identified as black or white. Sarah Jane wants to be included on the white side of the racial binary, and her singular focus on passing, on holding a white racial identity and identification, suggests she accepts the racial binary.

Sarah Jane's acceptance of the binary leaves her in a complicated relationship with her mother. How can she pass as white if she publicly acknowledges Annie as her mother? Marina Heung suggests that this conflict is built into melodrama's generic conventions and displaces the conflict that should exist between Annie and Lora as an employee and employer, respectively. Heung rightly criticizes the film's depiction of Annie as a live-in maid, which blurs the lines between maid and family member and benefits Sarah Jane by eclipsing the problem faced by many women of color when working or white women—how to balance care for their own family with the expectations and responsibilities of their job. Yet I want to trace the tension between Sarah Jane and Annie not merely as a generic convention where mothers are expected to and praised for

[204] Curtis J. Evans argues that "Harmlemites" such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes "tried to break away from 'race problems' or 'race relations' in their writings about dramatic productions. Hughes and Hurston hoped to write about laughter, triumphs, and sorrows of black apart from how these features hindered blacks in confronting the problem of race in America," (*The Burden of Black Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2008)], 158). With such intentions, it seems we can think of Hurston and Hughes as less concerned with racial identification than with accurately representing black culture.

their self-sacrifice but as a question of the impossibility of love to adjudicate competing desires of family members without causing suffering to someone in the family. Rather than the convention of melodrama creating such a mother/daughter conflict, I suggest it is the family structure and idealization of the family that causes the conflict and suffering. [205]

Greta Ai-Yu Niu addresses the conflict between Sarah Jane's desired racial identity and her racial heritage by arguing that "to successfully pass as white, Sarah Jane must disidentify with her mother."[206] However, disidentification does not seem to render Sarah Jane's actions accurately. Disidentification suggests that Sarah Jane negates the dichotomous racial identity options. Yet, Sarah Jane repeatedly identifies as white, which suggests that she is not disidentifying Annie but disavowing her, that is she refuses to be associated with, claim knowledge of, or acknowledge Annie.

When we evaluate Sarah Jane's disavowal in terms of acknowledgment, I argue we can see this disavowal as avoiding race and refusing to acknowledge Annie. To understand Sarah Jane's actions as avoidance and refusal of acknowledgment, we need to further develop our understanding of acknowledgment. In the doll test scene, we discussed the difference between the failure to acknowledge and the failure to know something. In the case of Susie's ignorance in the doll test scene, I argued Susie can be seen as having a lack of knowledge about the racialized meaning of

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[205] Heung examines the relationship between white and black women and Sirk's treatment of the relationships as problematic. Heung argues that Lora as the bad mother and Annie as the good mother function as foils. But more importantly, that the tension which should exist between Lora and Annie as employer and employee is displaced onto the tension between Annie and Sarah Jane and the problematic relationships between mothers and daughters readily present in genre of melodrama. This is particularly problematic because it denies woman of color their "instrumental" role "in shifting the trend of domestic service from live-in to live-out status" and their "quintessential struggle" to choose between caring for their employer's family or their own ("'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?'", 311). For more on women of color and their role in changing the nature of domestic service see Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books 1985), 128-130; For an editorial on the changing roles of black women through labor see Elaine May, *Homeward Bound,* 8-11; Ebony photo editorial, "Goodbye Mammy, Hello Mom," *Ebony*, March 1947: 36-37.

[206] Greta Ai-Yu Niu, "Performing White Triangles: Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' and *Imitation of Life* (1959)," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (August 2005), published online August 22, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200590461846, 141.

the doll and her lack of knowledge reveals that corresponding absence. Cavell further distinguishes between knowing and acknowledgment: "...from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge I'm late—otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are. One could say: Acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in order the of knowledge, but in its requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge).[207] Here, we can see that to acknowledge calls for a person to act, you must do something. Acknowledgment does not mean that you simply know that you are late and then keep that knowledge of your lateness to yourself or avoid that knowledge; acknowledgment requires you to recognize and reveal your lateness to others.[208] In Sarah Jane and Annie's relationship, Sarah Jane's disavowal occurs in a relationship where she knows Annie is her mother but she does not reveal that relationship to the world unless by force; her disavowal is a failure to acknowledge Annie as her mother. Sarah Jane's disavowal also works as an avoidance of race and contributes to the irony in the film because what Sarah Jane avoids saying is presented in the surrounding mise-en-scène.

The characters in the film are forced to accept the racial binary, but for the viewer, irony undermines the definitive either/or status of the binary by both juxtaposing images of Sarah Jane's whiteness with Annie's blackness and showing the viewer how people change their treatment of Sarah Jane when her racial heritage is revealed. In the scene of Sarah Jane's passing at school, Annie unwittingly betrays Sarah Jane's black heritage to her entirely white classmates by coming to school with the lunch Sarah Jane forgot. The sequence juxtaposes the verbal and visual

[207] Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 257.
[208] At this point, I understand acknowledgment to be both a concept and a response that we can evaluate in terms of said concept.

elements—characters may verbally avoid race but the visual confirms its presence. The scene also presents us with one of the few moments where Annie shows pride in her blackness and tries to pass that pride on to her daughter. For our purposes, I begin analyzing the scene when Sarah Jane runs out of the classroom, now embarrassed and angry that her classmates know she has a black heritage. Annie starts to follow Sarah Jane but pauses near the teacher when she speaks to her, telling her they did not know Sarah Jane is black.[209]

Once the teacher finished speaking, Annie continued to follow Sarah Jane. We cut to a long of the front of the school, which is titled the generalized name of "Public School No. 1." The weather is a mix of snow and rain, and Sarah Jane runs down the school's steps and away from the front door while Annie follows, calling out her name. Sarah Janes runs past the camera, and as Annie nears the camera in pursuit of Sarah Jane, there is a cut to another long shot of the school. In this new shot, we look at the school through a gap between Christmas Trees. A bright red sign in the foreground reads, "Xmas Trees", and we watch as Sarah Jane and Annie run through the walkway between the trees into the shot's foreground. Sarah Jane stops when she is framed in a medium shot but in the extreme foreground. Annie catches Sarah Jane and kneels in front of her so that she can help her tie a plastic bonnet over her head. Annie tells Sarah Jane to put her coat on properly and asks, "What do you want to do to catch pneumonia?" Sarah Jane replies vehemently, "I hope I do!" Then we cut to a medium close-up of Sarah Jane looking at her from behind Annie's left shoulder. Sarah Jane continues, "I hope I die!" Annie tries to soothe Sarah Jane, "Honey, nothing hurts. You shouldn't have let them think." But Sarah Jane interrupts before Annie says "white" aloud and responds, "They didn't ask me! Why should I tell them?"

[209] For sequence and dialogue see *Imitation of Life*, 00:33:41-00:34:30.

Here we see the juxtaposition between what is said about race in the dialogue and what is communicated visually. In this shot, Annie's blackness is used instead of the word white, visually showing the audience what she was going to say "You shouldn't have let them think you are white." But behind this implied sentence and omission of the word white is more. Sarah Jane's comments raise the question of what determines a person's racial identification. Less obvious, however, is whether Annie's advice to Sarah Jane is right.

As we saw above, racial identification and self-identity are unstable. The film underscores this instability by consistently subverting the notion of racial identity based on visual appearance. Sarah Jane looks white but is considered black by the people in the film. Similarly, the idea that a person is a specific race based on their heritage or upbringing is also subverted. Sarah Jane looks white and is raised in an environment akin to that of Susie, which would suggest she is white. But, Sarah Jane is eroticized and made sexually alluring and has a black mother, which indicates she is black. Each of these components contradicts one another, revealing race's arbitrary and constructed quality as well as how the audience could see Sarah Jane as having a subversive and ambiguous racial status. While the audience can see the ambiguity of Sarah Jane's racial identity, in the diegetic world, Sarah Jane is not offered a non-binary racial identity. The diegetic limitation of Sarah Jane's racial identification serves as a criticism of racial dichotomy.

But what of Annie's advice to Sarah Jane that she should not let people think she is white? In the scene of passing at school, Annie tries to change Sarah Jane's attitude and engender a sense of pride in her black heritage. After Sarah Jane asks why she should tell her schoolmates about her black parentage and the word "white" is avoided, there is a cut to a reverse shot of Annie in a medium close-up. She is kneeling in front of Sarah Jane and replies to Sarah Jane's question [why should I tell them I am black/not white], "Because that's what you are, and it's nothing to be

ashamed of!"[210] Annie's reply to Sarah Jane is imploring but assured and full of conviction. Annie's tone, combined with her kneeling in front of Sarah Jane, tells the viewer that Annie is confident in what she says but also that she desperately wants Sarah Jane to embrace her message. On the one hand, Annie's words and actions in this scene are admirable; they serve as a moment to advocate for equality in 1959, as Annie implores Sarah Jane to find pride in being black.[211] On the other hand, however well-intentioned and admirable Annie's advocation, she dismisses Sarah Jane's desire to identify as white. Annie chooses Sarah Jane's racial identity for her. Sarah Jane's own desires, even though distorted and conditioned by racial prejudice and inequality, are nonetheless subordinated to her mother's conviction about who and what her daughter should be.

4.8 Sarah Jane's and Annie's Exclusion from the US-American Family

In the previous sections, I argued the dialogue creates an avoidance of race, while the visual elements are imbued with racial meaning; the film signifies to the viewer that race relations are present just below the surface of the conversation. In particular, we see how Annie and Sarah Jane contend with issues of race both in the public and private spheres. Similarly, I posited that the P/P is symbolic of US-America's mythic narratives and thus limited in its capacity to lend contingent form to the whole of US-American experiences and ultimately leads to social criticism. The film

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[210] Annie's sense of dignity here is reminiscent of Evans's description of Hughes as "no longer ashamed of those aspects of culture" that made him different from whites (*Burden of Black Religion*, 196.) Similarly, the casting of Mahalia Jackson to sing during Annie's funeral seems particularly apt when we consider what Martin Luther King, Jr., said about Jackson, "[she is a] 'blessing to Negroes who have learned through [her] not to be ashamed of their heritage,' (King, 10 January 1964)," ("Jackson, Mahalia," on The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/jackson-mahalia). Jackson who was able to inspire so many people to not be ashamed of their heritage is cast in a film where a black woman tries to do the same thing for her daughter, to inspire her so that she is not ashamed of her heritage. While King wrote this in 1964, approximately five years after the release of this film, we can see the trajectory of people of color learning to reject any shame about their race(s) that will eventually lead to the positive formulation of black pride.

[211] Sirk has mentioned that this film was made prior to the "black is beautiful" movement and that the Universe of *Imitation* does not entertain the idea that black is beautiful. However, *Imitation* seems to contradict Sirk's claims here. While indeed the pride of race is not as strong in this moment of the film as it will be in later historical movements, but that Annie insists there is nothing shameful in being black seems to allow rather than preclude the thinking that black is beautiful (Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk,* qtd. in Lucy Fischer, ed., *Imitation of Life*, 228. See also, Jon Halliday, "America II: 1950–1959," in *Sirk on Sirk: Conversations with Jon Halliday*, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780571343201.ch-005).

defamiliarizes the home space, enabling the audience to see the limitations of the P/P and the absence of depoliticized spaces in the lives of the black characters.

Dovetailing with the defamiliarization of the home space for people of color, access to the "traditional" family is only available to the white people in this film, namely Lora and Susie. We see an obvious example of the exclusion of black folks from the institution of the family, through the juxtaposition of Annie and Lora. Annie plays the role of a "mammy" and thus maintains an asexual role, never attempting to remarry. Annie's asexuality starkly contrasts Lora, who loves Steve and considers marrying David Edwards, saying, "It would be better for Susie."[212] The same concern is not expressed for Sarah Jane; no one wonders whether she would benefit if Annie (re)married and gave Sarah Jane a father figure.

The juxtaposition between Lora and Annie, on the one hand, seems to reify the racial component of family and on the other hand, offers a criticism of the insistence of a specific form of family. In a film renowned for its subversion, Annie and Sarah Jane as a black family perpetuate the racialized stereotype of the "black family collapse" through the absent father and child born out of wedlock. When first meet Annie and Sarah Jane in the film, we learn that Sarah Jane's father "left before she was born," whereas Lora is widowed.[213] While Lora's circumstances are sorrowful but respectable, Annie's circumstances suggest family collapse and shame. The opening sequence creates a similar ambiguity around Annie's past and marital status as it does around Sarah Jane's race. When Lora thanks Annie, she simultaneously asks for her name: "Thank you, Mrs." Annie fills in her last name, Johnson, but does not correct Lora to say she is not married.[214]

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[212] Fischer, *Imitation of Life,* 96.
[213] Fischer, 47
[214] Fischer, 46.

While our initial introduction to Annie as a single black mother is deeply problematic, we see that Annie does form a family or kinship network with Lora. This kinship network, while alternative to the "nuclear" family bears some resemblance to how black families coped with racial discrimination and inequality. To survive, black families would live with other relatives or individuals, pool resources, or even split up as members "went in different directions in search of work or security."[215] (240). Rather than a flexible and adaptable family with role variation and matriarchal authority researchers found in families of people of color, Annie and Lora create a figural "nuclear" family. Lora is the breadwinning father but instead of seeing her as a dedicated and successful breadwinner, gender conventions recast her as an ambitious mother who neglects her child in favor of a successful career. Annie is the caretaking mother but her blackness subjects her to racialization and transforms her into a Mammy.

In the absence of gender and race, these two women comprise the form of a successful nuclear family. Indeed, one may find Annie and Lora's nuclear family uncanny as it seems familiar in form but strange in content. *Imitation* simultaneously insists on the traditional white, gendered family—going so far as to use Annie's death to bring together a cohesive and traditional (visibly) white family, complete with Steve as the father figure and Lora finally taking in a maternal role—and criticizes that concept of the family by defamiliarizing the assumed reliance of its form on its content.

4.8.1: Frankie's Rejection of Sarah Jane

In the following section, I analyze Sarah Jane's violent encounter with Frankie and his rejection of her on the basis of her racial heritage. Before the sequence with Frankie's violence, we learn

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[215] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 240. See all of chapter ten in Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* for more on the false narrative of the collapse of the black family, "Pregnant Girls, Wilding Boys, Crack Babies, and the Underclass," 232-254.

that Frankie does not know about Sarah Jane's racial heritage through a conversation with Susie. We also know that Frankie's first interactions with Sarah Jane were rooted in sexual attraction. The undercurrent of sexual attraction that forms the foundation of Sarah Jane and Frankie's relationship is communicated to the viewers through the emphasis on music. Sarah Jane explained to Susie that she met Frankie in the village at an ice cream parlor with a jukebox. Every time she would walk by, Frankie would whistle at her. The whistle, perhaps more acceptable as a form of a compliment back then, today is considered an act of cat-calling (by which I mean a loud whistle or comment of a sexual nature made by a man toward a woman he sees).

While the whistle itself suggests that Frankie is sexually attracted to Sarah Jane, the addition of the jukebox indicates the association between music, race, and sex. The jukebox in the village, the frenzied music in this sequence, Sarah Jane's teaching herself to dance to jazz, her burlesque performance, and her joining the choir line at Moulin Rouge all create an association between music, sex, race, and Sarah Jane. While Jazz and rhythm and blues became famous and an expression of people of color in the 1920s, the innovation of black artists, writers, intellectuals, and—most audibly—musicians was still vibrant in the 1940s. "Charlie 'Bird' Parker, Thelonious Monk, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Mahalia Jackson, Dizzy Gillespie and man others experimented with a range of musical forms—jazz, blues, gospel, beebop—that had distinctly African-American roots…. Contemporaries [of the 1940s] identified much if this music as 'race music.' Some of it had a hard and diving beat, lyrics were sexually suggestive, and talk about 'rocking and rolling,' a phrase (like jazz) that blacks understood to signify sexual relations."[216] Sarah Jane's racial identification as black reinforces the racialization and sexualization of the music surrounding her in the film. Combining the racialization and

[216] James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974,* The Oxford History of The United States, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30-31.

sexualization of the music that plays in this sequence with Frankie's sexual attraction to Sarah Jane, I argue that we can see in this sequence the violence of Frankie as a figurative rape. Frankie's figurative sexual assault of Sarah Jane but rejection of her for the familial role of wife speaks to the violence and eroticization black women have experienced at the hands of white men.

The sequence begins with a dissolve to a long shot of Sarah Jane walking on a street. It is dark outside. She walks in front of an abandoned store with a sign that says, "Store for Rent." Sarah Jane holds her sweater and looks down as she walks. She stops in front of the door to the empty store. The camera has not moved as Sarah Jane walks; a tableau is set for the scene. The camera is arranged so we can see through the empty store window; the shot is in deep focus, so we see a boy walking toward Sarah Jane through the glass window. He comes from around the building across the street. We can hear his footsteps, and so does Sarah Jane; she turns and looks through the glass window, seeing him walk toward her. Sarah Jane turns completely and walks toward him. The camera moves parallel with Sarah Jane's movement but stops once it is past the empty storefront. The combination of the abandoned store, the darkness, and our ability to hear Frankie's footsteps shows the viewer the isolation and secrecy of the meeting.

We watch Sarah Jane trot toward her boyfriend, saying, "Frankie, you're late."[217] She stops as she completes the sentence, letting Frankie walk the last distance to meet her. Frankie has crossed the street to meet Sarah Jane. Frankie's crossing the road is reminiscent of a romance with "star-crossed lovers," the crossing to the wrong side of town, and the crossing of social boundaries. However, Frankie's actions will not conform to the romantic hope of loving Sarah Jane regardless of her heritage. Frankie walks the last steps to Sarah Jane, walking around so that his back is to the side of the empty store and is lit by an unseen light. He faces Sarah Jane, she is in profile

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[217]For the sequence and all quoted dialogue with Frankie, see *Imitation of Life*, 01:18:08-01:19:52 .

looking at him, and he is turned toward her and partially toward the camera. In the background, a car drove by on the alley's far end. They both turn to look at it and wait for it to pass before continuing with their meeting as if even a stranger insulated in a car threatens the safety and secrecy of this meeting. After the vehicle passes, they look back at each other, and Sarah Jane says, "Let's walk down by the river." Frankie, however, turns past Sarah Jane so that he fully faces the camera and begins walking toward it. He remains silent and looks angry. Frankie walks a few more steps and stops. He looks through the empty store window and, presumably down the street there. Frankie investigates the area, ensuring that they are alone.

Sarah Jane turns to face the camera again, tracking Frankie's movement. She has stopped moving, however, sensing something is wrong. Frankie turns back toward her; he now stands in the shadow of the street. The shading evokes several symbolic meanings. The viewer can see him as cast in a "shadow of a doubt," meaning he is doubtful about his relationship with Sarah Jane. Alternatively, the shadow around Frankie suggests the viewer should doubt Frankie. The shading also indicates Frankie has a dark, nefarious intent. Finally, we can experience the shading as simple foreshadowing; something terrible is about to happen. Frankie looks at Sarah Jane, finally replying to her question about walking "down by the river," and responds, "We can talk here." This is an ominous pronouncement and the first words he has spoken. As viewers, we feel the foreboding of the pronouncement not only from the shadow around Frankie and because Sarah Jane and Frankie are utterly alone in an alley with garbage. Frankie's desire to stay in place tells us that whatever is about to happen is meant for a place of isolation, regardless of how the alley might be construed in public, and that he sees his meeting with Sarah Jane as befitting the location.

We have our first cut in this sequence after twenty-six seconds of a single shot with camera movement to reframe the characters. Such a long first take allows the viewer to feel Sarah Jane's

building anxiety and experience the space of the scene. The length of the take is starkly contrasted as the scene progresses to more frequent cuts. The first cut is a medium close-up of Sarah Jane and Frankie, in profile to the camera and facing each other. We see dumpsters just past them on the sidewalk. Even if the dumpsters are empty, we have to imagine the alley smells of garbage. Sarah Jane begins speaking, “Frankie,” and looks down and then looks back up and says, “I’m having trouble at home.” This comment is an understatement; in the previous sequence, we watched Sarah Jane parody a southern slave, endure a chastisement from Lora, and realize her actions devastated her mother. Frankie responds, asking, “Your mother?” Sarah Jane replies, “Yes.” Then still looking up at him, she steps to his far side, places her hand on his arm, and inquires, “Frankie, you said you wanted to take a job in Jersey. Couldn’t we run away? I’d do anything to be with you. Anything.” Frankie replies, “That’s not a bad idea,” as he leans back against the empty store window, the camera panning to the left to follow his movement. His tone is condescending, but Sarah Jane does not seem to notice his disdain, too caught up in her distress from home and her trust in the feelings she has for Frankie and assumes he has for her.

The camera’s pan to the left shows Sarah Jane reflected in the mirror, looking with a hopeful smile at Frankie, but her physical body is off-camera. The reflection imitates the person who is reflected, a less than subtle allusion to the film's title, “*Imitation of Life*.” The shot showing Sarah Jane reflected in the mirror works ironically: we are shown an imitation of Sarah Jane as she is about to be caught imitating the life of a white woman.

We can see Frankie in the profile and the back of his torso in the reflection. The window reads the word “Bar” above Sarah Jane’s review. The word and the start of the non-diegetic music reinforce the idea that this is not a “wholesome” part of town. Frankie continues his reply, “That’s not a bad idea. Just tell me one thing.” Sarah Jane, beaming, replies, “Yes?” Then Frankie asks,

"Is it true?" Sarah Jane chuckles and asks in response, "Is what true?" Frankie stands upright and meets with Sarah Jane nearby. The camera pans to the right as he moves to show us his movement and threatening demeanor toward Sarah Jane. Then he asks, "Is your mother a n****er?" Sarah Jane's face falls, and she looks worried, taking a slight step back from Frankie. His imposing size and closeness to Sarah Jane suggest his ability to overpower and intimidate her. The camera enhances this intimidation as it moves with Frankie, engendering feelings of crowdedness as Frankie does not allow Sarah Jane to maintain space between them.

The music in the background changes with this question, becoming upbeat drums. Frankie insists, "Tell me." And then repeats himself, yelling, "Tell me!" Sarah Jane replies, flustered and raising her voice, "What difference does it make? You love me!" The music continues to crescendo, and it feels as though Sarah Jane must yell over it to be heard. As viewers, we might experience Sarah Jane shouting as a means of being heard over the non-diegetic music; however, because she and Frankie do not hear that music, her raised voice is also her attempt to make Frankie hear her, recognize her as white, and accept through acknowledgment her chosen racial identity.

The upbeat drums and horns in the music enhance the viewer's anticipation, but the anticipation is uncontrolled. On the one hand, both in contemporary and in 1959, viewers might only feel anxiety and dread at Frankie's anger, imposing body language, and increasingly frenzied music. Frankie shouts at Sarah Jane, "All the kids are talking behind my back. Is it true?" Then we have our next cut in this scene, to a shot looking at Sarah Jane from over Frankie's shoulder. Sarah Jane shouts her reply, "No!" to Frankie's question. The reply is synchronous with the cut. This is the second cut in the sequence, occurring after fifty seconds of camera movement to direct where we look. We will see the duration of each shot decrease as the music crescendos, and Frankie becomes more enraged. The music remains non-diegetic, but the viewer's experience is one where

it seems as though the frenzied music feeds Frankie's anger, Sarah Jane's denials, and the sexual tension between the two characters. Then Frankie asks, "Are you black?" Sarah Jane answers, "No, I'm as white as you!" Frankie shouts in reply, "You're lying!" As he says this, he raises his hand; we see his arm coming up as the camera is still behind his right shoulder. Sarah Jane's eyes are closed in anticipation of the strike. Frankie hits Sarah Jane as she shouts her reply, "No, I'm not." While Sarah Jane finishes her replies, there is a cut to a medium-long shot from the right side of Sarah Jane and Frankie. The camera is slightly angled toward Frankie and the window behind him, but the camera focuses on the glass behind Frankie. We see a larger portion of the window than when we first saw Sarah Jane reflected in it.

Frankie moves forward, following Sarah Jane, and rather than follow Frankie, the camera turns in the opposite direction of Frankie's movement, toward where Sarah Jane has stumbled. As Frankie walks toward Sarah Jane, the camera pans toward the window, so we see their reflections instead of seeing Frankie and Sarah Jane's physical presence. The camera stops with Sarah Jane and Frankie centered in the window in a long shot. Frankie still advances toward Sarah Jane, shouting, "You're lying," and Sarah Jane backs away from him, calling them "I'm not" in reply to Frankie's insistence that she is black. This scene brings to the surface of the dialogue the issue of race in a way that the discussion in other locations has avoided explicitly mentioning race. While in private, Sarah Jane, Lora, and Annie avoid directly talking about race; in the semi-public space, Frankie shouts at Sarah Jane, asking if she is black. We saw a similar interaction when Annie encouraged Sarah Jane to be proud of her racial heritage. There Annie and Sarah Jane were in a semi-public location, although their conversation gives the illusion of privacy. The site is also semi-public, but the empty streets and late hours give the impression of privacy. In these liminal spaces, the topic of Sarah Jane's racial identification, itself a luminal topic as Sarah Jane is passing

in both scenes, is explicitly discussed. When race is not avoided, it erupts into violent expressions, enacting the tension of race relations that are suppressed in much of the film.

In the window's reflection, we see Sarah Jane back up until she runs into a wooden box stacked in the alley. Frankie strikes Sarah Jane again, sending her head and torso away from him and toward the boxes. He moves to tower over her. We cut to a medium-long shot; we see Sarah Jane is huddled next to the boxes, partially crouched, covering her face. We can only see Frankie from behind, over his left shoulder. Frankie strikes Sarah Jane again. Then he pulls her up. Sarah Jane is repositioned so that she cannot hide herself; Frankie exposes her both physically and figuratively. Sarah Jane screams. Frankie grabs her by the front of her dress and steps back.

Only his chest and raised arm are visible. He transforms into an anonymous object of punishment. Sarah Jane is centered in the shot. Her arms are out to the side. Her face is vulnerable to Frankie. Her head is tipped back slightly from the scream. Frankie slaps Sarah Jane. We have another match on action cut; right after the slap lands, we cut to a shot from behind Sarah Jane's left shoulder. Sarah Jane screams when the slap lands. Then Frankie slaps her again. He uses his left hand, and her head snaps to the right with the impact. We cut to the reverse shot. Sarah Jane is struck again, now with Frankie's right hand. Each cut is timed with a slap and the shot's duration is short, sometimes less than a second. The quick succession of cuts amplifies Frankie's flurry of strikes and the frenzied feeling in the scene. The speed of the cuts starkly contrasts the opening shots of this sequence where the camera cuts were carefully limited and only tracking reframed the characters. The crescendo in music and quick cutting build off one another; the scene crescendos with the music. Frankie delivers his final strike to Sarah Jane at the music's loudest moment.

After this final slap, Sarah Jane falls forward, again next to the boxes, her face toward the box and in profile to the camera. As she falls, the camera follows her movement, dropping down rather than titling to stay level with her. Sarah Jane curls up on the street in a dirty puddle of water, crying. We cut to the reverse shot, where we watched from over Sarah Jane's shoulder as Frankie hit her with his left hand, but now the camera is tilted downward toward Sarah Jane's curled figure, lying on her side. We can see Frankie's legs and feet as he turns and walks away. As he leaves, the camera tilts upward to see Frankie's entire figure as he exits the alley.

Frankie turns to look back at Sarah Jane, and we cut to a medium shot of her still curled on the ground; this time, we are in front of her, which creates an eyeline match, showing us what Frankie sees. We cut back to the previous shot to see Frankie turn away and continue to walk away from Sarah Jane, finally rounding the corner of the building from where he first entered. We cut back to Sarah Jane, curled on the found in the dirty street puddle as she slowly lifted her head to look toward the direction Frankie went, crying; her hair is wet and she tries to call out. The camera moves upward slightly as Sarah Jane lifts her torso to look after Frankie. But, she falls back forward into the street puddle, the camera enhances her movement by tilting downward as she crumbles.

The final flurry of shots and eruption of violence over Sarah Jane's racial heritage creates an increased tempo that alludes to the sexual nature of this attack. Frankie was sexually attracted to Sarah Jane based on his first interactions with her and the cat-calling. The combination of the abandoned street, the bar, and the music further suggests a sexuality or eroticism associated with people of color at the time. We see this through the idea of jazz music as a euphemism for sex and the association of alcohol or the bar with depraved behavior. Rather than gratifying his sexual urges, Frankie's desires are displaced and subsumed into violence when he learns Sarah Jane has

a black mother. The increased tempo in the sequence and the crescendo that climaxes with the physical slapping of Sarah Jane figures for the climax of sexual intercourse. We see here, as we saw in *Night of the Hunter*, the displacement of sex, love, and romance with violence, and we are reminded again that there is more than one way to consummate a relationship. Whereas Harry Powell consummates the marriage through murder, Frankie consummates the relationship through assault.

Sarah Jane is left in a puddle of dirty water in the alley with the trash. This visual tableau communicates how Frankie sees Sarah Jane as trash, regardless of his sexual desires. Sarah Jane is not only punished for "passing," she is rejected from the possibility of marriage and life as the white wife of a white man. The semi-public punishment prevents her from pursuing a relationship with other white men while she resides in Lora's house. Instead, Sarah Jane moves to burlesque dancing, showcasing her white skin to reinforce her racial self-identity as white. Sarah Jane's racial heritage is the source of her eroticization in the film. Despite her white skin, she is seen as more sexual, alluring, and exotic (especially as compared to Susie and possibly Lora). This eroticization may garner Sarah Jane's attention but precludes her from the role of a wife in a marriage, a role Susie is being groomed for (although she too faces difficulties here when she falls in love with her mother's boyfriend). In this film, the idea of a family is not open to Sarah Jane unless she takes on a racialized role that accommodates white people's expectations, desires, and comforts. In other words, Sarah Jane can only vicariously participate in the US-American family if she takes a job associated with black folks, such as working for a white family as a domestic servant.

4.8.2 Sarah Jane's Repudiation of Her Familial Heritage or Annie's Sacrifice

Annie's exclusion from the traditional white family manifests differently than Sarah Jane's. Above I noted that Annie never entertains the idea of remarrying. Indeed, marriage appears as an option

Annie has already discarded. Sarah Jane's abandonment strips the last vestige of a family from Annie's life. Despite her care and love for Susie and Lora, Annie's behavior suggests she considers her relationship with Sarah Jane to be more genuinely familial, underscoring the claim that Annie and Lora are unable to realize a nuclear family by living together. Only with Sarah Jane does Annie honestly or authoritatively reveal her beliefs about race suggesting with her daughter Annie feels at home.

Once abandoned by Sarah Jane, Annie asks Steve to find Sarah Jane so she can see her one last time to say goodbye, although she only hints at this latter part. Steve finds out Sarah Jane is working at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood. Knowing she is dying, Annie takes a flight to California and confronts Sarah Jane in her hotel room. This sequence begins with a dissolve to a medium-long shot from the floor, tilted upward, looking at Sarah Jane's back as she puts on a dress. We are in a room of some kind, a hotel room or room provided by the show she works for. We hear a knock on a door, and Sarah Jane finishes zipping her dress and looking in the reflection. She calls the "door is open." The camera pans slightly to the right as we watch Sarah Jane walk away and begin to sit. We see a door on the right open, and Annie walks in, framed in a long shot. Not looking up and now seated and grabbing shoes, Sarah Jane says, "I'll be ready in a minute, and then says, "I hope they're not here," and stops speaking midsentence as she turns to see Annie.[218]

This opening shot's inversion of power relations creates a sense of the uncanny as it did in *The Night of the Hunter.* Recalling Susie's tiny bedroom, where Annie first chastises Sarah Jane for taking Freida, the white doll, we now see a reversal of authority in yet another small bedroom. The same two people now find themselves in opposite positions, with Sarah Jane wielding power

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[218] This sequence and dialogue is taken from *Imitation of Life,* 01:39:54-01:43:58.

and control over Annie. The reversal of their relationship confirms what we have been shown throughout the film, that Sarah Jane is higher and thus more authoritative than Annie on the racial hierarchy. Yet, there remains something uncanny. The complete reversal of the relationship between mother and daughter strikes the viewer as a sharp contrast to the rest of the film. While Sarah Jane has always rebelled against Annie's authority and status as her mother, we have not seen Sarah Jane command and control Annie as is hinted at in the beginning of this scene and which comes to full fruition when Annie disavows Sarah Jane in front of Sarah Jane's fellow chorus performer. What we feel as uncanny is that the racial hierarchy in the public space has fully overcome the family hierarchy in a private space; the daughter is no longer subordinate to her mother.

Returning to the sequence in the film, as Annie closes the door after entering the room, Sarah Jane stands to face Annie, and the camera lifts slightly with her. Annie meets Sarah Jane and tells her, "Now, don't be mad, honey. Nobody saw me." Annie stands across from Sarah Jane, facing her and anxious. Sarah Jane, now silent, takes a step or two backward and then turns away from Annie and walks back toward the dresser with a mirror above it. She slams her shoe down on the top of the dresser after saying, "It was you." Sarah Jane walks toward the chair the camera is behind, and the camera tilts upward so that we see her in a medium shot but from a lower angle, imbuing her with the same power the camera infused Lora within what I have called "the doll test sequence." Sarah Jane now possesses the same authority as a white woman in her home.

Sarah Jane continues speaking to her mother, saying, "You were there tonight." Sarah Jane sits still, facing the camera's direction but not looking at the camera, and she asks, "Why can't you leave me alone?" We have our first cut in the scene after almost 30 seconds. We cut to a medium shot of Annie from a slightly lower angle, giving us what feels like an eyeliner match because the

shot is in line with Sarah Jane's eyesight. However, Sarah Jane refuses to look at Annie. Thus the familiar editing technique is suggested but denied to the viewer, similar to how Annie is denied the full realization of a mother/daughter relationship. Still, in front of the door she entered, Annie replies, in a tired, sad voice, "I tried, Sarah Jane. You'll never know how hard I tried." The irony is rife in this comment as the audience knows that Annie has been ill and indeed Sarah Jane will never know because Annie will die before Sarah Jane can realize the sacrifices Annie has made for her.

There is a cut to Sarah Jane in a medium shot, level with Annie, still facing away from her mother, and she says, "Well, I might as well pack." Then Sarah Jane quickly stands and turns away from the camera toward the other side of the room. The camera pans to the right and tracks forward slightly, following Sarah Jane across the room and reframing the shot so that we see Sarah Jane and Annie in medium-long shots. Sarah Jane walks toward the camera with her suitcase, placing the briefcase on the bed. Annie has moved further into the room but still stands across from her previous position. Her presence exudes tension; she is uncomfortable as if she is trespassing in Sarah Jane's room and her life. Annie tries to explain why she is there, starting with "Look, baby…" but Sarah Jane cuts her off, turning back away from the bed and growling, "I suppose you've been to the boss." She opens the dresser across from the bed, on the far side of the wall opposite the camera, as she continues her angry rant, "Lost me my job, my friends." Sarah Jane slams clothes into the suitcase and turns to face Annie, and Annie finally raises her voice as she tells her, "I've been no place!"

Sarah Jane and Annie stand almost in reverse from when Annie first entered the room. Annie explains, "I didn't come to bother you." And again, Sarah Jane cuts her off before Annie can continue, "And you won't. Not ever again. Spoil things for me here, and I'll go somewhere

else." There is a cut, and the camera reframes the room from next to the bed, giving us an establishing shot. We cut to a shot looking over Sarah Jane's shoulder at Annie, the first of what we expect to be a shot reverse shot sequence. Sarah Jane continues her torrent, "and I'll keep going until you're so tired, and so…" Annie interrupts Sarah Jane again, "Baby, I am tired. I'm as tired as I ever want to be." Annie turns her head to the chairs in Sarah Jane's room and asks, "You mind if I sit down?" Annie takes a step toward the chairs, and there is a match on action cut; we cut to a medium-long shot of Annie and Sarah Jane as Sarah Jane rushes to block her mother from sitting, telling her, "Yes, I do!" Once in front of the chair, Annie had attempted to use, Sarah Jane, pushed the chair back a few paces. She turns around to face the door and does not look at Annie. Then she looks to the right, toward the camera, looking ashamed and surprised at her cruelty and disrespect. Sarah Jane slowly justifies her actions by saying, "Somebody's coming. That's why the door was unlocked." Her excuse for refusing Annie sounds false, an afterthought unlike her immediate reaction to prevent Annie from finding any hospitality or kindness.

Annie, however, does not try to argue with Sarah Jane about her rudeness. Instead, she takes a couple of steps toward Sarah Jane, who still is not looking at her, and tells her, "I'll only stay a minute. I want to look at you. That's why I came." Sarah Jane slowly looks toward her mother, looking angry and annoyed again. Annie asks, "Are you happy here, Honey?" Sarah Jane looks away from Annie again, and Annie asks another question, "Are you finding what you want?" Then Sarah Jane steps around the chair, turns her body away from Annie and walks to the mirror attached to her dresser. The camera pans to the left to follow Sarah Jane's movement away from Annie. As she moves, Sarah Jane says, "I'm somebody else." This response implies she is no longer the child Annie identified as her baby; Sarah Jane rejects her racial heritage and Annie as her mother. After Sarah Jane stops moving and stands looking in the mirror, the camera continues

to pan until Sarah Jane's body is in the left foreground, but our eye is drawn to the mirror where we can see Sarah Jane and Annie in medium shots, Annie standing behind Sarah Jane. This shot builds on the meaning of "I'm somebody else" suggesting Sarah Jane has left Annie "behind her." At the same time, the reflection of Annie and Sarah Jane alludes to Sarah Jane's heritage. Even if Sarah Jane disavows her mother, black heritage, and leaves Annie in her past, she cannot unmake Annie or unlive her childhood experience. An aspect of Annie will always be reflected in Sarah Jane. The permanence of biology and heritage, with all of their racialized meaning, are both affirmed and denied by Sarah Jane's response and the reflection of the women in the mirror.

With Annie and Sarah Jane visible in the mirror, Sarah Jane continues explaining to Annie, "I'm white."[219] Sarah Jane turns her face toward the mirror, but her eyes are downcast and looking to the left; she avoids her reflection and the visual signifier of her racial heritage. Sarah Jane repeats the word "White" and then shouts, "White!" before closing her eyes, tilting her head down, and crying. Here, we again witness an inversion of the visual/verbal racial signification. Sarah Jane's shouting white explicitly addresses the issue of race.

In contrast, the issue of Sarah Jane's racial heritage, which contradicts her claim of whiteness, is silently reflected in the mirror. Sarah Jane may refuse to acknowledge her relationship with Annie and her corresponding relationship with black racial heritage, going so far as to avoid eye contact with Annie in the mirror. Still, the audience sees the contradictory elements of Sarah Jane's racial identity; she looks white but has a black mother. This shot is steeped in irony, as the verbal suggests one meaning and the visual another, as well as ambiguity since the images seem to recreate and subvert the racial binary simultaneously. On the one hand, we see the black/white binary reasserted in the mirror by Annie/Sarah Jane, respectively. Sarah Jane must

[219] The part of this sequence with the mirror corresponding dialogue begins at *Imitation of Life,* 01:41:18.

choose to either continue to disavow her mother or she must acknowledge her heritage. On the other hand, Annie's placement in the mirror's background leaves the viewer to wonder if the film is suggesting a more complex understanding of racial identification, perhaps even suggesting that the image of Sarah Jane does not simply recreate a binary but allows the viewer to see Sarah Jane simultaneously hold a black and white identity.

Sarah Jane's refusal to acknowledge Annie and her racial heritage confirms Annie's loss of family. After shouting "white" at the mirror and its reflection, Sarah Jane leans forward, crying, and then slowly turns toward Annie. The camera moves pans to the right with Sarah Jane's movement and stops, sharply tilted upward, with Sarah Jane in the extreme left foreground and Annie in a medium shot on the right. Now facing Annie, Sarah Jane asks, "Does that answer you?" Annie takes a few steps forward toward Sarah Jane and nods her head before replying, "I guess so." We cut to a reverse shot, looking over Annie's shoulder at Sarah Jane, perhaps the beginning of another unfulfilled shot/reverse shot. The camera creates expectations of a dialogue between Sarah Jane and Annie, but the truncated shot/reverse-shot sequences emphasize the truncated conversation between Annie and Sarah Jane. Just as traditional shot/reverse-shot expectations are left unfulfilled, so are the expectations and hopes of familial reconciliation.

Sarah Jane, too immersed in her longings and life to realize that Annie has hinted she is dying, cries as she asks Annie, "Then please, mama, will you go?" Sarah Jane's words, "will you go," offer us a double meaning, asking Annie to leave her room and life, but also it asks Annie to go, to die and permanently leave her alone. Sarah Jane continues, "And never do this again. And if, by accident, we should ever pass on the street," Sarah Jane looks away from Annie as she asks this last part, "please don't recognize me." We cut to the reverse shot, looking at Annie over Sarah Jane's shoulder, and Annie replies, "I won't, Sarah Jane. I promise I settled all that in my mind."

Sarah Jane, of course, cannot know that the next time Annie is on the street near Sarah Jane, she will be in a coffin and unable to attempt any recognition. Annie has come to say goodbye to Sarah Jane, accepting Sarah Jane's request for disavowal and thus fully realizing the self-sacrificing, suffering figure of motherhood so familiar in melodramas.

We cut to a close-up of Sarah Jane, still looking away from Annie. Annie continues, "There's just one thing. I wish from you."[220] Sarah Jane looks at Annie finally after the second sentence and responds, "What?" with apprehension. We cut to the reverse shot, now Annie is in a close-up as she tells her, "If you're ever in trouble, if you ever need anything at all, if you ever want to come home, and you shouldn't be able to get in touch with me" Annie looks down at the end of this last clause and then looks back up. We cut back to the close-up of Sarah Jane as she finishes her request, "will you let Miss Lora know?" Sarah Jane looks somewhat concerned but then replies curtly and looks away, saying, "Yes. Yes, anything! Now, will you go?" We cut back to the close-up of Annie, "That wasn't all I wanted, honey; that was only part of it." Sarah Jane asks, "What's the rest?" Annie, "I'd like to hold you in my arms once more like you were still my baby." We cut back to Sarah Jane as she looks away and concedes, "All right, mama." And then repeats more forcefully, "all right."

Annie moves forward and grabs Sarah Jane crying her name, and then we cut to a reverse shot, still in a close-up. The close-ups emphasize the heightened emotion between Sarah Jane and Annie.[221] We see Annie's face over Sarah Jane's shoulder as she continues crying, "Oh my baby. My beautiful, beautiful baby." We cut to the reverse shot and Sarah Jane, also in an extreme close-up, who looks distraught and confused and is not yet hugging Annie. Then we cut back to Annie

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[220] The exchange with the close-ups between Sarah Jane and Annie runs 01:42:51-01:42:54.

[221] In a similar interpretation, Niu reads the extreme close-ups and "the swelling music of the soundtrack" as reinforcing the intimacy between Sarah Jane and Annie (*Performing White Triangles,* 142).

as she says, “I love you so much.” Here, we experience a different kind of climactic pace than the slapping between Sarah Jane and Frankie. This heightening is not a frenzy or an explosion of violence associated with the exotic sexuality of black women, but there is still an increase in the tempo, which intensifies the emotional feeling. Annie goes on, “Nothing you ever do can stop that.” We cut back to Sarah Jane, and she finally caves in and hugs Annie, crying still and saying, “Oh, mama. Mama.” Annie says, “My baby”, simultaneously as Sarah Jane continues crying, “Mama.”

This embrace shows the unmistakable love between a mother and daughter. Yet their love and Annie’s benevolence toward Sarah Jane cannot overcome the barriers to their reconciliation. Sarah Jane suffers because of factors external to the family. The power of public sentiment and laws shapes the family in spite of the best efforts to maintain a P/P. Yet, Annie’s sacrifice here does not ensure the happiness or flourishing of Sarah Jane. Unlike Willa, Annie does not sacrifice herself while fulfilling the role of a submissive wife. Unlike Ed, Annie’s sacrifice is not meant to incur guilt and punishment on behalf of Sarah Jane. Nor is her sacrifice an inversion of Abraham’s test of faith—where she saves her daughter and offers herself up instead. Annie’s sacrifice is an attempt to suffer on behalf of Sarah Jane; she tries to suffer what is Sarah Jane’s to suffer and as such participates in engendering the performance that follows this moment when the showgirl arrives in Sarah Jane’s room.

We hear a knock on the door in the background, Annie looks toward the door, and we cut to a medium shot of Sarah Jane from behind her.[222] The camera pans as Sarah Jane walks a few steps away from Annie and then stops, as does the camera so that she is framed in profile in the extreme left foreground of the shot. On her right, the door opens. Sarah Jane’s red-headed friend

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[222] For the duration of this sequence and dialogue, see *Imitation of Life* 01:42:56-01:43:56.

from the choir walks in, telling "Linda" that the boys are waiting. She closes the door behind her as she enters, and her eyes flick away from Sarah Jane to Annie and then back to Sarah Jane. Then her friend walks into the room and says, "Say, listen, if you're the new maid, I want to report that my shower is full of ants." As the showgirl walks into the room and toward Annie, the camera pans to the left and stops with the showgirl and Annie facing each other in medium shots.

Annie, behaving as she has promised Sarah Jane, parodies the role of a mammy, to her daughter. She is painfully submissive and respectful and tells the girl that she just stopped in to see "Miss Linda." Then Annie looks away from the girl toward Sarah Jane as she continues explaining, "I used to take care of her." The camera pans to the right as Annie walks toward Sarah Jane but does not move so that the two are framed in medium close-ups, echoing the closeness they just experienced, but once again, there is a gap between them. Sarah Jane faces toward the camera but does not look at Annie. Annie is in profile looking at Sarah Jane. Annie tells Sarah Jane she must leave; her plane is leaving, and she continues to call her Miss Linda. Then Annie whispers, crying again, "Goodbye honey," and gently touches her shoulder with her hand before removing it, remembering she is not supposed to show excessive affection or connection to Sarah Jane. Annie tells Sarah Jane to take "good care" of herself, and Sarah Jane, still looking away, says, "Goodbye", and then finally she looks at Annie again and mouths the word "Mama" so that her friend cannot hear or see.

Annie walks away from Sarah Jane to the door to leave. Sarah Jane turns around, and the camera reframes, shifting slightly to the right to see Annie going in the background. The chorus girl walks back into the frame, and Sarah Jane turns around to watch Annie leave. The choir girl looks to Sarah Jane and says, "Well, look at you" before Annie has entirely left, and once Annie is out the door she continues in a southern accent, "So honey child, you had a mammy." Sarah

Jane slowly walks across the room, and the camera tracks her and keeps her framed in a medium close-up as she comes to the door and leans on it to close it, closing the door on Annie and her black heritage, also closing the door on the opportunity to acknowledge her black heritage publicly before Annie dies.[223] Sarah Jane replies to the chorus girl, crying and replying, "Yes, all my life." Sarah Jane's words end the scene with irony and racial reference.

4.9 Conclusion:

The ending of the film offers a tableau of a happy(white) family but again raises the ambiguity of Sarah Jane's racial identity. In the last sequence of the film, we see a united "white" family: Lora finally takes on a maternal role comforting Sarah Jane and connecting with Susie despite their recent disagreements; Steve finally approves of Lora and her actions, assuming the patriarchal head of the family role; and Sarah Jane appears to take the place of a daughter at Lora's side and a sister, sitting across from Susie. From the moment Sarah Jane enters the car with Lora, the viewers are given the impression that she finally finds a place of acceptance in a white family. This moment visually signifies Sarah Jane as white, despite her black heritage and fulfils the required Hollywood "happy" ending showing a united, affectionate, (white) family.

As we saw above, the dialogue in the film avoids explicit references to race (with a few notable exceptions such as the scenes with Frankie's abuse) but racial status and meaning is communicated to the viewer through visual cues, such as Annie's presence and blackness. However, the dialogue earlier in this sequence, combined with an inversion of racial signification, undercuts the triumphant "happy" ending. Now that Annie is dead, this sequence no longer offers

[223] The interpretation of the closed door and its meaning for Sarah Jane and Annie's relationship is taken from Niu who argues, "But the recognition of Annie as her mother, the scene insists, is a close matter, a closed door," ("Performing White Triangles," 142).

a visual signifier of racial difference and consequently signifies Sarah Jane as white. Yet the dialogue before this shot suggests Sarah Jane has embraced her black heritage. The inversion of the visual, which now means racial similitude instead of difference, is destabilized by the dialogue and Sarah Jane's racial identification is left ambiguous.

Both Annie and Sarah Jane always refer to Lora as "Miss." As was the custom during the Jim Crow years, the honorific only applies to white women and once to Sarah Jane when Annie disavows her as a daughter and pretends to be her "mammy," calling her "Miss Linda."[224] Sarah Jane also uses the honorific when talking to Lora and notably calls her "Miss Lora" when Lora tries to pull her away from the hearse with Annie's body in it. While we could argue the honorific is said out of habit, using the word "Miss" suggests that Sarah Jane still maintains a position of racial inequality next to Lora. Moreover, she uses the term, Miss, right after she pushes through the crowd and runs to the hearse carrying Annie's body while screaming, "that's my mother." Sarah Jane's action acknowledges her racial heritage and, in so doing, believes that society will identify her as black because of her mother. Combining this moment of acknowledgement with the honorific and setting them against the visual tableau of the white family in the funeral car, we are left with the ambiguity surrounding Sarah Jane's racial identification and self-identity.

I read this final scene as purposely ambivalent. This final scene is indeed ironic—we have inversions of the story of the prodigal son, possible dramatic/structural irony if we attended to the film enough to expect Sarah Jane's return home when she learns of Annie's death—after all, the audience knows what Sarah Jane does not, Annie is ill. But for our purposes the irony we need to briefly consider here is the visual juxtaposition of a phenotypically white Sarah Jane, mourning as

[224] My interpretation here echoes Niu who notes "Both Annie and Sarah Jane always refer to Lora as 'Miss' but the honorific, it seems, only applies to white women, or when Sarah Jane is passing as 'Miss Linda,'" ("Performing White Triangles," 143).

if she is an equal member of her white kinship network, with Sarah Jane's mannerisms and spatial occupation by Lora's side. The former suggests Sarah Jane identifies as white and is finally accepted into a white family; the latter can be seen as Sarah Jane taking up Annie's role and racial identity as a black woman. Yet this juxtaposition leaves ambiguous Sarah Jane's racial self-identity.[225] Do we emphasize her seemingly new acceptance as a white daughter by Lora or her mannerisms and speech that are so reminiscent of Annie?

This sequence is an example of a place where we can "overlook" for an ironic cue to find a stable meaning or racial identity for Sarah Jane. Moreover, Klinger's criticisms haunt any interpretative effort here, forcing us to ask if we read this scene as ironic and thus having an ascertainable meaning because of Sirk's controlling comments about his body of work. Rather than use Sirk's comments about irony to stabilize the meaning in the end, I want to heed the irony's destabilizing effect irrespective of Sirk's intention. Put differently, irony performs the task of making the viewer uncertain, which creates discomfort. The figurative devices parody, satire, the

[225] Jeremy G. Butler, however, echoes my own sense of ambiguity of Sarah Jane's racial identity during this scene ("Imitation of Life (1934 and 1959): Style and the Domestic Melodrama," in *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*, ed. Lucy Fischer [(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991)], 287-298. Marina Heung offers a sobering interpretation of this final scene that runs adjacent to my own interpretation although Heung identifies Sarah Jane as black: "In the final analysis, Sarah Jane's mistake is to insist that adoption means assimilation; her transgression is to resist her own contingent status. Here the theme of racial integration intersects with that of domestic service, for the vigilant but invisible presence of the servant within the sanctified privacy of her employer's home is an analogue in miniature of the contradictory terms by which blacks like Annie and Sarah Jane can remain as adopted members of the American family: invited, even appreciated, but intrinsically alien ("Daughters and Mothers," 324).
Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's interpretation of this final scene counters my own. Flitterman-Lewis reads the scene to mean Sarah Jane definitively accept her black racial heritage and takes the place of her mother as Lora's maid: "As noted, the last shots of the film place her [Sarah Jane] in the limousine with the surrogate family (by implication, her employers), and, as such, reinforce her acceptance of the symbolic position of the black woman. No longer willing to 'be' as she 'seems,' Sarah Jane becomes fully black by taking her mother's place, and in so doing, she accepts her black identity with resignation" ("*Imitation(s) of Life*: The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling Other," in *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*, ed. Lucy Fischer [(New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991)], 329-330. Niu takes a different approach to reading this final scene, suggesting as I do that Sarah publicly acknowledges her racial heritage or "declares her bond with her blackness," (143) but uses this declaration as a means of affirming and stabilizing of Sarah Jane's racial identity and identification. After her declaration, Sarah Jane, "is entreated by and finally enclosed in a white triangle with Lora and Susie" (143), meaning Sarah Jane steps into the role of her mother, a black woman and racial other. Sarah Jane's adopted racial otherness affirms Lora's and Susie's white womanliness ("Performing White Triangles," 138, 143).

uncanny, and ambiguity all lead to varieties of discomfort; they force us to feel, think, and see things that we might otherwise avoid. The effect on the viewer is such that ultimately, we should feel uncomfortable making a pronouncement about Sarah Jane's racial identity. This final scene remains ambiguous because race is an ambiguous phenomenon. We undermine this emphasis and the film's social criticism when we use irony to stabilize and decide Sarah Jane's racial identity for her.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have argued that the films, *The Night of the Hunter, Bigger than Life,* and *Imitation of Life* undermine the most obvious reasons why we assume the benevolence of parents toward their children--parental love and good intentions. I argue that the three films function as forms of what Michael Walzer has helpfully termed "social criticism"—they offer a critical interpretation of the already existent values, ethical behaviors, and beliefs in society. This criticism reveals the gap between the ideal and the real, between how something ought to be and how something is. These films target the idealization of the family and the use of biblicism, a form of US-American religion, as a source of ethical behavior.

The family and religion are two of the "sacred" tenets of US-American society emphasized by the Production Code. The Code was socially conservative: instead of promoting social change, happiness and success were understood to be achievable within the already-established norms and conventions of the US. Contrary to the values of the Code, these films worked around Code's rules through figurative devices like the uncanny, irony, ambiguity, ambivalence, and defamiliarization to criticize the idealization of the family and biblicism as synonymous with ethical behavior.

In conjunction with Walzer, Brooks's, Cavell's, and Elsaesser's arguments about melodrama were valuable sources for me because they animate the problem of the difficulty of expression. Rosengarten's exegesis of Ricoeur suggests the possibility of interpreting these films as narratives about the sacred values of US-American society and thus as narratives of myth. As such they contend with the need for symbols and the impossibility of capturing the totality of reality.[226] I have framed the difficulty of expression and recourse to symbols as the impossibility of the films to encompass all experiences of the family and relieve all tensions between the

[226] Rosengarten, "Election and Inflection," 469.

competing claims on the family members in their different roles—wife, mother, father, husband, child, domestic servant, mammy, friends, white folks, people of color, etc.

I also argued that films perpetuate our mythic narratives and thus have a role in shaping our "common" cultural heritage and inheritances.[227] The common cultural heritage and inheritances are the familiar ideas and values that everyday US-Americans share and pass from generation to generation. Part of that common heritage is the link between biblicism and ethical behavior and the idealization of the family. However, I also argued that not all US-Americans have access to the family. Thus, our common cultural heritage and inheritances are themselves subject to Walzerian social criticism—there is a gap between the ideal of a common cultural experience and the real experience of cultural heritage and inheritance by everyday US-Americans. Rather than common, a dominant cultural heritage and inheritance is perpetuated in our mythic narratives. The limitation of these mythic narratives returns us to the difficulty of expression and the inability to express the totality of US-American experiences. The family, the use of biblicism as synonymous with ethical behavior, and the public/private divide are all means of narrating US-American myths that are necessarily limited and are certainly less representative of US-America today than in the 1950s. Nevertheless, they were also limited in the 1950s but certainly not acknowledged as such by the Production Code.

[227] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness,* 14. A parallel claim made by the authors of the Production Code and one that leads them to determine the need for censorship via the Code: "Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings….the *moral importance* of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours and ultimately touches the whole of their lives….[they] affect the of those who thru the screen take in these ideas and ideals" (Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood,* 347-349, italics in original).

5.1Triangulating the Films

In the Introduction, I used Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" to argue that there is not an essence to a single genre but rather a series of overlapping features that can be combined and compared in endless ways. I posited that the films are like overlapping fibers that remain strong because of their relationship with one another. I built on Wittgenstein and this claim about genre with Cavell, to suggest that we can ask how the films inherit the question of the assumed benevolence of parents to their children. Drawing together both Wittgenstein and Cavell, I use Rosengarten's work to claim that there is no origin point to a genre and instead, we must choose a point from which to begin to think, elect, and then engage in how the films relate to one another. At times throughout the chapters, I have drawn comparisons across the films to sharpen how we can think about the family as a site of idealization and conflation. Here, I recap the films, their use of figurative devices to offer criticism of the traditional/nuclear family, and biblicism as a source of ethical behavior while also reifying the importance of these two institutions because of the focus on them.

Night of the Hunter works to defamiliarize and refamiliarize the form of the nuclear family. Both Ben and Willa Harper become so caught up in the need to fulfill their idealized roles—of breadwinner, in Ben's case, and obedient, submissive wife, in Willa's' case—that they miss the practical and realistic element of caring for a family; they need to be present and attend to the children. Harry Powell takes advantage of the misplaced priorities of Ben and Willa and comes close to sacrificing/murdering the children, John and Pearl, in his quest for money. Ben tasks his son John with the responsibility of minding Pearl and managing the money, keeping its location secret even from Willa. Ben swears his son to secrecy, a vow that will burden John throughout the film; he breaks this promise when the police arrest Powell in the same manner as Ben Harper but John returns to his silence in the courtroom, refusing to implicate Powell in Willa's murder.

Miss Cooper and Harry Powell embody the concepts of good and evil, light and dark respectively. Powell's evil corrupts the Harpers' home, defamiliarizing the rooms and feelings associated with them. He transforms John and Pearl's room from a space of safety to one of imprisonment and insecurity. The feeling of the uncanny arises as Powell's presence makes the home unfamiliar while the spaces remain physically unchanged. Powell's evil not only corrupts the Harpers' home, but it also fragments the justice system and spreads like a contagion through a mob who, now that they know of his corruption, amasses to enact "justice." The drastic shift in the people surrounding Powell marks the power of his evil. The respectable Hangman, Bart, loathes his job but suddenly feels privileged to execute his duties. Walt and Icey Spoon are converted from ice cream shop owners to disheveled drunks. Only Miss Cooper, the figure of Good, can resist Powell's charisma and protect the sanctity of the home by shielding the space and the children from Powell's depravity.

Powell recreates the nuclear family with Willa—realizing both the idealized form and content of the institution. Nevertheless, the nuclear family itself does not ensure the care of children or the benevolence of parents toward the children. Indeed, recreating the nuclear family with Powell endangers the children more than if Willa had remained a single mother. Miss Cooper's makeshift foster home refamiliarizes what a successful family can look like and what a family should focus on. A family need not consist of a heterosexual married couple or focus on material possessions as a marker of success. A family prioritizes the essential needs of the children—security, stability, and support.

Bigger than Life in many ways picks up where *Hunter* ends. I argue above that *Night of the Hunter* ends with a focus on the idyllic home, but its denouement emphasized issues of time, as well as children's ability to endure and abide. *Bigger than Life* begins with an emphasis on

children—the credits play while exuberant children exit a school for Easter break—and the plot begins with a close-up of a pocket watch followed by a hand entering the frame and reaching for the watch. Not only does the watch recall John's desire for a watch and Miss Cooper's Christmas gift but we are likewise introduced to a hand. The emphasis on the hand also evokes *Night of the Hunter.* I have made much of the importance of hands. Powell's hands play a pivotal role in his transformation and in unmasking his true intentions; he is not the gracious preacher but murderous villain intent on taking money from widows. Ed Avery's hands likewise take on a sinister significance throughout *Bigger than Life,* foreshadowing his attempt to sacrifice his son. The films depict two murderous husbands, two wives submissive to a fault, two sons who must inherit their father's responsibilities and sins regardless of their own desires, and two men who believe they can rightly interpret the Bible.

Unlike *Hunter,* however, the family in *Bigger than Life* lives in a modest middle-class suburban home and while struggling to make ends meet is not at the mercy of the Great Depression and financial crises we saw in *Hunter.* As we learn in the opening of the film, Ed is a schoolteacher moonlighting as a taxicab dispatcher to "make ends meet." Lou, his wife, stays at home tending to the household and to Richie when he is not in school. We are shown an ostensibly ideal US-American family. However, already this family struggles financially and internally as Ed lies to Lou about his second job and Lou suspects Ed of infidelity. Ed quickly falls ill and the financial concerns are cast in a new light while the idea of infidelity is dismissed.

In *Hunter,* Harry Powell is presented as the figure of Evil in human form. He invaded the space of the home and endangered the family. In *Bigger than Life*, Ed's illness and corresponding dependence on cortisone leads to addiction that transforms Ed into a monstrous figure on par with Harry Powell. Willa's insistence that she remain submissive and loyal to her marriage even when

she learns Powell has deceived her and wants Ben's money is echoed in Lou's insistence on the togetherness of her family. The notion of togetherness in *Bigger than Life* is repeated as Lou tries to keep Ed from abandoning her when he wants to begin a new education program and most poignantly at the end of the film when she maintains faith in the irrational notion that being together as a family will heal Ed.

The idea of togetherness is destabilized and defamiliarized in the film. Togetherness is destabilized by the function of the home. The family resides in the same house, they appear "together" but are divorced in their everyday activities and interactions. The rooms in the home begin to function as separate domains run by the different parents: Ed rules the study; Lou the kitchen. The home, the space meant to unify a family, can mask a divided family. The film defamiliarizes these two notions—the idealization of togetherness through marriage regardless of the costs and the vilification of divorce because of the harm that comes to children. We learn that togetherness does not equal a marital union. Ed declares they are divorced and that he remains in the home only for the sake of Richie as if living together for the sake of the child produces less harm than traditional divorce. Yet, Ed's declaration harms Richie as witnessed by the camera's focus on the child during the dinner argument.

The home, so closely aligned with the family and space of supposed freedom and comfort, becomes uncanny in both films. Once a place of security for John and Pearl, Powell's presence in the home transforms the spaces into prison as he plays a high-stakes game of hide and seek, a hunter stalking prey throughout the rooms. Likewise, Lou and Richie cannot escape their home. Instead, they bide their time until their weekend of terror ends. As they try to abide and endure, Ed slowly metamorphoses into a monster akin to Powell. For Lou and Richie, there is no shotgun-toting "mother goose" to save the day. Instead, the film ironically offers a "miracle" in the form

of a cerebral hemorrhage that interferes at the precise moment the angel in the *Akedah* stopped Abraham. This medical "miracle" clearly inverts the doctors' claims about cortisone, and once more raises the question of whether suffering and affliction, especially in retrospect can be read providentially.

Beyond the formal comparison, the connection between the films has historical founding. While searching for an actor to play Richie, Ray saw *Night of the Hunter*. He was so taken with Mitchum's brilliant portrayal of a murderous psychopath that he dressed James Mason in black to evoke the same murderous intent.[228] What remains unexplored is whether the two men evoke a sense of the demonic not just the monstrous. Using Kierkegaard's claim about the connection between faith and the demonic in *Fear and Trembling* would not only open an avenue to consider both men in terms of the demonic but supports the claim that the films challenge the presumed ethical uprightness of biblicism. One can exhibit faith and obedience like Abraham but not under the guidance of the divine or in the direction of goodness.

Imitation of Life diverts from a close connection between the previous two films, at times seeming as though it is a foil or simply a contrast to the gothic, horror, melodrama amalgamation of *Hunter* and *Bigger than Life.* The "traditional" family, while perhaps an aspiration for some is certainly not the only iteration of family and is not representative of the reality of US-America. *Imitation of Life* relentlessly confronts the viewer with racial difference and the diverging experiences and access to the family between black and white people. Annie, and Sarah Jane while racially identified as black, are precluded from the nuclear family unless it is as the "help" to ensure the success and care of the white family.[229] Annie is a mother but repeatedly falls into the role of

[228] Andrew, "Commentary" *Bigger than Life*; Eisenschatz, *Nicholas Ray: An American Journey,* 277, 531 n 10.
[229] Heung raises the idea of Annie and Sarah Jane as the "help" in "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane,'" 310-311. Heung bases some of her argument on the work of Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

a mammy until at the end of the film when she becomes a mammy. No longer only performing the role for Lora and Susie, Annie accepts the disavowal of Sarah Jane as her own daughter so that she can be white. Ironically, Annie as the most matronly and motherly figure is precluded from that identity because she is black. Sarah Jane whose white appearance and black heritage destabilizes the ideas of racial essentialism and bears witness to the constructed nature of race nevertheless exists in a world of an unrelenting racial binary. Not wanting to continue to be seen as inferior and unequal she embraces a life of passing as white, disavowing her mother until the very end of the film. But even then, it remains unclear if Sarah Jane will finally have access to a white family as a white woman or if she replaces Annie as a maid and mammy figure.

Lora and Annie form an untraditional family, in that they cohabit and pool their resources to care for their daughters. Indeed, they recreate the form of the "traditional" family but defamiliarize the content. But, the issues of race and gender pervade the film subjecting Lora's and Annie's kinship network to public expectations of the family, until they finally accede to the content as well as the form of the nuclear family. Instead of a successful breadwinner, Lora is subject to the dichotomy of ambitious career woman vs. caretaker mother, individual desire vs. motherly duty. Consequently, Lora is frequently interpreted as exemplifying the "bad" mother, implicitly winning for herself the scarlet letter 'A' for ambition."[230] Perhaps most poignantly indicative of Lora's failure as a mother is Susie's rejection of her offer of self-sacrifice, to give up Steve. In a genre notorious for commending the sacrifice of women and mothers in particular, Susie's rejection of Lora's offer rebukes Lora as a maternal figure. Susie accuses Lora of giving

[230] Heung, "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?'" 304. Heung here is working from Peter Biskind: "The career woman had replaced the vamp as *femme fatale* of the fifties; the scarlet letter stood for ambition not adultery" (Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1983], 263, qtd. in Heung "'What's the Matter with Sarah Jane,'" 304). Heung notes that Biskind is paraphrasing Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2001), 46.

her everything but a mother's love and of "playing the martyr" in her offer to give up Steve. While Lora here is rejected as the self-sacrificing maternal figure, especially in comparison to Annie, Susie embraces a future with more independence than Lora had imagined. Susie rejects her mother's fanatical offer rather than continue as a child to be dressed and coddled. On one level, Susie's rejection of Lora's sacrifice mimics Sarah Jane's rejection of Annie. Both daughters repudiate the roles their mothers have determined for them; Sarah Jane refuses to inherit Annie's imagined life for her as black just as Susie repudiates Lora's role for Susie as a devoted, dependent doll.

Imitation, like the other films, concludes with the appearance of a "happy ending." Sirk's own claims about the end of the film are relevant here. He argues, "you don't believe the happy ending" and that for the characters the only solution is "just the *deus ex machina*," which is now called the 'happy ending.'"[231] In this case, I find purchase in Sirk's claims. The *deus ex machina* seems apt because it suggests the conditions in the narrative cannot resolve themselves without outside intervention, much as Abraham could not resolve the tension between servant to God and father to Isaac without God's intervention. The kinship network Lora and Annie formed failed, and the members of that network remain fractured until Annie dies. Annie's death provides the means for a reunion/union of a visibly "white" nuclear family but not a solution for the difficulties faced by the characters; Lora and Susie's relationship remains strained, as evidenced by the distance between them in the car and the question of Sarah Jane's racial identity remains

[231] Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk*, qtd. in Fischer, *Imitation of Life,* 229. See also Elsaesser, who in offering a brief genealogy of melodrama argues that post-French Revolution France melodramas differed from their pre-revolution predecessors in that they had "happy endings, they reconciled the suffering individual to his social position, by affirming an 'open' society, where everything was possible….Complex social processes were simplified either by blaming the evil disposition of individuals or by manipulating the plots and engineering coincidences and other *dei ex machina,* such as the instance conversion of the villain, moved by the plight of his victim, or suddenly struck by Divine Grace on the steps of Nôtre-Dame," ("Tales of Sound and Fury," in Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is,* 46).

ambiguous. Using the "happy ending" to resolve the conditions and tensions in the narratives remains as uncompelling as assuming a "happy ending" in the *Akedah* because God stays Abraham's hand; how can Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah possibly overcome this event going forward? Moreover, it is not only *Imitation's* ending that I reject, the happy endings in *Hunter* and *Bigger than Life* are equally problematic. Lillian Gish's sermon could not erase John's trauma at the hands of both Ben Harper and Harry Powell; the reunion of the separated Avery family cannot remove the horror of almost being murdered by one's father or husband.

The families in all three films experience inexplicable and unjustifiable suffering, pain, and terror which is merely masked by the "happy ending." In the case of these three films, the "happy ending" functions as a symbol for the experiences of the families in a manner similar to how myths function as symbols of the experience of the sacred; the "happy ending" lends contingent form to the limitation of expression because it cannot give meaning to the totality of the experience of the families. Rather than a static mask obscuring the horror of the families' experiences, the "happy ending" is one mask among many attempting to give meaning to the totality of the structure it covers.

5.2 Iterations of the *Akedah*

In the Introduction, I argued for using the *Binding of Isaac* as an elected mythic narrative and generative source of the films. The *Akedah* challenges the Production Code's assumption that religion can assure moral rightness or be used as a source of ethical behavior in Hollywood films. Above I looked at how *Hunter* and *Bigger than Life* present the viewer with problematic uses of religion, challenging the idea that the religious and the ethical are synonymous. Here, however, I am going to raise the ways in which all three films offer iterations the *Akedah*. God's command to

Abraham to sacrifice his son as well as Abraham's obedience to God and the danger of the covenant are all refigured in these films.

In *Hunter,* arguably, the stories told by Miss Cooper of baby Moses being sent down the river or King Herod's "massacre of the infants," and of course the warning of "wolves in sheep's clothing" more aptly resonate with the film. But the *Akedah* comes to bear on *Hunter* in other ways. As I have already mentioned, both Willa and Ben abandoned the practical needs of their children in trying to fulfill the idealized role of wife and father. The idealization of those familial roles is a competing claim for the parents, interfering with their need to be present in order to love and care for their children. As such, they sacrifice themselves for the unrealistic expectations of the nuclear family but also leave their children to be sacrificed by Powell in his quest for money.

Of the three films, Powell is perhaps the pinnacle figure that undermines the assumption of the benevolence of parents toward their children. Powell certainly does not feel any love or benevolence for John or Pearl and so unlike Abraham, he does not need to adjudicate between his love of a child and a command by God. But extracting the location of Ben Harper's money from John and Pearl figures as a test of faith for Powell. In the opening of the film, we learn that Powell follows the "road" he believes the Lord guides him down. In meeting Ben Harper in jail, Powell feels as though the Lord has providentially sent Powell to prison so that he can learn of the $10,000 an unsuspecting widow possesses. But Powell's own code of whom to kill, those women he feels are sexualized and amoral, begins to unravel when he cannot find the money. Indeed, if there are any competing claims on Powell it is between completing the Lord's work of murdering eroticized women and his greed and desire for money. We see this tension begin to emerge when Powell traps John and Pearl in the cellar of the home after he has murdered Willa.

When Powell realizes that John lied to him about the money's location, there is a cut to a medium shot in deep focus. Powell stands up, grabs John, forces him to bend over the potato barrel, and holds him in place. Once there, Powell suddenly jerks his head up. There is a cut to a medium close-up of Pearl who is terrified as she looks at her brother. Then we cut to a medium shot of John and Powell in profile. Powell's head remains turned his face skyward and slightly tilted. This tilt echoes the same tilt we saw before Powell killed Willa. The mise-en-scène reveals Powell's murderous intent. Moreover, this head tilt and pause cue the viewer that Powell believes he is receiving divine communication. This expectation of divine revelation is confirmed when Powell tells the children, "The lord's a-talking to me now, He's a-saying 'a liar is an abomination before mine eyes.'"[232] Powell seems to have received confirmation that a lying child is as loathsome as the eroticized women he hunts. Has Powell here been commanded to kill John as he feels he has been called by the Lord to kill the widows? Or is he simply trying to scare the children into confessing the location of the money? If John is as abominable as the women, should Powell not kill the child regardless of whether he reveals the locations of the money?

After Powell conveys this divine message, a quotation from Proverbs, his eyes look down toward John, and then his head and finally shoulders turn back to John. Powell tells John to speak and tell him where the money is hidden. There is a cut back to the close-up of Pearl as she bounces up and down in anxiety and fear; Pearl of course also knows where the money is hidden and keeping the secret jeopardizes her brother's life. We cut back to Powell and John. Powell

[232] The biblical reference here seems a truncated version of Proverbs 6:16-19 and 12:22. Proverbs 6:16-19, "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, feed that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family (NRSV). Proverbs 12:22, "Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord. But those who act faithfully are his delight" (NRSV). Ironically Powell seems to be an offender in both of these textual citations; he certainly has hands that shed innocent blood and sows discord in a family and his actions here deviate from his supposed faithful behavior up to now.

continues, “Speak! Speak, or I’ll cut your throat and leave you to drip like a hog hung up in butchering time.” Powell pulls out his knife and holds it over John’s shoulder to emphasize his intent. This moment with John indisposed and bound by his promise to his father not to reveal the location of the money raises the climactic moment in the *Akedah.* Powell as an inversion of Abraham seeks to sacrifice John for his own means and seeks justification from the Lord rather than the Lord commanding him to sacrifice the child as a test of faith. John, like Isaac, is bound in place, at the mercy of the father figure’s knife. But John is also bound by a promise to his biological father as well as by his stepfather. Both John and Isaac are endangered by their fathers—Isaac by Abraham and at one remove by God the Father and John by Powell and Ben Harper. Both children are burdened with being the target of their fathers’ fulfillment of a role greater than the child itself.

Pearl continues whimpering in the background while John tells her to keep her promise and not tell the location of the money. Powell tells Pearl she could save John. We cut back to Pearl as she breaks down telling Powell the money is in her doll and lifts the doll so that it is in the frame of the shot. The tension temporarily breaks. Powell laughs at the revelation and leans back against the cellar wall with a shelf of jars above his head. But this reprieve gives John time to hit the shelf holding the jars so that they fall on Powell’s head. Then Pearl and John make their escape with Powell in pursuit, but Powell is slowed down when he slips on one of the jars.

John and Pearl’s escape does not deter Powell. Instead, he kills a farmer to steal a horse and pursue the children. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, John and Pearl’s escape begins a reversal of Powell’s fate and his spiraling out of control. Powell abandons his path laid out by the Lord, murdering those women who offend his sensibilities (and the Lord’s) in the greedy pursuit of money. If the Harper children and the location of the money are meant to test Powell’s faith in the

Lord and his mission against his greed, he fails this test, unlike Abraham, foregoing his faith for his own wants and desires.

Bigger than Life obviously offers another iteration of the *Akedah,* and I discussed much of the retelling and figural changes in Chapter 3. Ed's illness figures for a command or call like God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Indeed, Richie is almost sacrificed to Ed's illness during the retelling of the biblical story. The marriage between Ed and Lou figures for the covenant between God and Ed. Although, in the inverse of the traditional story, it is Lou, not Ed, whose faith is tested, and Lou who maintains an irrational faith in the togetherness, in the marriage covenant, of her family. However, Lou's unshakable faith and the competing claims on Ed leave the viewer to worry about Richie. Lou's faith in togetherness and the union of her family places her priority as a wife above that as a mother or at the very least merges the two together so that she only sees herself as able to succeed as a mother if she is also a wife. The nuclear family in this film conflates faith and togetherness with the practical solutions an illness engenders. Ed's diagnosis requires an acknowledgment that the Averys' lives have changed, avoiding this acknowledgment and holding onto faith in the family and togetherness elides the practical needs of the children—security, stability, and support. In this case, the family is left with an impossible decision, they seem unable to provide the necessities for Richie and remain a union because of the potential danger of the treatment for Ed's illness. The "happy ending," much as the angel's interference in the *Akedah* does not alleviate the tensions that will persist after this momentary reprieve.

As I argued above, the family that Lora and Annie create is subjected to gender and racial expectations. Indeed, this subjection leads to seeing Lora as a bad mother through the lens of gender. Through the lens of race, Annie is epitomized as a "good" mother and more broadly as the figure of good throughout the film. This comparison pits the two women against one another to

determine Annie as the woman with the best motherly aptitude. Yet, by drawing on the *Akedah*, we can also see how Annie's love interfered with her ability to be a good mother. When sick, she tells Lora she too is a bad mother, countering Lora's insistence that Annie "couldn't have been a better mother to Sarah Jane," by asking, "Then where's my little girl?"[233] Later, on her deathbed, Annie asks Lora to tell Sarah Jane, "tell her I know I was selfish—and if I lived her too much, I'm sorry."[234] Rainer Werner Fassbinder argues that Annie's love is brutal. When Annie visits Sarah Jane one last time, Fassbinder argues it is not Sarah Jane who is cruel, but Annie: "It is the mother who is brutal, wanting to possess her child because she loves her. And Sarah Jane defends herself against her mother's terrorism…."[235] Annie's love takes on another iteration of the question about the benevolence of parents to their children. Rather than asking why do assume that benevolence, here we can ask why do we assume love ensures the safety, stability, and support of children. This question is similar to the one I raised when looking at the *Akedah*. Abraham's love seems to endanger Isaac, making him a target for God's test and cannot adjudicate the competing claims on Abraham between the role as God's servant and his role as father to Isaac. Annie falls in line with this rendering of the *Akedah.* Rather than giving up her role as a mother, I suggest that we can see Annie as sacrificing Sarah Jane.

In the *Akedah*, however, it is Abraham who endures competing claims on him—that of God's servant and that of being a loving father to Isaac. Abraham chooses to obey God and regardless of the ending of the story, at some level, he betrays his fatherly role to Isaac as he almost sacrifices him. In lieu of the covenant and God, the racial hierarchy is to Annie what God's

[233] Fischer, 145.
[234] Fischer, 150.
[235] Rainer Werner Fassbinder "Six Films by Douglas Sirk," in *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 245. Fischer excerpts Fassbinder's review on *Imitation of Life* from, "Six Films by Douglas Sirk," trans. Thomas Elsasser, in *Douglas Sirk,* ed. Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972), 104-107.

command is to Abraham. Instead of acceding to the command of God, she relents to her daughter's command and sacrifices her. In the final meeting between Annie and Sarah Jane, Annie, framed in a close-up, repeatedly laments “My baby” as she smothers her figural baby to death with love. Certainly, Annie embodies the self-sacrificing role of a mother; she gives up any personal desires for the sake of motherly duty, foregoes the life she imagined her child would inherit, and eventually sacrifice her role as a mother. But at the same time, Annie sacrifices her baby to a public racial hierarchy that commands more power and servitude than the private institution of the family.

5.3 Final Thoughts

In the introduction, I contended that a formal aesthetic analysis of a film can be an interpretative mode of social criticism and as such prompts an ethical engagement. I maintain that the films in this project provide another source of ethical material for consideration when investigating issues such as US-American values. The attention to the formal elements of the films was meant to ensure that the films were not reduced in complexity or made subservient to the ethical questions. At the same time, the formal analysis was not meant to detract from the films as important sources for ethical consideration rather than mere escapism or unimportant entertainment.

The balance between aesthetic analysis and ethical engagement via social criticism offers a rejoinder to the idealization of the family. The films simultaneously criticize and reify the importance and centrality of the family to US-American life. Idealizing and insisting on a singular form of family, the traditional/nuclear family, subject to the constraints of race and gender delimits the potential of the institution to meet the network of needs and wants of the people it governs. The consistent defamiliarization of the family and home and the persistent sense of the uncanny in films undermine the power of a rigid family structure ruled by form and content rather than the

needs of its members. The need for the flexibility of the institution is addressed in both *Hunter* and *Imitation* which offer iterations of the "found family" trope.

My use of social criticism diverges from Walzer's model in that I do not advocate for a return to a law or value from which the family has departed. I argue these films reveal the gap between the idealized family and the real experience of family. This idealization of the family is rooted in media depictions and the Production Code's own insistence on the family as a cornerstone of US-American society. But, my intention has been to show the limitations of the family to fulfill and meet such unrealistic expectations of the family to be all things to all of the members. Rather than return to a value or principle from which we have departed, I suggest a Cavellian response, which is to acknowledge the limitations of the family and the absurdity of assuming a specific form and content of family will result in happiness. The children while ostensibly the focal point of a family are often instruments used to fulfill their parents' wants and desires and are at the mercy of their parents' authority when the limitations of the family require the adjudication of competing claims on the family members.

At the same time, the consistent focus on the family tells us of the institution's importance and potential to be a source of security, stability, and support not only for children but for adults as well. I suggest that Cavell's concept of acknowledgment assists in thinking about the family's potential reservoir of positive influence. Acknowledgment shadows many of my interpretations and holds for me a certain ethical import if not imperative. This concept requires that people reveal a relationship they have to the world. Acknowledgment does not mean that you know that you are late—hence keeping the knowledge of your lateness to yourself. It means you recognize and reveal your lateness to others. This step requires a certain vulnerability, awareness, acceptance, and perhaps culpability. Moreover, acknowledgment requires you to allow another person to do and

suffer for themselves rather than try to act and suffer for them. Instead of acting or suffering on behalf of children or assuming a child will want to inherit a cultural role, parents must learn to acknowledge their separateness from their children so that the children can find and express their own self-identity and desires.

Miller's interpretation of Cavell's acknowledgment is illuminating here. For Miller, Cavell's elucidation of acknowledgment shows us that an "encounter with an other is less about my predicament-as-parochial than about how my life is normatively conditioned by alterity. The core idea is that the other petitions me to account for myself."[236] By contrasting our experience with alterity, to our experience with the familiar or the intimate, Miller identifies an important duality to acknowledgment—one must acknowledge others and one needs to be acknowledged. "We are is in no small way constituted by our intimate relationships….this matter of our constitution, moreover, extends beyond what we know and acknowledge to the ways in which we are known and acknowledged…."[237] Parents and children experience a duality not only of acknowledgment—they must both learn to acknowledge each other—but they experience a duality of alterity and intimacy. By learning to consider each other strangers as well as friends, parents and children can cultivate relationships where problematic idealizations such as glorified self-sacrifice or misguided assumptions about inheritances do not inhibit family members from constituting their own identities.

The family cannot always satisfy the needs of its members; suffering is inevitable, for both parents and children. Nevertheless, the family remains a crucial site of moral cultivation.[238] The

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[236] Richard B. Miller, *Friends and Other Strangers*: *Studies in Religion, Ethics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 3.
[237] Miller, *Friends and Other Strangers,* 4.
[238] Richard B. Miller, "Conclusion: On Liberal Care," in *Children, Ethics, and Modern Medicine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 268-274.

family is the space where children develop self-worth and love, learn what it is to care for another, and have their first experiences with justice, equality, and fairness.[239] Likewise the family is the space where we may first experience pain, affliction, and human faults. But the idealization of the family diminishes the negative experiences and insists that we need only find the right attitude, form, and content to achieve a utopian "happily ever after." This idealization undermines the capacity of the family as a space where we learn to accept that we cannot prevent all suffering and instead cultivate how to support each other without negating our individuality and separate experiences.

[239] Miller, "On Liberal Care," 270-274.

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