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A textual and contextual analysis of Fannie Hurst's Imitation of life

Céline Bassetti

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Céline Bassetti entitled "A textual and contextual analysis of Fannie Hurst's Imitation of life." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Charles Maland, Major Professor

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Charles Maland, Major Professor

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A TEXTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FANNIE HURST'S IMITATION OF LIFE

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Céline Bassetti

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DEDICATION

A Marie, qui m'a donné l'art
et Daniel, à qui je dois la manière.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a textual and contextual analysis of Fannie Hurst's novel Imitation of Life (1933), aiming to re-evaluate a novel by an author who was quite famous in the 1920s and 30s but who is nearly forgotten today. Imitation of Life is one of Hurst's most popular domestic melodramas in which the author explores gender and racial relationships. It was written at a time when she had not only established herself as a successful writer but had even become a public figure of some importance: she epitomized the successful "lady-writer" to millions of Americans. In spite of her overwhelming success, Hurst was never to be acknowledged by critics who overlooked the complexity of her writing and in general despised the genre of her novels: melodrama aimed at a feminine audience, a genre which had no place with the realist, modernist, and male-dominated literary canon.

In order to analyze and re-evaluate Hurst's novel, a definition of melodrama, an examination of relevant biographical information, and a survey of the critical reception to Hurst's works are of primary importance. Thus, the first chapter of the thesis gives a working definition of melodrama as a narrative type which appears in drama, prose fiction and film. This definition of melodrama is intended to avoid evaluating Hurst's novel through literary criteria which deprecate melodrama.

As melodrama is a particularly time-bound artistic form, the second chapter explores Fannie Hurst's socio-cultural background and her biography, thereby uncovering two major aspects underlying her writing: first, her inner conflict and effort to reconcile the widening gap between traditional values and radical changes in women's social position in the working world; second, the overwhelming public image which Hurst used to promote social issues such as women's and racial issues, and which boosted her literary career. Thus, Hurst in part appears as a 19th century literary survivor by writing domestic melodramas well into the first half of the 20th century, whereas her use of her public image definitely makes her part of the 20th century.

The third chapter consists of a narrative and stylistic analysis of Imitation of Life in view of the definition of melodrama and background information provided respectively in the first and second chapter. The sections dealing with the narrative structure and techniques show how Hurst uses both of these aspects skillfully and innovatively, demonstrating her outstanding abilities as a writer of melodrama. The analysis of the characterization shows how both the main and secondary characters reflect predominantly either traditional values or ground-breaking attitudes related to women's and racial issues. This contrast in the type of characters parallels Hurst's own experiences and the crucial preoccupations of American society at the beginning of this century, which she attempted to influence through her public persona and her writing.

The third chapter continues with a stylistic analysis of the novel which explores the different aspects of the modes of melodrama: excess, immediacy, and spectacle. If Hurst is rather successfully using excess and immediacy in order to heighten the melodramatic effects in her novel, she falls short in the melodramatic scope of grandiose public events, that is to say spectacle. This failure to use spectacle derives from her inability to melodramatize the black subplot in which the major spectacle scene of the novel occurs. Although the black subplot is highly propitious to melodramatic expression, the author is caught in her white patronizing perspective on racial problems. Hurst is unable to avoid the artificial tone pervading the black subplot, thereby precluding its very melodramatic impact.

The fourth and last chapter concentrates on the critical response to Hurst's novel since its publication. Although Fannie Hurst's works, such as Imitation of Life, have irremediably suffered from the passing of time, her writing from the position of a popular "lady-writer" in the 1920s and 1930s critiqued most often in negative terms, this survey on the critical reception of Hurst's novel and the analysis of the novel presented in the third chapter help to establish the importance of studying a popular genre such as melodrama, which still pervades American culture, its literature and cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is a textual and contextual analysis of Fannie Hurst's novel Imitation of Life published in 1933. The overwhelming popularity enjoyed by Hurst as a popular and prolific writer during the 1920s and 30s contrasts sharply with the critical response she usually received in that era, and makes it worthwhile to undertake a re-evaluation of her works and, in particular, Imitation of Life, one of her most successful domestic melodramas. However, this melodrama in which gender and race relationships are being explored cannot be separated from its biographical, social, and literary context. First, Fannie Hurst's own experience as a woman writer incredibly successful in promoting her own career and as a third generation German Jew on the horn of her ethnic dilemma reflects the gender and racial tensions portrayed in her novel. Second, she was writing melodramas at a time when this type of narrative was being look down upon by literary critics, who did not see her popularity as a token of literary accomplishment. Even if, according to the prevailing critical standard, the popularity of a work of art often constitutes a flaw rather than an indication of artistic value, this does not jeopardize the interest of this study, as the following concise historical survey on melodrama will show.

If one has to categorize Imitation of Life, the novel falls inescapably into the best selling social family melodrama type or its subset, the sentimental novel. Whatever the media form they took, social family melodramas up to the 1960s were disregarded by 20th century critics mainly because of their sheer entertainment function and their predictable standardized forms, two aspects which are despised by the critical majority, in spite of the fact that melodrama shapes a considerable part of the books, films, plays, and television serials we consume. However, melodrama has not always had such a bad reputation. In her thorough survey on the development of melodrama and its criticism ("The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation"), Christine Gledhill situates the shift in the appraísal of melodrama at the end of the

century, a period in which the theater and the novel were still the main outlet for melodrama:

> Nevertheless, realism, along with tragedy emerged at the end of the century as a criterion of elite cultural value. According to Vardac, theatrical realism gained its edge as a cultural touchstone as when the technologies for realistic staging became too cumbersome for melodrama's need of speedy, episodic narration. (Gledhill, 27)

Interestingly enough, the same shift in critical standards occurred later on in the movies (Gledhill, 34), after cinema became the principal artistic expression of melodrama thanks to its technical capabilities:

> Technically the cinema solved the problems of the stage, and the verbal limitations of the novel, in their common search to realise the melodramatic imagination. Film offered the photographic naturalism to which audiences had become accustomed through the illustrated press and the new staging techniques of the metropolitan centres, while editing could reproduce at a fraction of the cost the narrative continuity which in the theatre demanded either complex and labour intensive machinery, or 'non-naturalistic' sets and backdrops. (Gledhill, 27)

Melodrama is therefore a narrative type which has appeared successively in drama, prose fiction, and film and which was highly respected and enjoyed by the critics before the literary standards of realism rendered it obsolete.

Ultimately, the conclusions that can be drawn from this brief survey on the evolution of melodrama are the following: first, the predominant critical standards are inadequate when it comes to examining melodrama. Secondly, melodrama developed historically by switching from one artistic mode to another, pervading the novel, theater, cinema and thereby becoming a form hard to define although it remains easy to recognize. Finally, any definition of melodrama must include references to realism and tragedy in view of the historical and aesthetic relations between these modes of artistic expression. The first chapter of this study provides a working definition of melodrama. Chapter 2 presents elements of Fannie Hurst's biography and aspects of her time period which are relevant

to this study. The third chapter, drawing on the definition of melodrama established in Chapter 1, presents an analysis of the novel. Finally, Chapter 4 surveys the critical appraisal of Hurst's works and emphasizes the necessity of studying a popular genre such as melodrama.

CHAPTER 1: DEFINITION OF MELODRAMA

A way to avoid evaluating Imitation of Life through critical criteria which implicitly favor tragic and realistic qualities is by establishing a definition of melodrama which would take into account the variety of genres in which melodrama appears. Thus, by referring to a working definition of melodrama, it will be possible to evaluate how the novel succeeds in creating or fails to create it (Cawelti, 7). After a brief summary of various critics' approaches in defining melodrama, a working definition of melodrama will be established for the purpose of this study.

Unfortunately, any attempt by critics to define melodrama is confronted with the difficulty of circumscribing a notion which is characterized by its fluidity--a fluidity inherited through its pervasiveness in such forms of artistic expression as theater, and sentimental, Gothic, and Victorian novels. Indeed, according to their field of interest, critics stress one or the other literary tradition. For instance, Christine Gledhill, who is mainly interested in cinema, defines melodrama as the convergence of moral drama and spectacle (20), thereby putting forward the importance of the theatrical tradition in the development of cinema. She mentions the connections between melodrama and the Gothic and sentimental novels without fully exploring them (Gledhill, 20). On the other hand, after defining melodrama as one of the five basic categories of "formula stories," making references to novels, plays, and movies in the opening chapter of Adventure, Mystery and Romance, John Cawelti dedicates his last chapter to the study of "social melodrama" and consequently limits his examples to novels. He cites Dickens as a precursor of social melodrama (Cawelti, 266). If there might be as many variations in the definition of melodrama as there are possible critical approaches and fields of interest, most of the critics, such as Gledhill, Cawelti, and Lang, agree on a twofold definition of melodrama: melodrama is a "pervasive aesthetic mode that broke genre boundaries" (Gledhill, 6) or, in Lang's terms, a "genre's archetype" (47), and in Cawelti's perspective, melodrama becomes a type of set of "story formulas" (Cawelti, 260). Then, in a more restrictive

perspective, melodrama can be presented as a genre within their field of interest: social melodrama for Cawelti, Hollywood family melodrama and its subset, the woman's film, for Lang and Gledhill.

In the light of this dual aspect of melodrama perceived by the critics, a working definition of melodrama for this study can be established by relying on melodrama's aesthetic pervasiveness and pattern without being confounded by differences in media. In other words, one will define the characteristics of melodrama as they appear in any sort of artistic expression in order to see how these features are shaped within the literary form of a novel, Imitation of Life.

In order to do so, this working definition will be based mainly on the common characteristics of melodrama as they are discussed in the works of three critics (although others will be occasionally mentioned): Christine Gledhill, whose studies are oriented toward film melodrama; John Cawelti, whose book Adventure, Mystery and Romance deals with formula stories and includes a chapter on literary melodrama; and Robert B. Heilman in Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience, which focuses mostly on drama. However, the characteristics of melodrama, as seen by these critics, need to be classified.

In an attempt to organize the various characteristics of melodrama drawn from these various critical sources and to ensure the coherence of our definition of melodrama, one can draw on Gérard Genette's work on narratology. Indeed, his analysis, as it appears in Terry Eagleton's brief summary of Genette's work, defines formalist linguistic concepts which are easily adaptable to the analysis of various artistic expression:

> In his *Narrative Discourse* (1972), Genette draws on a distinction in narrative between *récit*, by which he means the actual order of events in the text; *histoire*, which is the sequence in which those events 'actually' occurred, as we can infer from the text. (Eagleton, 105)

While Genette makes clear that *récit/histoire* can be applied to literature and drama, such film critics as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have used the same distinction in their formalistic approach to cinema, calling it *plot* and *story* (84). This equivalence between

Genette's terms of *récit* and *histoire* and those from Bordwell and Thompson's definitions means that the concepts of narrative and the distinction between *plot* and *story* can be applied to various narrative types.

However, Genette's term of *narration*, which designates "the act and process of telling a story" (Eagleton, 107), is equivalent to the "performance" of the text, something somewhat conceivable in the case of a movie or a play but much less descriptive of the process of reading a novel which is in general a personal and silent interior process. I would like therefore to introduce another notion which will also deal with "how the story is told" and at the same time will refer to elements present both in the cinematic and literary melodrama. This concept, different from the narrative itself, will designate the qualities within the melodramatic narrative by which the artist through his/her style attempts to arouse certain feelings and reactions in the reader (or viewer). This term will be designated as *modes of melodrama*, as it has more to do with the kind of effects that the melodramatic text intends to have on the audience/reader than the narrative itself. Thus, *modes of melodrama* presents also the advantage of being applicable indiscriminately to novel, drama, and cinema. In film studies, for instance, it corresponds to Bordwell and Thompson's definition of film style (262). With the main distinction between *narrative* and *modes of melodrama* established, one can now give a working definition of melodrama structured around these two critical terms. To do so, we must discuss what elements of narrative are characteristic of melodrama and what typical stylistic effects of melodramas a melodramatic text should try to evoke. Genette's notions of *récit/histoire* (*plot/story*) will be used further in the Chapter 3 in order to analyze the narrative structure of the novel.

If narrative and modes of melodrama constitute the framework in which the general characteristics of melodrama can be classified, it is necessary to outline first the principles at the base of such distinctive features. All critics agree that the characteristics of melodrama are in part shaped by its purpose: that is to say, to provide its consumer with entertainment and escape. However, "high" literature

also offers entertainment and escape to the reader, but it is a different type of pleasure, as Gledhill points out by comparing melodrama with realism, modern and post-modern literature (Gledhill here cites from Peter Brooks):

> While the drive of realism is to possess the world by understanding it, and the modern and post-modern explore in different ways the consequences of this ambition's disillusion, the central drive of melodrama is *to force meaning and identity* from the inadequacies of language, 'making large, but unsubstantiable claims on meaning'. [my emphasis] (33)

Thus, the melodrama is mainly organized to lead to "the clear establishment of poetic justice in the form of a happy or *morally* satisfying ending" (Cawelti, 262). More precisely, "melodrama moves from a sense of injustice and disorder to an affirmation of a benevolent moral order in the universe" (Cawelti, 262). Now, how can such a moral reading plastered on reality satisfy the reader's search for enjoyment and escape? According to Cawelti's analysis, melodrama fulfills two types of its consumer's impulses which are paradoxically opposed and can never be reconciled in the real world: the human yearning for "order and security" (16) as well as the desire for excitement which can be generated only by challenging to the boring world of order and security (16). Christine Gledhill pushes the analysis further by noting the parallel existing between this twofold psychological need and the always shifting socio-cultural forces at work in melodrama and society at large:

> As melodrama leaves the nineteenth century behind, whose moral outlook it materialised, these two levels [realism and melodrama's moral perspectives] diverge, and it becomes a struggle between atavistic symbols and the discourses that reclaim them for new constructions of reality. (37)
> Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse. (38)

Thus, from somewhat different approaches to the study of melodrama, Gledhill and Cawelti uncover the same crucial features of melodrama: the enjoyment and escape it gives to its consumer through the creation of a

world of "moral" fantasy and through the disproportionate intensity of feelings it incites. Furthermore, the melodramatic fictive world is at the same time close to and removed enough from the socio-cultural reality of the consumer in order to make possible the resolution of psychological and socio-cultural conflicts which in reality cannot be solved. In order to cover up this paradox, melodrama offers a twofold solution: according to Cawelti (264), the aesthetics of melodrama rely in part on the principle of "simplification," which allows the creator of melodrama to present the resolution of conflicts in a simplified world among simpler characters (whereas in the complexity of reality no solution to these conflicts is to be found). As Cawelti further notes (264), another important principle of melodrama is "intensification," which includes all the narrative and aesthetic devices used by the creator of melodrama in order to increase the reader/viewer's emotional reaction. In a way, simplification and intensification are two complementary aesthetic principles of melodrama, since intensification, by involving the emotions of the reader/viewer, helps cover up the possible contradictions caused by the "simplification" through the reader's enjoyment of the work. However, if, as Cawelti notes, in order to enhance the reader/viewer's experience, the melodramatist resorts to various techniques of aesthetic simplification and intensification (264) which permit the artist to present a solution within the melodrama where none is ever to be found in the real world, these "simplifications" and "intensifications" must be kept within the range of plausibility. In a way, the creator of melodrama has to intensify the reader/viewer's experience and to present a simplified version of the world but without threatening too openly the sense of plausibility. Gledhill also underlines the limitation of melodramatic aesthetics within the plausible which she describes as the "reality principle": that is, "the standard imperative imposed by the bourgeois aesthetic devotion to realism" (30).

If simplification, intensification, and plausibility are essential key elements in the melodramatic process of forcing a moral interpretation and the resolution of socio-historical and psychological contradictions within a fictive universe, they simultaneously underlie

all the characteristics of melodrama: thus, both simplification and intensification combine to generate all characteristics of melodrama whether, first, they belong to the narrative or, second, they describe the modes of melodrama. Finally, plausibility plays a balancing role in the effects of simplification and intensification, as we will ultimately see when we discuss the problem of evaluating the achievements of the narrative and modes of melodrama.

In melodrama's narrative, simplification and intensification determine the narrative structure and mechanisms as well as the narrative characters themselves. After examining how simplification and intensification are at work in melodrama's characters, we will see how these two concepts shape melodrama's plot structure, thereby defining the characteristics of melodramatic narrative.

According to Robert B. Heilman (and echoed by most of the other critics), characters in melodrama, contrary to characters in tragedies, "are whole rather than divided, and the conflict is not within them but between them and various forces outside themselves" (Heilman, 81). Obviously, the "quasi-wholeness" of characters in melodrama is caused by the necessity to simplify and to intensify. Cawelti mentions two degrees or types of character simplification in "formula stories" and, therefore, in melodrama. In addition, he relates these two kinds of simplification to two different functions assumed by characters in melodrama (Cawelti,18-19). According to Cawelti, some characters serve as an idealized self-image to the reader/viewer who identifies himself/herself with them and experiences intensely through them positive or negative resolutions of conflicts (which are not necessarily solvable at all in real life). Indeed, whereas tragedy, realism, modernism and post-modernism make the reader/viewer experience the limitations and contradictions of the world through the reader/viewer's identification with a divided character whose split nature is central to the work, melodrama intensifies the viewer/reader's experience by his/her identification with characters who are superachievers of some sort. Thus, these characters in melodrama have a clear drive to act according to some definite central desire that defines them; consequently, they are not susceptible to being taken over by the

division which accompanies impossible dilemmas. The experience is intense because through them the reader lives the resolution of conflicts difficult to achieve within the complexity of the world, a resolution rendered possible and acceptable by the simplification and moralization of the world of melodrama. If these simplified superachievers dynamically fulfill the need of escapism and thrills, other characters fulfill the reader/viewer's need for order and security (Cawelti, 19). This second character type in melodrama is not only built around a dominant trait or desire, but it is representative of a stereotype already existing in the reader/viewer's social-historical environment. Thus, the function of this type is to reinforce or to pull fundamental and traditional values into the world of melodrama which will then allow a moral reading of this fictive world. In a way, they not only satisfy a human need for stability, but as Cawelti notes (19), they allow the reader/viewer to escape from reality toward "the golden past." It is possible to summarize the characteristics of these two kinds of characters in melodrama by linking them to Gledhill's analysis of the ideological tension at work in melodrama. If all the characters in melodrama tend to be undivided, the heavily stereotyped ones are part of the "atavistic symbols," whereas the superachievers tend to introduce "new constructions of reality" (Gledhill, 37). Finally, it is interesting to note how, thanks to their simplifications, both of these characters' types contribute considerably to the moral ordering of the world. In a way, that is how the moral becomes personal in melodrama, as is described by Gledhill (30).

As already mentioned above, Heilman not only emphasizes the "quasi-wholeness" of characters in melodrama, but he also connects this lack of conflict within the characters with the exteriorization of conflicts within the plot. Since the characters have highly moral connotations and since melodramas have predictable moral endings (some kind of resolution which reaffirms the existence of a moral order in the world), the narrative structure in melodrama is bound to be strongly standardized and therefore simple in its reading. Indeed, all melodramas roughly match Gledhill's narrative outline in which she defines essential steps of the plot, although in my opinion the

"villain" she mentions does not necessarily crystallize into a definite character but can be represented by the social situation of the central protagonist:

> Characteristically the melodramatic plot turns on an initial, often deliberately engineered, misrecognition of the innocence of a central protagonist. By definition the innocent cannot use the powers available to the villain; following the dictates of their nature, they must become victims, a position legitimated by a range of devices which rationalise their apparent inaction in their own behalf. Narrative is then progressed through a struggle for clear moral identification of all protagonists and is finally resolved by public recognition of where guilt and innocence really lie. (30)

However, from this standardized narrative structure (misrecognition of the innocence of the superachiever, the superachiever's initial powerlessness and subsequent victimization, the struggle for moral and social reinstatement, the final restoration of the moral ordering) a problem arises: because the consumer of melodrama is familiar with the plot formula through previous experience, the standardization of the narrative structure constitutes a clear simplification, but at the same time it does not account for readers' or viewers' craze for melodrama. In other words, how does the narrative structure contribute to the "intensification" of the reader/viewer's experience? Three characteristics of the melodramatic narrative structure combine to create intensification: the complication of plots; the delay in the resolution of predictable outcomes; the narrative mechanisms which prevent the characters from expressing themselves.

Concerning the complication of plots, Cawelti insists particularly on melodrama's characteristic need for intricate plot and subplots in order to intensify the reader's (as well as, in my opinion, the viewer's) experience:

> The writer must find an overarching structure sufficiently commodious to accommodate a vast variety of exciting incidents and a plethora of characters as well as a detailed discussion of the workings of major social institutions. To do this while still maintaining an ongoing excitement and suspense is no simple task of construction (266)

Therefore, the simplicity of the reader/viewer's experience tends to obliterate the difficulty and complexity of creating the intensification; this intensification requires an intricate system of plot and subplot as well as the ability of holding the reader/viewer's interest in a diffuse structure. The second technique of intensification "consists in delaying, longer than one would conceive it possible to delay, a conclusion which is inevitable and wholly foreseen" (T. S. Eliot quoted by Cawelti, 267). In this case, although the prolongation of delay might threaten the plausibility of the work, the technique of the delay allows the tension to run high by temporarily and repetitively casting doubts on the outcome which should be expected. Finally, Gledhill describes the last characteristic of melodrama, which serves to arouse intensification through the plot structure, when she notes that:

> To this end, [i.e. to apply pressure on the conventional and repressive discourses] melodrama utilises narrative mechanisms that create a blockage to expression, thereby forcing melodramatic enactments into alternative and excessive strategies to clarify the dramatic stakes. (30)

An illustration of such a "blockage to expression" could be a character's incapacity to communicate some information or feelings to another.

To summarize, narrative structure in melodrama functions basically according to a standardized formula which consists of four steps: misrecognition of the innocence of the superachiever; the superachiever's initial powerlessness and victimization; the struggle for moral and social reinstatement; the final restoration of moral ordering. Hence, an intricate system of subplots is tied to this basic narrative structure in an effort to heighten the intensification experienced by the consumer. Two other techniques geared to maintain the intensity are the series of unexpected events delaying or challenging the expected outcome and the narrative strategies blocking the characters' expression.

The modes of melodrama complement these narrative features through three striking components: *excess*, *immediacy*, and *spectacle*. If

stylistic *excess* is one of the characteristic effects which belong to the modes of melodrama, *immediacy* and *spectacle* are the other two stylistic features of melodrama which make melodrama so easy to recognize, whatever the media form being used.

Excess is the most striking of the elements of modes of melodrama since it is traditionally criticized as a call on the reader/viewer to overreact, "to feel happiness, sorrow, fear, or anger to a greater degree than the actual situation would seem to merit" (Cawelti, 264). If stylistic excess is obviously related to "intensification" of the reader-viewer's experience, its aesthetic purpose stretches beyond a simple "excess of effect over the cause" (Neale, 7). As Robert Lang emphasizes by citing the result of S. E. F. T.'s Weekend School on Melodrama, excesses, whether expressed through music, mise-en-scène, or language, "do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it" (25-26). Therefore, as several critics mention, stylistic excess is a way to express not only feeling, but what cannot be said by words or actions. In this perspective, excess "serve[s] the purpose of clarification, identification and palpable demonstration of repressed 'ethical and psychic' forces, which nevertheless constitute compelling imperatives" (Gledhill, 30, citing Brooks). Gledhill attributes this purpose to "the spectacle, moral polarization and dramatic reversal" (30). In a sense, stylistic excess tends to override the limitation of traditional moral values and language (cinematographic or written), and to express what the simplification left out.

In a way, immediacy is a stylistic trait which is both opposed and complementary to excess. In her comparison of melodrama, realism and modernism, Gledhill, quoting Peter Brooks, points out:

> Taking its stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and representation, it [melodrama] proceeds to force into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning. The signifier cannot cover the possibilities of the signified; nor will the melodramatic subject accept the gap between the self, its words and meaning laid bare by the post-structural project. Melodrama is above all a "language of presence and immediacy." (Gledhill, 33)

Therefore, immediacy creates the capacity of melodrama through some of its stylistic element to attribute instant moral significance to characters or events within its plot: the presence or existence of characters and events within the plot becomes significant by their instant inclusion in a moral reading of the world rather than by some explicit explanation or justification. Thus immediacy is a stylistic feature which serves simplification by luring the reader/viewer into an immediate moral reading of the fictional world without involving any careful mental understanding of it. In other words, immediacy includes all the stylistic devices used by the creator of melodrama in order to draw the reader/viewer into a world wherein such elements as the immediate experience of feelings, a kind of situation, or an image are the ultimate sources of knowledge (contrary to the intellectual process of analysis). In melodrama, the reading or viewing process itself offers through stylistic devices of immediacy the most complete instantaneous reading of the world without involving the reader's or viewer's intellectual analysis.

Spectacle is also a central stylistic feature in the aesthetics of melodrama. It is as well strongly tied to excess and immediacy since it always appears in combination with them. Cawelti defines spectacle as one of the most important methods of intensification and states that:

> The good social melodramatist makes us feel that his story is involved with large events of social or historical importance that usually eventuate in some massive public spectacle or event. Our excitement about large events intensifies our feeling about the significance of individual episodes and the way in which they critically affect the fate of characters. Usually there are one or more major public spectacles--a trial, a revolution, a terrible murder, or a war--at the heart of most social melodramas. (264-5)

As a subset of social melodrama, women's melodrama usually contains features of spectacle which serve to broaden the domestic circle into a larger social scale, although the public occasions in which spectacle occurs might draw less on historical or famous social episodes than social melodramas do. Thus, from Cawelti's remark on *spectacle* in social melodrama, one can assume that *spectacle* is recognizable both in

social and women's melodrama by its impressive dimension: the effect of grandiosity is at least as important as, if not more important than, the event it describes. In addition, the immediacy provided by a *spectacle* is more meaningful to the reader/viewer than the actual function of the event described within the work's narrative structure. Thus, one can define spectacle as a particularly striking expression of stylistic excess and immediacy equally combined in one event or scene (generally public), intensifying the reader/viewer's experience as well as providing him/her with ethical meaning by its mere presence in the narrative.

To this point we have seen how the principles of intensification and simplification determine the two types of characters and the standardization of the narrative structure as well as the narrative techniques in melodrama, as far as the narrative is concerned; we have also seen how these two principles are equally at the basis of the modes of melodrama, noting how the three central stylistic effects (excess, immediacy, and spectacle) revolve around these two key concepts. We need now to discuss briefly how plausibility plays a major role in the definition of a melodrama independent of the media in which it is represented.

In his chapter on social melodrama, Cawelti attempts to determine what narrative qualities we should expect in a "good" melodrama (266-7). Pointing out that the major artistic problems of melodrama are "the considerable diffuseness of the structure because of the concentration on striking individual incidents, and difficulties created by melodrama's inherently moralistic nature," Cawelti emphasizes that the artist's ability to create a successful melodrama "will depend on his ability to dramatize the moral order in sufficiently complex fashion that its operation allows for the trials and tribulations of the characters without basically threatening the reader's sense of a benevolent principle in action" (267). Therefore, the artist should not only have a clear understanding of the moral vision of his time (Cawelti, 267) but must also be able to give a new vitality to melodrama by inventing within the limits of the genre. That is to say, he/she must respect the limits of his/her audience's credibility. The

narrative, in spite of its simplified characters and its complex plot and subplot convolutions, must stay plausible.

As for the melodrama's characteristic stylistic elements of modes of melodrama as defined above, they must also stay within the range of plausibility, although excess in particular and spectacle to a lesser degree inherently challenge the sense of plausibility. Actually, the audience's senses of plausibility evolves with the socio-historical shifting of senses of reality and ethical values. What was plausible in the 19th century no longer corresponds to what is considered plausible in the 20th century. The crucial question of plausibility explains why melodrama is such a time-bound artistic form of expression and ultimately "tends to be the most perishable of popular story formulas" (Cawelti, 268), a point underlined by all the critics studying melodrama. Therefore, no serious study of works of melodrama can evade reference to the socio-cultural background of the time period in which the works have been created nor the artist's personal position within this background.

This working definition of melodrama, as it is constituted according to the principles of simplification, intensification and plausibility, will be used as a basis for the study of the aesthetic components and socio-cultural implications of Imitation of Life. Fannie Hurst's life and time period will be briefly examined in Chapter 2. It is particularly relevant to this study to examine both the melodramatic text and the socio-cultural and biographical context for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, melodrama is a particularly time-bound artistic form which necessitates a careful consideration of the particular socio-cultural background involved and the artist's position within it. Second, as mentioned above, there is a striking parallel between Fannie Hurst's life as a successful popular female writer, her concern with the social issues of her time, her fascination with repulsion toward ethnic diversity and the gender/racial relationship exposed in Imitation of Life.

CHAPTER 2: FANNIE HURST, HER TIME PERIOD, HER PERSONAL LIFE AND HER CAREER

Chapter 2 presents elements of Fannie Hurst's biography and aspects of her time period relevant to this study and is organized into three sections: Literary Background of Her Era (I); Her Personal Background (II); Compulsive Writer or Compulsive Career Woman (III).

I. LITERARY BACKGROUND OF HER ERA

One crucial aspect to take into account in order to understand Hurst's position as writer is the literary and social climate in which she wrote. Her sensitivity to women's issues, her paradoxical reluctance to be labelled as a "woman's writer," and the contempt with which literary critics considered her works in part derives from it.

Nowadays, many critics, such as Cecelia Tichi, Donald McQuade, Elaine Showalter, Nina Baym, and Wendy Steiner note the increasing social, cultural, and literary antagonism experienced by woman writers in the 1920s and 30s. This resurgence of an anti-feminine attitude, while certainly not the first one in literary history, duly contributed to the exclusion or underestimation of women's artistic contribution to American literary expression. Nina Baym, in her article "The Rise of the Woman Author," notes how the reputations of many women writers fell during Hurst's day:

> Their subsequent removal from the record is part of the literary history of a later day when exponents of various literary movements--especially post-Civil War realism and post-World War I modernism--found it convenient to allegorize women authors as exemplars of all that was wrong with literature, all that the new writers were committed to correcting and erasing. (305)

When Fannie Hurst started publishing her short stories in the early 1910s, that is to say just before the blooming of modernist rebellion against traditional standards, there were two main trends in American literature, one inherited from the genteel tradition and the other exhausting the naturalist vein. Although these two tendencies of American literature already crystallized a tension between feminine

versus male literary expression, as Steiner notes, women writers were still considered part of the canon, an attribution which drastically decreased with the anti-tradition and anti-middle class revolt of modernism (Steiner, 855):

> The split between intellectual and bourgeois also expressed itself in an extreme hostility toward women. Though in the 1910s the literary conflict between traditional gentility and rugged naturalism had been roughly aligned with female versus male writers, both approaches seemed viable as aesthetic strategies and were treated as significant social assessments. By the twenties, women writers had been almost completely routed from all but the popular taste, and anti-feminism had become a pervasive novelistic theme.

The re-emergence of anti-feminine attitudes has causes which are all pertinent and apparent in Hurst's writings and their central focus on issues about women and work. This brief survey of literary history will show, first, how Hurst's attitude as a writer was influenced by the changes in women's social roles and the subsequent changes in the conception of femininity. Second and quite paradoxical for a woman who often presented herself as a expert on women's issues, it will show how Hurst's ambiguous attitude toward feminism is related to a sudden setback of feminist issues in the 1920s and 30s, after World War I and the passing of the 19th Amendment.

At the turn of the century, women entered urban jobs in numbers which might seem ridiculously small today but which were the indication of an ongoing shift in the women's social status. According to Donald McQuade (724):

> in 1880, only 4 percent of all employed women worked in offices while the remainder were concentrated in agriculture. By 1890 the percent working in offices had risen to well over twenty. Thirty years later, women represented nearly 50 percent of all bookkeepers and accountants, and over 90 percent of all typists and stenographers.

Of course, this change in the demographic composition of the American work force had to be accompanied or even preceded by an evolution in the way society considered women. By the end of the 19th century, two feminine ideals rubbed shoulders but sharply contrasted with one another. The 19th century "Angel in the House" represented the ideal

domestic woman whose virtues and sexlessness constituted the last rampart of the domestic and egalitarian values of an agrarian America against the greediness and ruthlessness of the emerging capitalistic world. On the other hand, according to Cecelia Tichi (590), the "New Woman" appeared as early as the 1880s, and her image evolved and suffered caricatural distortions in the early decades of the 20th century. The ideal of the "New Woman" promoted new values based on personal fulfillment instead of selfless devotion. It asserted the woman's right to self-determination and fulfillment in work and sexuality outside the stifling domestic world. Both Cecelia Tichi's "Women Writers and the New Woman" and Elaine Showalter's "Women Writers Between the Wars" show how such an iconoclastic female figure was easily transformed into caricatures, in particular through the image of the flapper, in retaliation against the transgressions it was calling for. It is not surprising, then, to notice with Showalter (825) how writer such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald looked down on their literary female contemporary writers even if they were themselves indebted to female writers as Stein, Wharton and Cather. Ultimately, women writers were caught between a rock and a hard place. The facility with which the "New Woman" could be caricaturized and subverted induced most of the women writers to shun radical postures, as Hurst did somewhat later by refusing to be confused with hard-line feminists (Anatomy of Me, 244-5). Yet these same women writers could not relate to the "Angel in the House" without challenging it. By the 1920s and 1930s even if the entering of women into the urban work force had to be accepted as a fact, as the numerous working women characters figuring in Imitation of Life indicates, the dichotomy between the "Angel in the House" image and "New Woman" was still problematic. Enterprising upper-class women, including Fannie Hurst, were trapped between the stifling 19th conventional femininity, which was at odds with their own perception of womanhood, and the still socially and culturally unacceptable iconoclastic model of the "New Woman," which in many ways was more reflective of their own experience as women and writers. This dual vision of womanhood underlies Hurst's characters in Imitation of Life and prompts her to attempt, through the melodramatic narrative form, to

reconcile the gap between a traditional and an emerging radical vision of woman's social status.

Furthermore, the reasons for such changes in the perception of femininity and recognition of women artists in the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century shed further light on Hurst's situation as a female popular writer. Contrary to the situation in the first half of the 19th century, when women were encouraged to be the main providers of popular literature and were thereby "perceived as a sign of a rise in general standards of culture" (Nina Baym, 290), after World War I women were gradually banished from the literary canon (Showalter, 824-5). Several elements help to explain this backlash movement. First, as Gledhill notes, at the turn of the century for theater, literature and arts and somewhat later for the cinema, a shift occurred in cultural standards, one that discredited the formerly respected melodramatic and popular aesthetics and favoring realism. This shift resulted basically in a rupture between high masculine and popular low feminine expression:

> Recovery of realism and tragedy at the turn of the century as categories demarcating high from popular culture coincided with a re-masculinisation of cultural value. Realism came to be associated with (masculine) restraint and underplaying. It eschewed flamboyant characterisation in favour of psychological analysis, carried in verbal discourse and dialogue.... Sentiment and emotiveness were reduced in significance to "sentimentality" and exaggeration, domestic detail counted as trivia, melodramatic utopianism as escapist fantasy and this total complex devalued by association with a "feminised" popular culture. Men no longer wept in public. (34)

It is clear that the rejection of popular culture in favor of high culture hurt the cultural reputation of women writers since female authorship had thrived on the lack of (male) popular writers in the 19th century (Baym, 289-90) and had written primarily works of popular appeal. Spurred on by World War I, which boosted masculine attitudes and values, and by modernism, which reacted against tradition, especially the "genteel tradition" to which most of the "serious" female authors belonged, the anti-feminine trend shifted focus from popular to realist cultural standards, and even "serious" writers such as Willa

Cather and Edith Wharton "were scorned by critics of the 1930s as decorous relics of a bygone age" (Showalter, 825). This change was a cause of distress for young women writers such as Fannie Hurst:

> While this shift in female attitudes toward personal achievement caused anxiety and conflict for women planning literary careers in the 1920s and 1930s, hostility toward female authorship and feminine values in academia and the literary establishment further stigmatized women's writing. A country taking new pride in its cultural heritage after the war saw only weakness and sentimentality in the contribution women had made to our national literature. (825)

Fannie Hurst, as a writer of popular melodramas, was certainly not exempt from such anxiety. In fact, her autobiography reveals her resentment at being categorized as a popular writer and as a woman's writer (354):

> I find myself classified as a writer largely concerned with women. The impeachment is soft, but it irks. If true, my powers of self-appraisal will bear reappraisal.

Her anxiety sometimes translates into excessive inhibition in front of "serious" writers. Indeed, besides insisting on her insuperable shyness in front of other writers, she recognizes in her autobiography that she was not an adept participant within the famous literary meetings of the Village in the 1920s:

> I was in, but not exactly of, that era. The speakeasy world I knew by hearsay. All about us in Greenwich Village basement doors, come evening, began to open warily to those devotees of the bent elbow who gave the proper code ring of the bell....
> I was to meet most American top-line authors of that era, but with two or three exceptions we passed one another in the night. Some of them were more than my peers, and perhaps a sense of inferiority froze me. But even where I was not disturbed by any such feeling I did not seem to know how to fraternize. (217)

Moreover, several times in Anatomy of Me, she repeats the cutting remark that the president of a selective college literary was purported to have said--"I would rather be a classical failure, than a popular success like Fannie Hurst"--thereby justifying the fact that Hurst was never invited to join them (92). Notably this obsessive self-denigration

appears again in her biography, when Hurst describes her encounter with Willa Carter, whose talent inspired to her a sense of humbling awe (259). All these particulars indicate how affected self-conscious and painfully sensitive Fannie Hurst was by the response to her popular women-oriented novels, a sensitivity which is more understandable when analyzed within in the anti-feminine atmosphere of the 1920s and 30s.

Another qualifying particular which shows the impact of Hurst's literary background on her attitude to her writing and to social issues of interest to her resides in her ambiguous attitude toward feminism. If all of the above were not sufficiently deterrent to a young female writer, the setback experienced by the feminist movement after the adoption of the 19th Amendment in 1920 certainly contributed toward alienating women from radical movements in spite of the upsurge of anti-feminine attitudes. The suffragist movement had put forward women as the social group that was to bring about radical social changes once they were given the right to vote. The largely conservative attitude of women voters and the low turnout of women at the polls deeply shook feminist beliefs and caused disappointment and disillusionment (Showalter, 823). Thus, after World War I and the passage of the 19th Amendment, women, as writers and as a social group, failed to represent a radical political and aesthetic force. Furthermore, to make things worse, the setback of the feminist movement incited or consolidated an anti-feminine reaction even within the left-wing movements that were usually considered to be open to women's issues, according to Showalter:

> Leftist groups saw feminist issues as not only potentially divisive but also as less important than the struggle of the working class. Women's roles and needs were subordinated to those of workers, and women organizers were expected to sacrifice personal ambitions, family, and children for the good of the party. (830)

Since women's votes did not represent the progressive political weight expected by leftist groups, in the 1920s and 1930s women were shut out from any significant representation within the politically most radical groups, at a time when these had a strong impact on the cultural avant-garde. Thus, although Hurst was highly interested in and sensitive to women's issues, the radically overt feminist attitude was temporarily

outmoded at the time she started her career as a writer in New York. Therefore, Hurst's promulgation of women's and other social issues focused instead on the attempt to effect a reconciliation between radical and traditional values, rather than to upset utterly the traditional pattern.

This exploration of the literary and social background crucial to the period of Fannie Hurst's literary career renders her contradictory reactions regarding feminist issues more comprehensible. Although she could not avoid feeling belittled by being classified as a "woman's writer" in a time when social and literary circles erupted against the "feminisation of culture" (Steiner, Showalter, Gledhill), her popular stature as writer and her attempt to introduce feminine claims and to treat women's issues while taking into account the more traditional values that she promoted in popular novels such as Imitation of Life are crucial for the evolution of the social and literary treatment of femininity and women.

II. HER PERSONAL BACKGROUND

What first surprises anyone who studies Fannie Hurst is how her background seems contrary to her literary ambition and consequently what extraordinary energy and perseverance she demonstrated by achieving her aspiration to become a writer and by living an unconventional life. However, a second and closer look reveals striking parallels between her personal life and her ideas and approach as a writer and as a promoter of certain social issues. This part of our study aims to show how the following features of her biography tie in with her attitude as a writer and ultimately with the treatment she gives of characters in Imitation of Life, as it will be presented in Chapter 3: an unconventional child born in a too traditional family; an equivocal attitude toward her ethnic origins; her problematic position regarding marriage; and persons that clearly served as sources of inspiration for some of her characters.

Fannie Hurst was born to a Jewish, conservative middle-class couple, Samuel Hurst and Rose Koppel, around 1899(?)[1] in Hamilton, Ohio, on the maternal family estate to which her mother had returned for her birth. She lived in St. Louis most of her life, though occasionally visiting her mother's family in Hamilton, at least until 1910 when she moved to New York to fulfill her literary vocation. After the death in infancy of a younger sister, she remained the only child and describes herself at that time of her life as "a rather spoiled, overweight brat of a child, living snug as a bug in the middle-class middle-western so-called security of the pre-first-world-war era" (Anatomy of me, 6). Her father, originally from Mississippi, grew up in Memphis and ran a factory in St. Louis. According to Fannie, his handsomeness, his distinction, and his English, almost free of southern colloquialism, "gave the impression of culture" (5), although he would not read anything other than his two daily newspapers. Partly because of her father's emotional and physical remoteness, which contrasted sharply with his wife's boisterous and volcanic temper, Fannie admits to having little knowledge and interest in her paternal background and to feeling estranged from the male outside world (37), as many of the female characters do in her novels. On the other hand, through her mother's outspoken and warm character, Fannie was made sensitive to the female domestic world and her Bavarian Jewish peasant origins. Nevertheless,

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[1] In her autobiography Anatomy of Me, Fannie Hurst claims there are some uncertainties about the year of her birth because of inconsistencies in Hamilton, Ohio, birth records. Most critics, however, do not explicitly mention anything about it and even fewer indicate her full date of birth. In general, sources such as the New York Times (February 24, 1968) give October 18, 1889, as her date of birth. However, some other sources, such as the Dictionary of Literary Biography (151) cite October 19, 1889, as her birth date. Mary Rose Shaughnessy in Myths About Love and Woman (9) gave 1887 as Hurst's date of birth and states in a footnote that some biographies gave 1889 as the date of birth with Hurst's approval. Shaughnessy added that Hurst admitted the date was two years off. This uncertainty about her date of birth was obviously encouraged by the author herself and is one more occasion in which one can see how Hurst knew how to wrap herself in mysteries propitious to the shaping of her media image (see Brandimate's Fannie Hurst and Her Fiction [66-9] on Hurst's ability to promote her own image).

despite the differences between her parents and their backgrounds, neither accepted nor understood Fannie's literary ambition.

Thus, in order to become a writer, Fannie had to dedicate herself to bending the middle-class conventions according to which a girl should marry after completion of high school, and later she had to force herself upon the world of editors in order to get her works published. In the process, she spent "a round-trip fortune in stamps and long self-addressed envelopes," as her mother would put it (88). Fannie's struggle to become a writer is of particular relevance to a critique of her writing, since many of these biographical aspects can be traced throughout her depictions of women facing the working world in her works, especially so in Imitation of Life. Throughout her struggle to become a writer, in spite of many drawbacks, several elements favored her: right from the start, she found some emotional support in parental love offered her and the type of support her parents could not provide she found among her academic and editorial surrounding.

For instance, although her father was extremely conventional and conservative, he would always favor his daughter's intellectual inclinations in spite of the disrupting facts that it was not appropriate for a girl to be a writer nor had there ever been any writer in the Hurst family; "knowledge is power" was the motto he would repeat over and over, "like a broken record" (5) to his daughter, a motto which appears in Imitation of Life in the mouth of the patriarchal character, Mr. Pullman (Imitation of Life, 15). In many instances, her father's high respect for intellect was to help Fannie to overcome her mother's more materialistic aspirations for her daughter. In fact, just as the main character's mother in Hurst's novel prevented her daughter from getting any training which would have allowed her daughter to work, Rose Koppel Hurst did not have the same awe for knowledge as Samuel Hurst did but instead thought dance, piano lessons and nice, expensive if tawdry clothes to be far more useful for her daughter in order to get a good husband, since "men are afraid of smart girls" (41). For her, college was "the barren wastelands...where femininity died on the vine, where no eligible man entered, where parents of erudite unmarried daughters buried their dead hopes" (79). However, even if she did not view

favorably Fannie's inclination for books and writing, her devotion to her daughter always prevented her from taking any serious action against her daughter's compulsive literary aspirations. Actually, Rose was on several occasions the first one to give in and to force her husband to let Fannie have it her own way. With her father's support of her intellectual pursuits and with her mother's loving indulgence in case of crisis, Fannie was more or less able to do whatever she decided. In the end and against her parents' will, she lived a totally unconventional and unacceptable life if judged according to their moral and social standards.

Nevertheless, her unusual way of life never completely severed the emotional ties existing between them, although both parents and daughter suffered from their relentless struggle; her parents always attempted to curb her nonconformist behavior, but Fannie got her own way:

> Both Mama and Papa did live to enjoy some of the results of my nonconformity, but looking back, I marvel at my capacity of ruthlessness in leaving the home so concentrated on me. The fierceness of that concentration was doubtless part of the compulsion. (Anatomy of Me, 89)

Thus, in her personal life, Fannie Hurst had to find, in a more or less painful way, a balance between the traditional expectations of her beloved parents and her relentless drive for literary achievement which rendered her so unusual and radical. Not surprisingly, there is a striking parallel between the emotional equilibrium or compromise Hurst had to reach with her parents and her search through her writings and social work of a middle way between radicalism and tradition.

But this compromise found through love between parents and daughter did not come without pain, which could sometimes take the form of rejection or hate. Indeed, this aspect of Hurst's complex relationship to her parents and origins appears most clearly in her ambivalence about her Jewish identity, an ambiguous attitude which surfaces, although sometimes indirectly, in her depiction of racial and ethnic relationships in Imitation of Life. On one hand, Hurst used her mother's Jewish Bavarian background wherein a mixture of German and English still constituted an eclectic but colorful common language as a

great source of literary inspiration which awakened her interest in the many ethnic groups she later encountered in New York--Hurst's own favorite among her novels, Lummox (1923), has a Scandinavian maid as heroine, for instance. But, on the other, she resented having to present herself as Jewish, preferring to claim herself as "American" (Anatomy of Me, 90, 102), probably because she could not stand her parents' hermetic segregation of "Unsere Leute" from "kikes" (Eastern European Jews) and "gentiles" (non-Jews), which made her so different from the rest of the crowd. This ambivalence toward her Jewish inheritance and, consequently, toward various ethnic and racial groups explains one of Hurst's most paradoxical positions: on one hand, her writings and social activism show signs of her appreciation of the richness of ethnic and racial diversity--she was involved in meetings and lectures lobbying for "issues of concern to blacks" (Brandimarte, 89) and did some volunteer social work on Ellis Island (Anatomy of Me,247-8)--but nevertheless, Imitation of Life is also scattered with derogatory descriptions of Jewish, Italian, and black people and other ethnic groups.

The one point on which parents and daughter disagreed and suffered most was the issue of marriage, an experience which is clearly reflected in Hurst's depiction of marriage in Imitation of Life. First, after her graduation from Washington University in 1905 (Brandimarte, 38), her parents tried to put a halt to their daughter's impossible literary ambition by organizing a "marriage hunt" in which even a non-Jewish beau was better than no beau at all. In spite of three distressing trips to resort towns, no suitable suitors were found, from Fannie's parents' perspective, and Hurst did not overcome the depression into which their opposition to her prospective literary move to New York had thrown her until they let her go. Having valiantly resisted her parents' traditional marriage scheme, Hurst was finally allowed to move to New York where she broke her parents' hearts again a few years later: after breaking shamelessly an engagement with a Jewish scientist and university professor--who in her parents' eyes would have been the perfect son-in-law but who also would never have let her dedicate herself to her literary ambition (Anatomy of Me, 188)--she ended up in

1915 marrying secretly a Russian-born Jewish musician, Jack Danielson. This caused great distress to her whole family, aunts and uncles included, because of their prejudice against any non-western Jewish suitor, especially so when this beau did not even have a decent profession such as business man (Anatomy of Me, 266-8, 256, 233). Fannie's father could never resolve himself to accepting this marriage, and his relationship, if one can call it a relationship at all, with his son-in-law always remained strained.

Furthermore, even if her family's disapproval were not enough to make her loathe the traditional conception of marriage, Hurst's unconventional marriage to Jack Danielson became years later a source of social scandal which would do so. After five years of an unconventional and experimental marriage arrangement, during which Danielson and Hurst kept separate apartments and sets of friends in order to sustain each other's professional careers and to keep "the dew on the rose" (Brandimarte, 70-73), a reporter discovered their secret marriage. The unconventional marital arrangement launched a series of passionate reactions from the media, ranging from outraged and humorous rejection to enthusiastic support (Brandimarte, 73-76), during which both spouses left town to flee the press (72). Finally, even as the scandal and media agitation dwindled, the event became probably Hurst's most visible contribution to the evolution of woman's status rendered possible by the notoriety of her public image: it crystallized with the inclusion in 1920s vocabulary of expressions like "a Fannie Hurst marriage" or "a two-breakfast-a-week marriage" to describe this sort of unconventional marital arrangement which then became fashionable in some circles (Brandimarte, 76). However, this experience, coupled with her family's attitude regarding her marriage, undoubtedly left Hurst disheartened and particularly aware of the stifling social burden traditional marriage could present for women who intended to dedicate themselves to a professional career. This may account for the rather bleak portraits of married women in Imitation of Life in which hardly any of them are presented as happily married wives.

Finally, a more direct way in which a parallel can be drawn between Hurst's literary expression and her personal life is through the

obvious influence on her writings that some persons in her surrounding had. Indeed, although in her autobiography she denies having any direct inspiration from "real life"(Anatomy of me, 33), several of her family members and acquaintances were used by Hurst in Imitation of Life as models for her characters: her father; her grandfather; her first beau who proposed to her, a Mr. Barr, and some of the editors she met, such as Marion Reedy. For instance, her father's emotional and physical remoteness (Anatomy of Me, 4) along with her maternal grandfather's patriarchal attitude, evident in his cutting ethnic wit that allowed him unchallenged to reign over his four sons, three daughters and mirthlessly overwork wife (Anatomy of Me, 30-34), must have left a strong impression on her. Indeed, their characteristic traits, remoteness and unchallenged patriarchal power, constitute also the characteristics of the main father character, Mr. Chipley, in Imitation of Life (see study in Chapter 3). Moreover, Mr. Pullman, the main character's husband in the novel strangely resembles Hurst's first beau, Mr. Barr, a heavy-set and self-taught man who was the meticulous boarder of "Mae Ames Deatheridge's sister-in-law" (Anatomy of Me, 97) and who at one point of their courtship bragged about the paper on Abraham Lincoln he had read before his church literary society and which according to Hurst, he had "gleaned from encyclopedia, or textbook" (103)--an incident which parallels the "framed program of the Pleiades Club, the one on which Mr. Pullman was announced to read his paper on Abraham Lincoln" (Imitation of Life, 50). Finally, and more insidious, is the influence of misogynist editors. In particular, the first editor Fannie Hurst faced was William Marion Reedy from the Reedy's Mirror whom she went to see, teased by the fact that he was not giving her any financial compensation for the publication of "Ain't Life Wonderful" and that he failed to return another of her rejected manuscripts (Anatomy of Me, 99). Although their long discussion fascinated her, she could not help being shocked by the coarseness of his highly sexualized talk (100-2). This shock parallels Hurst's main character's humiliation during her job search and her attempt to secure a business loan, scenes in which men make open sexist remarks to her (Imitation of Life, 75, 134-6). Hurst's description of the position of women in the working world, therefore,

stems directly from her own experience, reflecting some of the misogynist attitudes she encountered and some of the helpful responses she received from the men and mentors she encountered during her rise toward becoming "The Highest Paid Short Story Writer in the World" (title of the New York Time article mentioned by Brandimarte on page 20).

In conclusion, it is clear that Fannie Hurst drew considerable inspiration from her personal experience and that one cannot evaluate fully her writing without taking into account first her ambivalent position toward women's issues which led her to look for a middle term between tradition and radical changes, her own ethnic dilemma, and the persons and events in her life which deeply shaped her attitude toward such issues as marriage, working women, ethnicity, segregation and racism. One other powerful factor remains to be examined: the charismatic influence of her public image as the ultimate "lady-writer."

III. COMPULSIVE WRITER OR COMPULSIVE CAREER WOMAN

In order to understand better the perspective in which Hurst's novel Imitation of Life fits, it is useful to take a look first at the author's overall literary career and, second, at the impact of her public image on her career.

Brandimarte divides her study of Fannie Hurst's literary career into three periods. The first lasts from the early 1910s, when she started to publish her short stories in slick New York magazines, up to the early 1920s, when she turned to writing novels. In this initial phase she established herself as a short story writer and became so popular that the magazines which previously had refused her short-stories were buying former rejects and even entered into financial competition to publish her stories which were circulation boosters (Brandimarte, 51-2). The second period extends from the publication of her first novel in 1921 to the mid-1930s. In this second stage of her career, Hurst continued to publish short stories in magazines, although at a slower rate, and she resolutely turned to the writing of novels in a conscious effort to consolidate her sudden success story into a long

lasting career (Anatomy of Me, 215, 240). Therefore, despite her greater attraction to the short-story form (Brandimarte, 210-1), Fannie started writing novels at a rate of one every year and a half or two. Thus, by the mid-1930s she had completed her most popular novels--Lummox (1923), Back Street (1931), Imitation of Life (1933)--and twenty-one movies had been based on her novels or short stories according to Brandimarte by 1935 (303-6). After the publication of Great Laughter in 1936, however, her literary creativity slowed. The third phase of Hurst's career began sometime during the difficult writing process of Lonely Parade (1942) and the publication of her last short story collection, We Are Ten, in 1937 and ends with her death in 1968. In this last period, Hurst hardly published any short stories, the last one dating from 1942 according to Brandimarte's bibliography, and the time span between her novels increased. In her interview in the New York Times Book Review of January 25, 1942 (2,18), which followed the long delayed publication of Lonely Parade, Fannie Hurst not only admitted to Robert Van Gelder that she had encountered unusual difficulties in writing this novel, but an important part of the interview was dedicated to her feelings about and attitude toward the bad reviews she was getting. The significance of such a topic in her interview is even more evident when one compares this piece with previous interviews in which her glamorous and unconventional way of life was the main subject of discussion. Her slower writing rate, the disappearance of her short stories from magazines, and the public's greater sensitivity to the negative literary appraisals of her works were signs of her waning fame as an author during this last phase of her literary career, although she was to remain an important public figure epitomizing the "lady-writer" until her death.

From this short overview of her career, there is no doubt that Hurst was an extremely prolific writer. Indeed, even Zora Neale Hurston could not avoid recognizing Hurst's irrepressible need to write in spite of her sometimes mixed feelings about her famous patron; she describes Hurst as "one moment a serious worker controlled by her genii, the next instant playing make believe with all her heart" in an interview for the Saturday Review in October 1937 (quoted in Hemenway, 21). Fannie

Hurst was born to write and became a compulsive and prolific writer: she wrote her first poem at age seven and started to write short stories at age eleven (Brandimarte, 24). By the time she wrote Imitation of Life, she had become a public figure of first importance, a prestigious status which had allowed her to dedicate her efforts toward acting as spokeperson for various social issues, such as issues of concern to blacks and working women, on public housing, birth control, abolition of the death penalty and much more, according to Brandimarte:

> Many reformers appealed to Hurst during her public life to endorse their stands and advocate their causes. And she refused almost none of them... (82) Although it is impossible to cover all of the more than fifty years of her public life, it is possible to mention a few of them that helped to earn her the titles of activist and feminist. (83)

By her writing, she not only became famous in her own time, but she became a social phenomenon and personality who pervaded the media of the time as the ultimate "image of the successful lady-writer," an image which was greatly fostered by the media itself (Brandimarte, 95), as Brandimarte points out:

> readers all across the country read her syndicated short stories and editorials as well as her views on fashion, war, youth, technology, home decor, marriage, and working women. Radio audiences listened to her many broadcasts, while a later audience saw her television talk show, "It's a Problem."
>
> The ubiquitous writer, whose stories of appealing heroines attracted a great following, made news with her unconventional marriage, her liberal politics, and her showplace residence. She popularized the "Fannie Hurst dress," a "Fannie Hurst picture," and a "Fannie Hurst marriage." People quoted her similes, contributed to her bags of fan mail, and defended her against academic critics. Magazine publishing circles knew her short stories as circulation boosters. Most of her novels became best-sellers... Hollywood based twenty-eight films on her plots.... The popularity of her fiction made her "the highest paid short story writer in the world." (Brandimarte, 2-3)

In fact, with her success came her growing impact on the American public as the embodiment of the successful lady-writer, and her public media

image made her success almost self-generative, as Brandimarte remarks (66):

> But by 1916 her personality had become as big a commodity as her writing. In fact, by this time it is difficult to know whether her fiction made her a celebrity or whether the appeal of her personality and the accounts of her success sold her books. Hurst apparently knew what all this meant: society had given her an image and she had to maintain it.

Thus, she no longer needed mentors, and as Cynthia Brandimarte beautifully demonstrates in her 1980 dissertation, Fannie Hurst excelled in the manipulation of her public image in order to maintain her fame: she lived in the right areas of New York City (66-67); she cultivated her outfits and furniture arrangements (68-9); she was infatuated with calla lilies, a flower which became her emblem; she created a dramatic dimension in any of her public appearance or interview (68-9), probably an outlet for her frustrated dramatic career. Like her main character in Imitation of Life, Bea, Fannie helped to shape her public image, but the newspapers also gave various versions of her success story and "when the details of Hurst's life did not parallel the myth, journalists changed the facts to fit the legend" (Brandimarte, 57). Here again, Hurst drew from her biographical experience to boost her inspiration and perhaps the success of her novels. There is no doubt that a strong similarity exists between the novel's main character and Hurst herself, a similarity which might not have escaped the Fannie Hurst readership well-acquainted with her life and media image.

To conclude on Hurst's career and public image, one can say first that Hurst was a compulsive writer and often drew her inspiration from her personal life to give a genuine tone to her novel, which might partly explain her incredible success with female readers in the 1920s and 30s. However, Fannie Hurst as writer and public persona ostensibly struck a chord in the collective imagination of her contemporaries by treating in her novels topics which genuinely preoccupied them and her as well. She also knew how to use her media image in order to boost her own success.

What has to be kept in mind before going on to the analysis of Imitation of Life is how strong is the existing connection between the author's life and her writing. Obviously, not only does she take her inspiration from her personal experience but she also writes her own conflicts and uneasiness into her novels. Hurst's conflictual relationship with her parents and her dilemma about her Jewishness bear on her writings. Moreover, the particular conflict between the unconventional daughter and traditional parents appears as an important component of Hurt's fiction, as this study of Imitation of Life will show. However, in spite of the existing tension between Fannie's aspirations and her parents' conventional expectations, the love they bore for each other undoubtedly played an important role in making possible her achievements and prompted her to find a middle way between both traditionalism and the radical feminism which were out of style in the 1920s and 30s. Thus, her sometimes traditional stand and definite conservative background do not preclude her sensitivity to more progressive ideas, but they nevertheless prevents her from adopting any hard-line activism on any kind of issue. This conflict between traditional and progressive impulses pervades not only Hurst's feminism but her attitude toward various ethnic groups, Blacks, and even her own Jewishness, as the study of Imitation of Life will show. In other words, at worst Hurst is a traditionalist in progressive disguise and at her best a reformist who finds herself bound within the tradition against which she struggles. In her life and in her writings, Hurst tries to reconcile the conservatism of tradition and the inexorable needs for change, as she expresses it in this excerpt of an interview in the Journal-American ("Fannie Hurst Suggests Divorce Cure, " Journal-American File at Humanities Research Center in Austin (HRC), quoted in Brandimarte, 41):

> We live in tradition, yes, even women like me. I'm as modern as anything--from the teeth out. But inside of me are hundreds of grandmothers influencing me, holding me to old thoughts, old ways, old traditions which I have constantly to argue and combat.

Being a "woman's writer" in the 1920s, when American culture experienced a resurgence of anti-feminist attitude, was definitely not an easy task, especially for someone who wrote popular fiction. That is why a re-evalution of Hurst's novel is badly needed and why one cannot blame her too harshly for using her image as the ultimate "lady-writer." If it is undeniable that such a powerful social image might have boosted Fannie Hurst literary success, her popularity also bore heavily upon the evaluation of Fannie Hurst's works and usually not for the best. Ultimately, Fannie Hurst had good reason to turn over painfully in her mind the allegation "I would rather be a classical failure, than a popular success" (Anatomy of Me, 92) since the weight of her public image finally shattered her literary reputation.

CHAPTER 3:STUDY OF THE NOVEL

This contextual and textual analysis of Imitation of Life, taking into account the author's biography and time period and based on the definition of melodrama established in Chapter 1, is divided into four parts: the summary of the plot (I); the discussion of the narrative (II); the study of the modes of melodrama (III); and the evaluation (IV).

I.SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL'S PLOT

As the analysis of the novel approaches, it becomes necessary summarize briefly the plot of the novel. A more detailed summary is also available in the Appendix located at the end of this study.

In her novel Imitation of Life, Fannie Hurst tells us about Bea Pullman, born Chipley, and her success story, that of the poor, young widow struggling for survival becoming the self-made business woman at the head of a large corporation who worries about her public image. The novel goes through four different stages in Bea's life and personal development, mostly in chronological order.

The first period (Chapter 1-13) goes from the seventeen-year-old girl who grieves over her mother's body to the innocent young widow who is left without any socially acceptable means to support her crippled father and her new-born baby girl, Jessie, after the accidental death of Mr. Pullman in a train crash. Initially, the innocent and inexperienced Bea lives a thoughtless existence in Atlantic City, between two caring parents whose restrained emotional behavior inadequately prepares her to face the real world. After her mother's death, as she tries to take on her mother's role in the household, Bea begins to face the precariousness of being a woman socially and financially dependent on men in a society which hardly allows women to work outside their home. When her father's health deteriorates, she readily accepts the proposal of Mr. Pullman, an unattractive and insensitive middle-aged man who was her mother's house boarder. Although she finds herself sexually indifferent to her husband and must adapt herself to his demands, Bea is

at first quite satisfied with her new status as married woman since it secures her future. After her father's stroke, which confines him to a wheelchair, her marital bliss lessens: she suffers from having to witness, powerless, her husband's demeaning behavior toward her useless and dependent father; her frustrated father retaliates by becoming more and more tyrannical in his domestic demands and by abusing her, without regard for her pregnancy.

The second period (Chapters 14-25) shows Bea's struggle to provide care for her family and her efforts to secure her financial and social situation. After searching without success for a job, she takes on her husband's sideline job delivering maple syrup cans to restaurants and hotels. She uses his business cards, which conveniently bear the same initials as hers. After her father's second stroke, Bea is forced to take a live-in maid to care for her baby daughter and her crippled father while she is prospecting for new customers. Delilah, an overweight Black woman, and her amazingly almost white baby daughter join the household. With her human warmth and her culinary talents, Delilah is a blessing for the overstressed Bea. Besides being the stereotypical Black "mammy," Delilah is soon transformed into a walking trademark by Bea who decides to market Delilah's waffles and maple syrup heart-shaped candies. Gradually and almost unwillingly since she is a "curtain hemmer at heart," Bea launches a new kind of diner specializing in waffles and maple-syrup products, first on the Atlantic City boardwalk and later in New York (Chapters 14-25).

In the third period, (Chapters 26-32), Bea enjoys a high standard of living with an apartment on Central Park as she works to expand her initial formula of catering into a chain of restaurants present in most of the large American cities. However, along with financial success, new domestic and professional problems arise: Bea has to deal with tense situations at home, such as Jessie's aloofness toward her and Peola's problematical racial identity. She has to learn how to keep and to use her public image for her own benefit.

In the fourth period (Chapters 33-47), the plot suspense switches from Bea's materialistic success story to her search for sentimental happiness. As success has isolated her from the human contact and

warmth she was enjoying when she was running her first B. Pullman restaurants in New York, Bea starts feeling a void which her workaholic lifestyle does not fulfill. She gradually falls in love with her eight-years younger general manager, Frank Flake, who at first is blindly unaware of her changing feelings and then mildly responds to them. Although Bea does not realize it, the return of her beautiful blond young daughter from her fancy overseas private college changes the sentimental equation. The book ends abruptly on Bea's state of shock when Jessie asks her for her maternal blessings as Jessie and Flake have decided to get married. The novel, however, gives hints of Bea's lonely future, her dragging her crippled father along with her from one foreign city to another and one luxurious hotel to another, as she takes care of her international branches spread around the world.

Besides the main plot centered on Bea's success story and sentimental failure to build a real home and family, the Black subplot intermittently appears based on the relationship between the picturesque, selfless, religious, credulous and conservative Delilah and her restless "almost white" daughter, Peola. Because Peola and Jessie were about the same age, they were raised together, and Jessie as a young child developed a devotion for Peola which Bea will sometime envy, as her daughter tended to shrink from her embrace (Chapter 19). The only one to worry about the lack of racial differentiation in which Peola is raised is Delilah, as she fears this would lead her "amazingly white" daughter to reject her own race in the same way her father did (Chapter 22). Therefore, she persistently puts Peola in her own place by always giving Jessie precedence, an attitude which frustrates Peola more and more as she grows older. Ultimately, after some clashes stemming from the children's growing perception of the racial differences between them, Peola's and Jessie's relationship has to be broken for Peola's sake: Peola throws a fit against Delilah and faints when Jessie inadvertently called her "nigger" during one of their childish arguments (Chapter 26). While Peola continues to attend the local public school, Jessie is sent away to a fancy private school for girls to receive the best education, and the tension momentarily vanishes. However, Peola's racial identity problem does not disappear

(Chapter 30). Some time later, as the overly concerned Delilah brings her daughter's galoshes and mackintosh to school in order to protect her from a sudden downpour, the Black woman abruptly discovers that her eight-year-old daughter has passed for white at school for two years. This time, Peola's anger at her disruptive mother is such that she has a nervous breakdown. In an effort to put back Peola on the right racial track, Delilah sends her daughter away to Washington, D.C., as boarder and pupil of a respected colored teacher (Chapter 32).

Once an adult, however, Peola does not resolve herself to live as a Black in a white world and, in spite of all her mother's efforts, she passes herself for white and marries a young engineer whose name and identity she does not reveal. The last confrontation between Peola and Delilah happens one night when Peola unexpectedly comes back home from Seattle, where she was working as a librarian, in order to drag from her mother the promise of never interfering in her life with her husband-to-be. This moment is one of the melodramatic climaxes of the book, as Delilah faints after having found the strength to comply to Peola's demand and granting her her motherly forgiveness (Chapter 39). Delilah is so shaken by her daughter's behavior that her health starts declining and, kissing Bea's ankles, she dies as much from a broken heart as from her overlooked abdominal protuberance which causes her unbearable suffering (Chapter 42). Bea scrupulously respects Delilah's only earthly wish, besides seeing her daughter coming back to her race: that of having a lavish funeral ceremony and procession in Harlem which Bea, Frank, and Mr. Chipley attend. An empty seat marks Peola's absence (Chapter 43).

II. DISCUSSION OF THE NARRATIVE

As Chapter 1 has shown, the purpose of melodrama, whether in written or visual form, is to provide its readers/viewers with entertainment and escape with the final establishment of a moral ordering of the world. In the definition of melodrama established there, simplification, intensification and plausibility were the three principles at the base of the aesthetics of melodrama. The next two

sections on the narrative and the modes of melodrama in this third chapter aim ultimately to evaluate first how Fannie Hurst uses simplification and intensification within the range of plausibility in her novel in order to thrill her readers on one hand and, on the other, how she attempts to present a moral reading of the world which contains a satisfactory resolution of conflicts which cannot be successfully resolved in reality, that is, in the socio-cultural context of her time. In exploring Fannie Hurst's ability to create melodrama, it is convenient to use the structure outlined in the previous analysis of melodrama in Chapter 1.

Following the working definition of melodrama established in the first chapter, the second part of the analysis of the novel will study the narrative and a third one the modes of melodrama in Hurst's Imitation of Life. The narrative of melodrama is further subdivided into narrative structure (A), narrative techniques (B), and characterization (C) which will constitute therefore the three subheadings of the part analyzing the narrative of Hurst's novel.

A. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

In Chapter 1, the distinction between plot and story was made, according to Genette's theory on narratology. The confrontation of the plot, that is to say, the order of events in the text, and the story, which is the order in which events actually occur, yields valuable information about the narrative structure of a narrative work of art. In the case of a novel, it puts forward the author's choice in ordering, withholding or revealing narrative information from its reader. The success or failure of many narrative effects depends on this choice.

Also in Chapter 1, some characteristics and qualities of the narrative structure of melodrama were established: to reiterate, the narrative structure of melodrama uses the principles of simplification, intensification, and plausibility in order to work toward the reinstatement of a moral ordering of the world. Simplification in the narrative structure takes the form of a narrative formula characteristic of melodrama composed of four steps as described by Gledhill (30)--misrecognition of the innocence of the central character; initial

powerlessness of the central character and his/her victimization; the struggle for moral and social reinstatement; the final restoration of the moral ordering. Furthermore, the exteriorization into the plot of the characters' internal conflicts contributes as well to the process of simplification, since the melodramatic world is oriented according to what should be the main character's internal conflicts. As for intensification, complications of the plot in the form of subplots, events delaying the expected outcome, and blockage of expression which prevents the characters from communicating information to one another have been pointed out as salient features. However, even though the narrative structure certainly plays a role in the degree of plausibility of the novel, it is awkward to discuss it separately from the plausibility stemming from or threatened by the characterization, the narrative techniques and the stylistic components of modes of melodrama in Hurst's novel. Thus, plausibility will be the last principle of melodrama discussed and will not appear in this analysis of the narrative structure of Imitation of Life. In this study of the narrative structure, the first part will be dedicated to the confrontation between plot and story (a), the second part will see how Hurst's novel conforms to or differs from Gledhill's melodrama narrative formula (b), and the last part will deal with the narrative features of the novel contributing to intensification (c).

(a) PLOT AND STORY

When the plot and the story of Hurst's novel are contrasted, the immediate reaction is how strikingly similar they are. At first glance, it seems to the reader that most of the narrative events are presented in their chronological development. Actually, 46 out of the 47 chapters constituting the novel follow each other chronologically, which supports the reader's first impression of time continuity (the particularity of Chapter 47 will be discussed later in the analysis of intensification).

Furthermore, since the concluding statement of each chapter echoes the events first mentioned in the opening, one perceives these 47 chapters as 47 beads or self-contained units following each other on the chronological thread. For instance, Chapter 1 opens on the detached

omniscient narrator's description of Bea's state of mind, a description which is repeated at the end of the chapter but through Bea's emotional voice:

> It struck Bea, and for the moment diverted her from grief, that quite the most physical thing she had ever connected with her mother was the fact of her having died. (1)
>
> I weep for mama, she is dead... her arms and legs and breasts and her loins there, under the bengaline dress are stiff and dead. (5)

Although there is a difference in tone and voice between the cold omniscient narrator and Bea's emotional utterance, the insistence on the physical details of the dead one in Bea's voice reinforces the narrator's introductory statement. Similar connections between the beginning and the end of chapters can be repeatedly found throughout the book. The end of a chapter either emphasizes, contrasts or refutes what has been stated in its first few introductory sentences.

Therefore, if the chapters are chronologically ordered, they are also conceived around particular moments of the story. Thus, the events at the center of a chapter or the temporal framework of this chapter can be separated from other chapters by many years--as it is the case between Chapter 24 focusing on Bea's initial commercial flop in New York at the beginning of WW I and Chapter 25 displaying her enjoying her financial success after the armistice--or by a few hours--as between Chapter 8 concluding with Bea's difficulty in swallowing her ice-cream at the end of her marriage banquet and Chapter 9 dealing with Bea's fears and apprehension as she faces her first wedding night. This focus of each chapter on a certain set of events allows each to fit into the chronological arrangement of the novel, as a self-contained unit describing a certain moment of the story.

However, within the self-contained unit of a chapter, thanks to its clear focus on a definite period, references to past and future events occur without disrupting the reader's sense of smooth chronological continuity. For instance, the following introductory excerpt from Chapter 15 not only displays Bea's arduous struggle for survival when she is left as a poor widow supporting a crippled father

and a new-born daughter but does so from a future perspective which discloses to the reader Bea's fabulous success story:

> Years later, she was to relate to a national group of business and professional women convening at Hotel Commodore, New York, that the tide of those days turned for her on a pail of syrup and a flight of stairs, the latter enabling her to let the three upper rooms of the house on Artic Avenue for a sum that to the penny paid her monthly rent. (81)

In a similar way, numerous references to Bea's life when her mother was still alive, in Chapter 2, 4 and 6 for instance, serve as contrast to Bea's present precarious situation, as her mother is not there any longer to take care of the household, to protect and guide her when she gets married and finally to face the terribly threatening health decline of Bea's father who is her only economic and social support.

To conclude on the contrastive analysis of the plot and the story in Imitation of Life, Hurst constructed her novel in a way to give the reader the overall impression of a continuous development by ordering chronologically self-contained chapters which focus around a limited and precise period of events of the story. Within the subsequent temporal structure of these chapters, however, the equivalence between plot and story is broken since numerous references to past and future events are made. These references serve also to provide the reader with events from the plot which had been left out in the gaps of time between the chapters.

(b) NARRATIVE FORMULA OF MELODRAMA

Since Imitation of Life is a domestic melodrama, its plot includes Gledhill's four narrative phases characteristic of melodrama: misrecognition of the innocence of the central character; initial powerlessness and victimization of the central character; the struggle for moral and social reinstatement; the final restoration of the moral ordering. However, as will be shown, in Hurst's novel the fifth step remains somewhat unclear and ambiguous.

In Hurst's novel, Bea Pullman, born Chipley, is clearly the central character of a story which appears at first to demonstrate how

money does not necessarily generate happiness: the novel describes, first, Bea's success story as she works her way up by excruciating toil and fanatical determination and with some luck. It then switches to her quest for sentimental happiness which fails abruptly as a consequence of her total inability to read and to understand other people's feelings and emotions.

As the main character of Hurst's domestic melodrama, Bea is the portrait of innocence, an innocence which finds no place in the 1910s society as it is described in the novel. Immediately after her mother's death, Bea is left in a world for which she is not prepared, that is to say, a world which has no consideration for her innocence although the social moral code requires a seventeen-year-old young lady to be or to look innocent. Indeed, Bea has been overprotected by her mother who spared her all the household chores and who prevented Bea's involvement in the outside world: the boys on the beach did not bother Bea because of the presence of her mother. Adelaide Chipley also discourages her daughter's meek inclination for the profession of kindergarten teacher, as in her moral standard women's work outside the home was not acceptable unless it was for "pin money." Up to the disastrous maternal disappearance, Bea has lived in a world wherein all the physical and sexual aspects of life have been carefully subdued. She does not face the reality of the world, whether in its physical, sexual, or economic expression. Her parents' restrained attitude even makes it impossible for Bea to accept their sexuality, therefore sexuality in general. Before her mother's death, Bea is all what a young lady should be according the late-Victorian social standards of the 1910s: she is totally innocent, inexperienced, untrained; she is home-oriented, patient, and submissive; she shuns sexuality; although she wishes she could live between mother and father all her life in her childish purity, she looks forward to having her own house as the intrinsic reward of marriage. Bea's remoteness from the physical world which Shaugnessy had pointed out as a type characteristic of a Hurstian heroine (142), and her protected purity end during the wake over her mother's body. She is then forced to realize and to accept her mother's physical existence at the very moment of Adelaide Chipley's

disappearance from this world. Mrs. Chipley's death and mortality are the first challenge to Bea's purity. It forces her out of an immaterial vision of the world and back into the real, physical, impure and dirty world, a world in which innocence cannot survive and for which Bea is absolutely not prepared.

As Bea first appears, she is the portrait of purity and innocence when she abruptly learns consequent to her mother's death, how little weight her innocence has in the world which she has now to face. Her innocence is not taken into account. Since she is repelled by any manifestation that is too physical, she is particularly unfit for household chores. In spite of the fact that she finds it "simply horrid, for instance, to have to go into Mr. Pullman's room after his departure each Monday morning and collect his laundry" (12), she tries her best to perform the household chores in order to satisfy her demanding and foppish father. In return, Mr. Chipley has no patience with her initial clumsiness, and he seems to ignore completely her sensitivity. He even forgets her 18th birthday and gives his approval for her marriage to Mr. Pullman without consulting her or caring about the obvious mismatch between the heavy, middle-aged man and his young and immature Bea. With the disappearance of her mother, Bea realizes that her purity and innocence do not insure any social recognition. On the contrary, as her father's health declines, she understands how women are arbitrarily bound to the social and economic status of the men on whom they are dependent. Although Bea conforms fully to social and sexual requirements for her gender, society does not take her into account: not only does no one protect her state of purity and innocence, but her innocence and inexperience make her the perfect helpless victim with no grasp of her own fate. In such a ruthless world, Bea has to lose her innocence and purity.

After having placidly accepted marriage to the unattractive Mr. Pullman, Bea thinks she has found the solution which will secure her future and give her a house and social position, the keys to happiness. Even if she does not seem to mind having to submit and to adapt herself to her husband's sexual and domestic demands when she herself remains sexually indifferent to him, her marital bliss soon evaporates. She

powerlessly witnesses the debasing treatment that Mr. Pullman inflicts on her crippled father, and at the same time she suffers patiently when her father takes out his frustration on her due to his sudden demeaning condition. When her domestic victimization stops with Mr. Pullman's accidental death, her social victimization starts as she is left a helpless widow with a crippled father and a new-born baby girl to support: she is clearly rejected from all the jobs she attempts to get because of her sex and probably also because of her lack of professional training. Furthermore, her status as helpless widow does not bring about any compassion for her, besides that from some family friends who are as helpless as she is. On the contrary, a representative of the railroad company takes advantage of Bea's innocence and inexperience and gets her to agree on a settlement outrageously disadvantageous to her. Bea's initially untouched innocence turns against her, which development corresponds adequately to Gledhill's second stage of powerlessness and victimization.

In the third stage, Bea is struggling not only for survival but for social reinstatement. Since society does not leave her any alternatives, Bea finally finds a solution to her economic needs on her own. She is able to usurp in a way her late husband's identity thanks to his "B. Pullman" business cards, which allow her to hide her femaleness from the maple supplier who was providing her husband with the maple syrup cans he used to deliver for a small profit during his lunch time. Her struggle for economic survival is harsh and occasions female enmities--usually limiting her meager profits--and male chauvinist attitudes which prevent men from taking her business projects as serious and viable opportunities. However, as soon as she is rewarded by a token of social recognition after the financial success of her waffle and maple syrup at the First Church charity fair, Bea not only decides to open a waffle diner on the boardwalk but also realizes that economic success brings social recognition, even for a woman who has transgressed the social standard by taking a man's job. This revelation sends her walking with "the grimace of intense desire" (115), a sign of her unwavering determination. Her success eventually turns her into the chairwoman of a booming chain of restaurants in New York

and most major American major cities. However, Bea's financial success establishes her socially but not morally.

In a variation of Gledhill's pattern of the narrative phases of melodrama, in Hurst's novel the social reinstatement of the central character is separated from its moral reinstatement. If Bea is made socially acceptable as she becomes an incredibly successful and rich business woman, she still remains an outsider if not an outcast, a curiosity if not an anomaly. She becomes a lonely woman whose public image keeps her daughter aloof and mute with awe in front of her distant and overworked mother. Therefore, if the first part of Bea's struggle concerns her economic and social reinstatement, Bea fights too for her emotional fulfillment as well as her return to a more conventional social position: she wants to dedicate herself to building the house, home, and family of which she has always dreamed. Thus, she falls in love with Frank Flake, her right-hand man and sales manager, less for the numerous qualities she attributes to him than to his filling up the increasing emotional void caused by her cumbersome public image as a successful business woman. She defines herself as a "curtain hemmer at heart" (344), and her marriage to Flake and the subsequent domestic bliss in the Fishrow mansion would have signified her moral reinstatement.

However, in Hurst's novel--contrary to Gledhill's third phase in melodrama narrative structure--Bea will not marry Flake and therefore does not succeed in reintegrating her moral and conventional position in society. Instead, the reader leaves her at the end of the novel as she is scurrying around the globe pushing the wheelchair of her virtually mummified father and taking care of her international business interests. Instead of Bea's moral reinstatement, the moral order of the world which had prove itself in the first place as treating the "fair sex" so unfairly is safeguarded and restored by the marriage of Flake to the young and homely Jessie, who claims to have "no ambish" (332) whatsoever. Bea cannot carry out her plan to marry a man eight years younger than she is, which at the time was an act considered an unbearable transgression of social and moral values. Ultimately, as Bea has already transgressed against the social and moral establishment,

even though unwillingly, by assuming her husband's identity and role as a breadwinner, she is not allowed to fit back into the traditional female role of the "Angel of the House." She has become a woman who has lost her female social prerogatives and who now suffers from being caught up in her male social role.

Thus, Hurst's novel does include Gledhill's five distinctive steps in the formula of melodrama: misrecognition of the innocence of the central character; initial powerlessness of the central character and her subsequent victimization; the struggle for moral and social reinstatement; the final restoration of the moral ending. However, Hurst's central heroine fails to gain her moral reinstatement. Furthermore, even though the moral ordering of the world seems restored at the end of the novel, it remains questionable. Indeed, the socially and morally established values of the time are maintained clearly at the central heroine's expense even though Bea had initially transgressed these values in order to fulfill a highly moral and human goal: she had to find a solution to survive and to provide support for her father and baby daughter in a society which denied any opportunities to women to be independent and secure. Although Bea was the portrait of purity and innocence, the moral establishment did not allow her to survive as such when she had to face the real world. As far as the narrative structure is concerned, it is clear that although the author follows the five-step narrative formula as it is expressed by Gledhill, she departs from it in the end in order to create a surprising narrative element which contradicts the reader's expectations.

As mentioned above, another characteristic of the narrative structure of melodrama is the exteriorization into the plot of what could potentially be internal conflicts of characters, part of the process of simplification. As a matter of fact, since melodrama tends to expose its characters to potential contradictions through their actions or clashes with other characters rather than through subjective psychological insight, the world of melodrama is a symbolic and external reconstruction of its characters' conflicts and thereby it is based on tangible assertions of conflicting values.

For instance, Bea's difficult relationship and lack of communication with her daughter Jessie reveals the painful conflict which plagues Bea: she has to assume the breadwinner's role and consequently, she alienates herself from the household and her maternal and emotional ties with her young love-hungry daughter. This conflict is first presented to the reader in the form of an occasional incident between Bea and her two or three-year-old daughter: Jessie refuses to obey Bea, who becomes so distressed at her daughter's rebellious aloofness that she cannot help bursting into tears.

In the same way, Peola's problematical racial identity is revealed by her increasingly difficult relationships with other characters. As a young child, she stays coldly detached in front of Jessie's boundless devotion to her. Besides this unusual coldness which is presented as an early sign of Peola's reaction to racial differentiation and inequalities--she dominates Jessie by controlling her emotions--Delilah is the first person who expects, discovers, and voices her child's problematic racial identity. As early as Chapter 22, Delilah interprets Peola's gazing "game" with the mute and crippled Mr. Chipley as a sign of her child's defiance against the racial ordering of the world. As the novel goes on, the reader is informed of Peola's increasing racial identity by the more numerous and more violent clashes occurring between Peola and her dear ones (Delilah and Jessie, since Bea the breadwinner is almost excluded from the domestic emotional world). With their increasing occurrence and intensity, these clashes become clearly racially motivated and thereby are the only expression of Peola's conflicting identity: Peola burns her hair as she tries to get rid of imaginary kinks in her straight black hair (175); a childish argument between Jessie and Peola degenerates into Peola's first nervous breakdown (Chapter 26); Peola passes for white at school at the age of eight which causes a major fight between Delilah and her rebellious daughter (Chapter 32); finally, Peola prefers to sacrifice her mother's love in order to pass for white (Chapter 39).

Instead of rendering the psychological complexity of the human experience, all these conflicts between characters have to be seen as mere clashes of values: Jessie-Bea's problematical relationship stems

from Bea's assumption of man's role when she should have been able to dedicate herself to her motherly duties and cares. In a more active way, Peola defies the racial order by rejecting her race and second-rate status, an attitude which contrasts sharply with Delilah's racial pride tinged with religious resignation toward the humiliating treatment of her own race.

What could have been developed into a character's internal conflicts in a psychological novel is expressed in Hurst's domestic melodrama by concrete clashes between characters, a melodramatic device used in order to "simplify" the reader's task: these clashes provide a moral reading of the world. Finally, although the narrative structure of Imitation of Life departs slightly from Gledhill's in its final step as Bea does not achieve social reinstatement, the novel narrative framework serves, nevertheless, the melodramatic principle of simplification.

(c) CONTRIBUTION OF THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE TO INTENSIFICATION

In Chapter 1, the narrative features presented as generating "intensification" are the following: complications of plots by the addition of more or less developed subplots; the blockage of expression between characters; the continuous delay of expected outcome. Here we examine the use of subplots, then the blockage of expression, and finally delay as a means of creating "intensification" in Imitation of Life.

-- Main Plot, Subplot and Intensification

In the Handbook to Literature, Holman and Harmon define subplots as "a subordinate or minor complication running through a piece of fiction," which "if skillfully handled, has a direct relation to the main plot, contributing to it in interest and in complication and struggle" (489-90). Subplots, thus, by definition contribute to the enhancement and intensification of main plots. However, Holman and Harmon observe that there are at least two "degrees" in the usage of subplots:

> those directly related to, and giving impetus and action to, the main plot; and second those more or less extraneous to the chief plot interest and on the hand frankly as a secondary story to give zest and emphasis, or relief, to the main plot. (490)

Imitation of Life has a myriad of secondary characters who contribute toward emphasizing positive or negative aspects of other characters by their differences or similarities to these characters. For instance, the following four secondary characters are the base of three distinctive subplots which clearly run through an important portion of the book narrative and function as parallel and contrast to other characters, thereby intensifying the reader's experience: Delilah, Peola, Virginia Eden, and Allen Matterhorn, who will become Peola's husband according to Delilah.

The Black subplot, in which Delilah and Peola's mother-daughter relationship parallels Bea-Jessie's difficult communication, is conspicuously the most important subplot of the book; thanks to its racial component, it serves actually as a more dramatic counterpart to Bea and Jessie's uneasy relationship. The dramatic intensity of the two Black characters' relationship and the ability of their story to stand on its own led several critics such as Mary Ross and M. W. to consider the Black subplot as the main highlight of Hurst's novel ("From a Waffle Shop...",4) ("Sucessor to 'Lummox'", 10). However, despite the melodramatic intensity of Delilah and Peola's story, the way the Black subplot fits into the white main plot of Bea's success story proves that it has been conceived as a subplot meant to enhance and to intensify the suspense of the main narrative.

Several clues indicate that the black subplot is principally meant to serve and to intensify Bea's story. First of all, Delilah and Peola appear only in Chapter 15, when Bea is compelled after her father's second stroke to look for a live-in maid, and both Black characters virtually disappear with Delilah's funeral, seven chapters before the end of the novel. Second, this Black subplot not only furnishes essential elements to Bea's success story--Bea could not have enjoyed such a financial success without Delilah's culinary talents and her perfectly stereotypical and commercializable face--but also relieves the

main plot when its suspense winds down: Peola's rejection of her racial identity and her mother's love with it, one of the most melodramatic scenes of the novel provides an existing alternative to Bea's story which levels off after the establishment of her newly-acquired social position and public image as an incredibly successful business woman. This peak in the Black subplot also conveniently precedes the switch from the economic success to the sentimental intrigue in the white subplot, which in this way finds a new lease on suspense. Thus, the Black subplot contains elements essential for the development of Bea's story and intensifies the reader's experience by filling in when the main plot intrigue comes to a weak point. Therefore, although at some points the Black subplot might exceed the main plot in intensity, it is clearly designed to be a subplot as it serves to renew the intensification of the novel.

While some subplots explicitly renew the interest of the reader by acting as contrastive reflection of the main plot, others have the same function less overtly. For instance, Delilah explicitly reveals the contrastive function of the Black subplot to the reader when she compares her relationship with her daughter to Bea and Jessie's relationship in Chapter 30:

> "You and your chile is too polite to each other, Miss Bea. What you need to git acquainted is some good old hollering fests, lak me and mine. We yells our lovin'. You two just hursts yourn." (213)

Furthermore, other minor characters such as Virginia Eden and Allen Matterhorn also are at the center of subplots which contribute toward intensifying respectively, the main white plot and the Black subplot. For instance, Virginia Eden, a successful cosmetic business woman, functions as a contrastive twin figure to Bea, offering the reader a different perspective on Bea's own success story. Both women have gone through the same "rags to riches" experience, and they were both pushed into the business world by melodramatic family situations which accidentally turned them into the only possible breadwinners. Both women identify themselves as pioneers in women's achievements, although Virginia demonstrates a keen drive and fierce determination for

business, a feature that Bea lacks. In this way, if at first Virginia appears as another sort of Bea Pullman, she also serves as a counterpart to her and underlines Bea's soft and traditionally feminine qualities making Bea more acceptable to a traditional audience but also more vulnerable: Bea appears weaker than Virginia who has it all: success, love, an unconventional but exciting life (193). Furthermore, Virginia is also the source of complications in the plot which raises again the intensification of the plot. Virginia launches the daring "Fishrow real estate operation" and draws Bea into it. But, soon the two women's conflicting business ethics raises an ultimate challenge to Bea's financial success as she ends up having to mortgage most of her company temporarily in order to buy Virginia's share in their real estate business at top price. Therefore, besides revealing Bea's weaknesses, the Virginia subplot serves again to renew the intensity in the main plot.

As an intensifier of the Black subplot, Allen Matterhorn serves first to underline Delilah's selfless and soothing nature, when she lavishes her motherly care on this homesick young G.I. recently torn out of his hometown and on his way to World War I (Chapter 25). With the thankful letter of Allen's crippled mother, which appears fully in the novel (233), the initial display of Delilah's nurturer nature expands into a complete apologia of Delilah's mother figure . Moreover, Allen's sketchy character asserts the exactness of Delilah's predictions, as on her deathbed she is able to identify him as Peola's mysterious husband whose partial description fits all the clues which were given throughout the novel about Allen Matterhorn's doomed fate. The Allen Matterhorn story not only serves to show Delilah's good nature, but it ultimately enhances the Black subplot by giving credibility to Delilah's frightened condemnation of her daughter's passing: "No, no, no! Gaws don't want His rivers to mix! ..... Black wimmin who pass, pass into damnation..." (299). Notwithstanding their cursory development, the Allen Matterhorn and Virginia Eden sub-plots intensify the reader's perception of the main and the Black subplot, and they play the essential function of asserting Peola's unhappiness in passing and Bea's failure to achieve happiness.

All of these subplots, in their own ways, contribute to the intensification of the reader's experience, as they renew the readers' interest, often by diverting their attention from the main plot at moments of necessary lows in its suspense. However, these subplots play another important role: very often subplots present to the reader alternatives or counterparts to the characters in the main plot, thereby compelling the reader to make comparisons and to cast a judgment on the events and characters of the main plot. In other words, subplots not only contribute to the intensification of the reader's experience by offering them an alternative thrill, but they also revive the interests in the main plot by giving the readers a crucial outlook on the main plot. Thus, the Delilah-Peola's story, as Virginia's and Allen Matterhorn's stories allow the reader to insert the plot or sub-plot they are enhancing into a moral perspective: when compared to that of the two Black characters, Bea and Jessie's relationship lacks passionate maternal love, as Bea is not playing her mother role properly. When Bea is compared to her business "alter ego," she appears softer and more human than the rather ruthless but impressive Virginia. However, Virginia appears to achieve everything that Bea is unable to do: she can handle an always more successful and busy business career without losing interest in it and simultaneously enjoy a tumultuous and satisfying social and love life. Finally, Allen Matterhorn's story reminds the reader that selfless and good-natured actions are not necessarily rewarded, as after benefitting from Delilah's warmth and special consideration, the young boy becomes the instrument of Delilah's martyrdom. She dies with a broken heart after Peola's sacrifices her in order to pass for white and marry Allen. Allen Matterhorn becomes also the assurance for the reader that Peola will not benefit from her racial and her filial transgression. These three subplots are examples of how subplots complicate the plot and, thereby, how the narrative structure contributes to the intensification of the reader's experience.

-- Blockage of Expression and Intensification

Another way of enhancing the intensification of the reader's experience is to play on the blockage of communication between

characters. This inability of characters to communicate allows the suspension of any possible easy way out of difficult situations and it creates devastating and dramatic incomprehension, thereby complicating and intensifying the plot.

In Imitation of Life, blockages of communication appear and are sustained between the characters of the main plot--Bea, Jessie and Flake--and the characters of the Black subplot as well, that is to say Delilah and her almost-white daughter. In Bea's plot, the difficult mother-daughter relationship intensifies the intrigue and consequently leaves Bea to her final loneliness. Notwithstanding the constant difficulties that mother and daughter have experienced throughout the novel, the communication is seemingly restored close to the end, when Jessie has just come back after graduating from her fancy boarding school. Actually this pretended and unusual closeness between the two only conceals that the blockage of expression is at its worst. Bea fails constantly to tell Jessie about her marriage plans, and Jessie finds herself unable to mention her growing infatuation for Flake until she asks a bewildered Bea to give her blessing for her marriage to Flake. Furthermore, in the main plot the blockage of communication does not confine itself to Bea's and Jessie's inability to express and to understand their mutual feelings. The attractive Frank Flake finds himself caught in a critical position as well, in which he is totally incapable of communicating his true feelings toward Bea and Jessie. Thus, most of the suspense in the main plot plays on a series of blockages between the trio Bea, Jessie, and Frank which brings about the intensity of Bea's sudden painful disillusionment abruptly closing the novel.

Contrary to Jessie and Bea's cold and constrained ways, Peola and her mother are engaged in a warmer relationship in which the communication can get stormy at times, as we saw above. Hence, the stumbling block which ultimately severs their communication altogether stands in Peola's growing awareness of Blacks' second-class status which leads her gradually to reject her own race and with it her mother's love. In order to be able to pass for white, Peola hides herself more and more from her mother and hides her mother from the world, until she

deliberately brings their relationship to an end. At first, at the age of eight, she conceals her race at school (Chapter 32); as a young adult, she chooses to live in Seattle as far away as possible from her mother's world (Chapter 36); finally, Peola drags the promise never to intrude in her life out of her heart-broken mother, as she has had herself sterilized in order to marry a white boy whose name she does not even reveal (Chapter 39). Therefore, in contrast to Bea and Jessie, who both suffer from their lack of communication, Peola actively severs her communication with Delilah in order to escape from her own race. The blockage of communication between them is embodied by Peola's racial dilemma which evolves into racial rejection, as Peola and Delilah have antithetical conceptions of racial identity (Chapter 39, 297-8).

In both plots, the blockages of communication between the characters work for the intensification of the story. Instead of having ordinary lives in which Bea would wallow in her material bliss and Delilah in her spiritual compensations, these blockages make Bea's and Delilah's fates turn into exciting and tragic melodramas, thereby intensifying the experience of the reader who through these characters and their lives himself/herself escapes from the treadmill of his/her own life.

-- Delays and intensification

As mentioned in Chapter 1, delays of predictable outcome constitute another device of intensification characteristic of popular genres ranging from thrillers to melodramas. Fannie Hurst uses this last intensification device of delays on numerous occasions in Imitation of Life.

One of the most striking examples of the use of delay for purposes of intensification concerns Bea's financial success. Thanks to various delays, notwithstanding the early disclosure of her successful social and financial accession, Hurst expands Bea's success story over eighteen chapters--from chapter 14 to 31, chapter 33 being the turning point of the intrigue from the financial success story to Bea's sentimental quest. Right at the beginning of Chapter 14, Bea is established as a future successful business woman and public figure

giving lectures in women's clubs, merely one chapter after Bea has been suddenly left to struggle as the sole provider for her family in a world where most opportunities are denied to women. Therefore, in this case, although many critics complained about the dullness of Bea's success story (Winsten, 197), Fannie Hurst is able to excite her reader's interest without relying on the uncertainty of the outcome of Bea's struggle for economic survival to keep her reader's attention.

In order to achieve this, she shows us Bea going through all the obstacles delaying or jeopardizing her financial position. First, when it appears as if Bea has found an adequate way of making a living as is the case in Chapter 16, working women such as "the women executives of hospital diet kitchens, hotels, and ... women along the Boardwalk who conducted eating establishments" are the ones who seemed purposely to refuse to order from her or even to cancel maple syrup orders, hampering her precarious financial situation. Another delay occurs when, although the maple syrup booth at the First Church Fair has proven successful, Bea is frustrated in her efforts to find a loan since the prominent business men in town cannot picture a woman as a successful business manager (Chapter 21). Furthermore, Bea's first waffle dinner in New York turns out to be a financial failure but is miraculously rescued by an unknown real estate agent who happen to be interested in the building housing her business (Chapter 24). Finally, Virginia Eden also contributes toward endangering Bea's success by pushing her into the real estate adventure: although this real estate deal provides Bea with the opportunity to realize her "dream" house, it suddenly degenerates into a financial nightmare, as the two partners' business ethics clash bringing the operation to a stalemate (Chapter 29). In other words, all these events show that up to Chapter 33, whenever Bea seems to have reached financial stability, something occurs to put it in jeopardy. Thus, Fannie Hurst extensively uses delay in Bea's story as a way of renewing and intensify the reader's interest.

Before concluding on intensification in the narrative structure, it is important to note that, as in the final part of the novel when the plot focuses on Bea's sentimental story, the Black subplot also functions as an intensifying diversion from Bea's story. Actually, the

Black subplot always interrupts the plot at moments in which the suspense is at a peak. However, contrary to the economic struggle, in the case of the sentimental intrigue Hurst does not explicitly establish the outcome of Bea's sentimental story in advance. Consequently, much of the effect of shock experienced by the reader at the sudden denouement of Bea's sentimental story resides in the reader's non-expectation of such a twist. Although Hurst sprinkles her narrative with either clues or puzzling insights about later events, such as the mention of Mr. Chipley's death in Sweden (Chapter 30) or Flake's contemplation of snapshots of Jessie (Chapter 39) and Jessie's beaming happiness (Chapter 46), Bea's shattered sentimental dream comes as a surprising and abrupt conclusion to the reader (Ross, 4). Therefore, although the Black subplot serves as an intensifying interruption of the main plot, most of the surprise effect in the outcome of Bea's sentimental story is drawn from the main character's unexpected failure to achieve her emotional fulfillment and from the suddenness with which her sentimental dream is shattered. Hurst uses two different intensification devices for these two different elements of Bea's story: the economic and sentimental intrigues. Even as the account of Bea's financial success has been established at the beginning of her story, the economic intrigue is intensified by delays of the expected outcome. In contrast, then, Bea's sentimental failure comes as a unexpected surprise, even more unexpected because the heroine's hard financial and social rise lead the readers to assume that she is a winner. In this way, the intensification of Bea's financial success story by delays creates the expectation that Bea should reach sentimental fulfillment by the end of the novel. Thus, the intensification of Bea's economic success also works for the intensification of the reader's experience through surprise when it comes to the outcome of Bea's sentimental life, although suspense and surprise are achieved in opposite ways.

Hurst, then, uses all the narrative features of melodrama, such as the complication of the main plot by various subplots, the blockage of expression between characters, and the delays of expected outcomes, in order to intensify the reader's experience and to force his/her vision into a simplified and moral reading of the world. Although Hurst

structures her novel by using boldly typical narrative devices of melodrama, she also departs from them--as when her main character fails to be morally reinstated and is forced to stay a social miscast--in order to build up the final effect of shock caused by the ending.

B. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Besides using effectively the characteristic narrative features of melodrama in structuring her fictional narrative, Fannie Hurst shaped her novel using narrative techniques which were also characteristic of the literary trends of her times. In particular, the importance of the literary interest in the concept of consciousness and unconsciousness in the first decades of the 20th century, from which stemmed experiments such as stream of consciousness and later on automatic writing techniques, can be observed in the narrative techniques used in Imitation of Life. This apparent contemporary influence might ultimately also explain why in some aspects Hurst's novel deviates from the expected intrinsic features of melodrama.

The narrative innovations that Fannie Hurst is attempting within the genre of melodrama rely heavily on the importance given to Bea, particularly her perspective of the narrative events which appears with a partial and intentional fuzziness between the omniscient narrator's voice and Bea's voice within the novel. Indeed, the whole story of Imitation of Life is told from the point of view of Bea Chipley Pullman, starting with the wake over the body of Bea's mother to the dramatic announcement of the marriage of Bea's daughter to Frank Flake, which annihilates Bea's prospects for sentimental fulfillment:

> It struck Bea, and for the moment diverted her from grief, that quite the most physical thing she had ever connected with her mother was the fact of her having died. (1)
>
> Here was the scene which was to be preserved so perfectly in the retina of her mind's eyes, that looking back at it across the years, the living picture of it, even to the yellow of a frock and the smear of anguish across a face were never to dim. They were so young, standing there... so right... (352)

If it is obvious from the opening to the final emotional moments that Bea is at the center of the story, the main character remains, however,

somewhat elusive. For instance, throughout the novel, Bea's physical description remains vague. There is no direct exposition concerning her physical portrait, and the author does not yield enough precise physical details to give us a clear picture of how Bea Pullman looks. For instance, the color of her hair is only mentioned once or twice in the entire novel and in such an incidental manner as to be rapidly buried under the mass of words, characters, and events filling Bea's life from the age of seventeen to her late thirties:

> She slid into her gown, closing it at the neck and at each wrist with a bow of white satin baby-ribbon, and, the color of maple syrup pouring from one of Mr. Pullman's pails, her hair came down below her waist and hung like a photograph of a waterfall. (Chapter 9, 52)

The reader does not necessarily notice the lack of physical description which leaves Bea an essentially transparent character, as the author-narrator keeps us well informed about Bea's physical transformation over the different period of her life. The description of Bea on her way to success could fit any physical type and gives the reader more information about her internal transformation than about the way she looks:

> She used to insist that, according to actual measurement by one of the Boardwalk penny devices, she had become taller during this period. Be that as it may, or whether the amount of walking as it hardened and slenderized, might have been accountable for the undeniable look of stature and added length of face, the look of new height was there. And it was a leaner face,an obsessed face, that strode ahead of herself those days of the first years of her bird's-eye canvassing of Atlantic City, a quality of straight-lipped concentration out in it that must have immunized her not only from street loiterers of a carnival city, but from the men upon whom she thrust herself, once she had cleaved her way through to them by the little device of the business card. (97)

As she falls in love with Flake, her physical traits turn into a softer physical type appropriate for her new emotional state, as well as her social prominent status, with "fluffiness of hair and figure" (293). But, here again her physical description as it is ambiguously presented

through Flake's eyes remains vague and emphasizes more her clothing than her actual physical appearance:

> What a curious conglomerate, this B. Pullman. But not of difficult stripe, once you learned to reckon with the fact that only Pullman the business woman was the phenomenon.... Apart of all these, she was, as Flake put it himself, nothing more than a girl with her skates. A rather blowy girl in her thirties, who wore her new grooming like a shellac from which her fluffiness of hair and figure and nervous manner would escape, but withal, a delayed kind of prettiness out all over her. (273)

Bea's transparency, which contrasts sharply with the other characters more definite physical description such as Delilah's detailed and colorful physical description (Chapter 16), is consistent with the author's choice in restricting the reader's perspective of the narrative events to Bea's point of view. These two devices, Bea's transparency and point of view, are narrative techniques which without doubt drastically favor the reader's identification with this central character. Furthermore, the voice used by Hurst to present Bea's perspective of the narrative events oscillates constantly from the omniscient narrator to Bea's point of view, which usually appears conspicuously in moments of emotional outburst. The confusion between the omniscient narrator and Bea's voice which stems out of this swinging back and forth between the two voices is reinforced by the recurrent omission of quotation marks to delimit when Bea is speaking.

One of the most striking examples of the blending between the two voices is the description of Bea's newly-married life at the beginning of Chapter 10. This chapter opens on a description of the rhythm of the seasons on the Boardwalk and of beach life in Atlantic City. This description seems at first to be told through the omniscient narrator's point of view. However, the omniscient narrator's depiction does not refer to Bea with an objective "she," which would clearly establish a detached narrator's discourse, preferring impersonal forms such as "it was pleasant in the crisp 'R' months to take the longer route of walking over the boardwalk" (54). This lack of explicit reference to Bea in the third person allows a blend between Bea's and the narrator's point of

view, an illusion which is only revealed by the last paragraph ending the description and switching to Bea's pregnancy:

> It must be good for me in my condition, thought Bea, breathing in with every inch of her capacity during these Friday-morning walks after the Absecon oysters. (55)

The absence of quotation marks preceding the demystifying "thought Bea" not only favors the continuity between the main character's voice and what seems at first to be the omniscient narrator's perspective, but also at the same time the meaning of the sentence itself is meant to reveal abruptly to the reader Bea's pregnancy and the fact that she might as well have been the voice narrating the preceding description.

As this sort of confusion between Bea's and the narrator's voices occurs constantly throughout the novel, the reader tends to identify the narrator-author with Bea. This identification is reinforced by the fact that both Hurst and Bea had to struggle to gain social and financial success, and were ultimately extremely successful at doing so. This confusion between the narrator-author and the main character of the novel is a distinctive literary technique which is rather unusual in melodramas. The narrative technique used by Hurst in her novel shows therefore, the extent of the influence of contemporary literary experimentations on Hurst's writing of melodrama. Although she is writing in a genre which is more that of 19th century literature, in this novel her narrative style belongs to the 20th century. Similarly to the main character in Virginia Wolf's Mrs.Dalloway, in Imitation of Life, Bea is the only character whose thinking process is open to the reader's scrutiny, sometimes even in moments in which Bea is interacting with other characters, as in this dialogue between Jessie just coming back from her private boarding school and her mother:

> [Jessie]: "You've grown so young! All the things I've been nagging you to do for years you've done and it frightens me! What a lamb to do it for me!"
> [Bea's thinking]: (I'm a fraud, Jessie, and presently you've got to know it)
> [Jessie] "I miss your whaleboning, darling..." (331)
> [The speaker's names preceding the quotes are my addition]

To the reader used to the confusion between Bea's and the narrator's point of view by Chapter 44 in which this exchange appears, it is absolutely clear that the sentence in parenthesis represents Bea's inner thought, as this sort of insight into the character's mind using the first person is only used to give Bea's and never another character's mental process.

To conclude on the narrative techniques used in Imitation of Life, it is clear from the observed transparency of Bea's character as well as the confusion existing between the narrator's and the main character's point of view that Fannie Hurst uses a narrative style characteristic of 20th rather than the 19th century literature. However, as will be explored in the next section dealing with characterization, the influence of 20th century narrative trends appears in her novel with other infringements of the typical 19th century melodramatic narrative in which the character's inner conflicts are not shown but are acted out through clashes between various characters.

C. CHARACTERIZATIONS

In the first chapter of this study, the discussion about characters in melodrama has shown the existence of two types of characters corresponding to two different functions assumed by these characters (Cawelti, 18-9). First, the superachiever has a clear drive to act on some definite central desire which defines him/her and pushes that character toward the enactment of which he/she strives. The function of the superachiever is to provide the readers with thrills and escapism within the limits of a moral reading of the world. On the other hand, the characters of the second type are built around some stereotypical figure well-known by the readers. The stereotype-based characters satisfy the human need for stability in the readers by representing traditional and familiar values to them; thereby, these characters support a moral reading of the world of melodrama. Furthermore, the first chapter established that the characters in melodrama tend to be "whole" rather than "divided," a characteristic designated as "quasi-wholeness" by Heilman and which clearly stems from the necessity for simplification in the melodramatic representation of

the world. The quasi-wholeness of characters in melodrama also implies that "the conflict is not within them but between them and various forces outside themselves," as Heilman formulates it, an implication which has already been observed for the characters in Imitation of Life in the section on the narrative formula of melodrama. Therefore, this section on characterization will analyze the main and some secondary characters to show how they function either as superachievers or as stereotypical characters in the melodramatic world of Imitation of Life how they all contribute toward establishing a moral and simplified reading of that world, and how they sometimes relate to the author's life. However, in view of the many secondary characters present in the novel, I restrict my analysis of secondary characters to female characters revolving around Bea, through whom Hurst ostensibly explores, on one hand, woman's role as a married woman and/or a working woman, and on the other, racial relationships according to her own life experience.

Six characters can be considered as main ones in Hurst's novel, four belonging to the main plot and two to the Black subplot: Bea, Jessie, Flake, Mr. Chipley in the main plot, and Delilah and Peola in the Black subplot.

BEA

Bea is ostensibly the superachiever of Hurst's novel. First, as we saw in the analysis of the narrative techniques, Bea's point of view is predominant in the novel and is often blurred into the narrator's voice. Furthermore, by becoming the head of a tentacular chain of restaurants, she represents an achievement that few women, at the time the novel was written, were even contemplating. Bea, therefore, undoubtedly plays the role of a superachiever figure--in the same way Hurst herself epitomized the successful lady writer--for all the women entering the work force as clerks, typists, or shop assistants in the 1930s, who most probably composed part of Hurst's female audience (since, to Hurst's distress the critics labelled her as woman's writer, her books geared toward a female audience). In this way, Bea is a character whose function is to provide thrills and escapism, especially

for women who were either bored by the humdrum routine of their jobs or the routine of their household chores.

However, Bea's character also significantly departs from that of the archetypal superachiever. Although she acts according to a central desire her "superachievement" as chairwoman of a chain of restaurants accidentally derives from her central desire, rather than being directly implied by it. In other words, although Bea takes her status of superachiever from her spectacular success story within a society which is highly unfavorable to women's economic independence, she carries it off unintentionally, merely as a means of fulfilling her central dream. Moreover, her central desire surprisingly consists in enjoying the house chores in "a house of one's own" (26) without worrying about having to make ends meet. This desire to have one day "a cottage in Ventor" where the afternoons would be spent leisurely "sewing for a child who romped as she stitched" (114) remains basically constant throughout the novel, even though it evolves according to her changing social status into the Fishrow mansion sheltering a family which includes Frank Flake. Accordingly, Bea contemplates her business merely as "the maple syrup [that] must be made to yield the belated reality of home worthy of Mr. Pullman's widow and child" (114) exactly in the same way she had first envisioned her marriage to Mr. Pullman, that is to say, as a means to getting "a house of one's own" with "bow window in the dining-room, looking out, over geraniums, at ocean" (26). Therefore, Bea is not a clear-cut type of superachiever; she becomes a superachiever incidentally in spite of herself, and her central desire is actually to lead a quiet life as a merry housewife.

Furthermore, if Bea becomes a superachiever almost reluctantly, her intense drive to establish herself economically and socially conflicts at some point with her central desire of being the perfect housewife. Consequently, she is the most divided character of the novel, a division which Hurst tends to muffle throughout Bea's social ascension. In order to maintain Bea in her position of superachiever, Hurst tends to find ways of restraining the gap between her character's central desire and her astounding economic achievement which provides the readers with escapism and thrills. The author manages to do so

first by avoiding as much as possible (or as long as possible) presenting Bea's success story and her central desire as conflicting and then by re-stating over and over Bea's central desire. In order to avoid this conflict, after Bea has unsuccessfully attempted to find a socially acceptable situation, Bea's drive for economic power is justified at first by presenting Bea's job as the only possible solution for the survival of Bea's household: exceptional circumstances leave her as the only provider for her family. Later on, as Bea becomes more and more successful, the justification for her ambition stems from a recurrent insistence upon the actual precariousness of her financial situation as Hurst multiplies incidents jeopardizing Bea's finances: from the mean "woman superintendent of a hospital" (98) who rejects a special kind of maple syrup she had ordered, to her difficult start in New York (Chapter 24), and finally the dangerous Fishrow estate operation in which Virginia lures Bea (Chapter 27). In spite of all of the author's efforts to subdue the clash between Bea's social aspirations and her desire to lead a quiet housewife life, it is impossible for Hurst to bypass completely her superachiever's contradictions precisely because Bea's perspective of the events is so central to the book. Here again, in order to preserve a semblance of quasi-wholeness in Bea's character, the author transposes the conflict between Bea's economic and her housewife aspirations, which would clearly be an internal conflict, into the mother-daughter antagonism which represents an external clash much less threatening to Bea's image as a superachiever. Significantly enough, although the mother-daughter conflict is latent from the beginning of the novel (see Chapter 19, when the child Jessie refuses to obey and come to her mother), Hurst waits until Bea has fully emerged as an astoundingly successful business woman (Chapter 29) to expose blatantly Bea's contradiction between her housewife dream and her financial ambition. Thus, it is only in Chapter 30 that Hurst allows the difficult relationship between mother and daughter to bloom by dedicating a whole chapter to it. Finally, at the end of the novel, it is again through the impossibility of real mother-daughter communication that Hurst compels her superachiever to relinquish her unfulfilled central desire. When Bea abruptly discovers

that her daughter has taken her place in Fishrow as well as in Flake's arms, Bea's ultimate failure to enact her central desire not only ends her character's suppressed dichotomy but, more significantly, represents an important departure from the figure of superachiever, for whom central desire is normally enacted as a token of social reinstatement.

Clearly, even if Hurst was able in real life to play the role of the incredibly successful lady writer and led an unconventional life which occasionally scandalized her family and the media of her time, in her novel Imitation of Life she is unable to create within the conventions of melodrama the figure of a female superachiever who would succeed in enacting her central desire. Even though Bea is undoubtedly the superachiever figure in the novel, the very success story on which her status as superachiever relies alienates her irremediably from the moral ordering of the world which conventionally has to be reinstated by the end of a melodrama. Consequently, Hurst conceives an unusual figure of superachiever in order to satisfy the conventions of the melodrama. Throughout the novel, Hurst spends considerable efforts to cover up her unusually deeply divided superachiever figure. However, in the end Hurst has to deny Bea the fulfillment of her central desire in order to restore the dominant patriarchal moral ordering of the world through Jessie's marriage to Flake. The extraordinarily successful Bea cannot be allowed to satisfy the conventional housewife dream life she was pursuing. Since Bea broke the social conventions by becoming an extremely successful business woman and by desiring to marry a younger man, she represents a challenge to the traditional values which underlie melodramatic moral order. Thus, she can only be tolerated as an outsider.

While Bea's unusual figure as a superachiever and her final alienation might account for many of the negative or puzzled critical reactions--most of the critics complained about the ending and the verisimilitude of Bea's character and story-- one might argue that Hurst is actually trying to spare the melodramatic conventions which are threatened by Bea's unconventional means toward attaining a conventional dream. However, Bea's final alienation should not necessarily be interpreted as the author's condemnation of Bea's unwilling challenge to

the melodramatic order of the world. Even though Bea's perspective is predominant in the novel, other characters surrounding Bea participate in the construction and moral implications of the melodramatic world in Imitation of Life. In fact, secondary characters such as Virginia Eden acknowledge the possibility for women to "have it all," since in contrast to Bea, Virginia appears more business-oriented, more feminine, and even more successful in her sentimental life.

JESSIE

If Bea's character stands out as the superachiever of the novel, Jessie clearly is the stereotype-based character. As has already been suggested in the discussion on Bea's character, Jessie's character becomes important and consequently is more fully developed in the second half of the novel, that is to say when the plot interest switches from Bea's financial success story to her romantic fulfillment.

In the first part of the novel, Jessie is merely a sketch of a character, as she appears as "the blue-and-yellow porcelain of Bea's child" (94) as "elusive as a humming bird, that had to be captured in a tender gesture too quick for it" (121). At this stage, she is "something" which by recurrent stress on her "brightly gold" hair (118) represents the unambiguously white in contrast to the racially ambiguous Peola. Jessie is also the main cause for her mother's drive for financial and social success, although Jessie's early aloofness from her caring bread-winner foreshadows the later problematic daughter-mother conflict.

In the last part of the novel, Jessie's character becomes more fully developed and defined as the unusual shyness between mother and daughter is explored. Although Jessie's temporary exile to a fancy boarding school in Switzerland is shown as one of the consequences of the racial tension emerging between Peola and Jessie, Chapter 30 clearly exposes how Jessie's upper-class schooling system is Bea's best excuse to avoid dealing with her child. Indeed, in this chapter, Bea's dilemma between her dream of being the perfect housewife--that is to say, also a good mother to Jessie--is presented as in total conflict with her business ambition: Jessie at age seven enters a fancy school which

conveniently "monopolize[s] her body and spirit for the next decade of her life" just as business monopolizes Bea's life during the same period, allowing Bea to overlook her duty as a mother. Furthermore, although Jessie's acceptance in this exclusive upper-class education system is presented as a social achievement and token of recognition in itself, it does not prevent Bea from feeling uneasy and somewhat guilty in front of her daughter's aloofness, as she suspect it to be one of the signs of her failure to assume her motherly role: "Perhaps I am just one of those tired business men to her, wanting to buy my way into her affections" (209-10). Furthermore, at this stage Jessie, who is seen in Chapter 30 through the blurred narrator-Bea's perspective, has no clear voice of her own yet and her character is made conspicuous and defined by her silence: "She talked so little; so little that her mother came to have secret awe of her silence" (209). This void in Jessie's character lasts until Jessie conveniently graduates from her education mill at the same time Bea feels ready to give up her financial ambition in order to start a home and family, thereby fulfilling her long-delayed domestic dream.

At this point in the novel, a superficial but eager communication finally arises between mother and daughter (Chapter 44), and Jessie's character finds her voice. It is the voice of the rich girl deprived of any ambition, one who has been typically raised to be the perfect upper-class house wife. In Chapter 44 , which consists almost exclusively of a dialogue between mother and daughter, Jessie's voice not only flows but utterly swamps Bea with happy, girlish talk to the point of preventing her mother from revealing her planned marriage with Flake. At this point, Jessie's voice defines herself as "[j]ust a plain home girl, ...willing to unbuckle her hip-flask and her dancing-sandals for any simple home-loving lad who can support her in even greater style than that to which she is accustomed" (332), which is an unambitious but upgraded version of Bea's own marriage vision when she was seventeen. Thus, with her mother's blessing for her caring only about her "own personal happiness" (333), her youth, her education, her long legs and blond-brightness, Jessie has clearly bloomed into the perfect upper-class housewife-to-be of whom any "home-loving lad" would dream.

Jessie, when she appears as a fully developed character, is a stereotype-based character that more adequately fits the housewife function than Bea, the "rather blowy girl in her thirties" (Chapter 37) who tries in vain to get rid of her "woman magnate" (334) public image. From then on, Jessie, the perfect bride-to-be, is ready to overpower Bea and to take over Fishrow, the house wife dream-castle construction of which Bea has too long delayed. Already in Chapter 45, Jessie disrupts Bea's endlessly remodelled dream house in Fishrow by convincing her mother to buy and tear down the next-door home in order to have enough space to build an elegant and imposing Colonial pillar frontage to the future house (340). With her decorating skills, Jessie overpowers the business-smart but human-blind Bea in the run for the housewife position. Finally, Bea is unable to recognize the takeover until Jessie's marriage disclosure, since the neglect of her maternal role has kept her blind to her own daughter's feelings.

Although the blond, racially unambiguous Jessie starts up as a sketchy character first meant to contrast with Peola's racial ambiguity and second to crystallize Bea's sense of failure as a mother, she develops into the perfect wife-to-be, a role Bea had fancied for herself.

FRANK FLAKE

Contrary to Jessie, who is a sketchy character evolving into a full character only when she overpowers Bea, Frank remains the outline of a manly young "seducer" who never fully develops. The main reason for Flake's failure to develop into a fuller character is that, contrary to other characters such as Jessie, Peola and Delilah, his voice is never heard, as he is almost exclusively presented to the reader through Bea's perspective. Indeed, except for a short dialogue concluding Chapter 40 in which he tries to avoid Bea's declaration of love, Flake never engages actively in complete dialogue which would disclose him directly to the reader. All his quoted words are simple quotations which are part of longer discussions reported to the reader through Bea's perspective on the events. Thus, the lack of first-hand information about Flake and the inevitable distortions due to Bea's

infatuation for him give a restricted view of Flake, especially since the reader might not be in the position to detect the inherent bias before the end of the novel. Consequently, Frank remains closer to the stereotype which constitutes his character and determines his contribution to the moral reading of the world: that of the "seducer." All his appearances in the plot serve to build up his image of seducer and/or to enact his seductiveness. Hurst's text operates in several ways in order to establish Flake as the ultimate seducer and to enact his seductions. First, I will show how Flake's introduction into the novel is already a process meant to intrigue and to seduce the reader. Second, I will indicate how the Hurstian text sets up Flake as the ultimate seducer of women and reveals what are the specific traits of his character which make him especially attractive to Bea. Finally, I will argue how Flake's deceptive strategy to seduce Bea is present in the text but is buried under Bea's uncritical opinion of the man she idealizes as the perfect husband-to-be.

Frank appears gradually in the novel long before he is fully introduced to the reader in Chapter 33. The recurrent elusive hints about Flake's presence in Bea's surroundings entices the reader's imagination at the same time it disposes the reader favorably toward this new character. Bea inadvertently mentions him as "the event of Young Flake" (174) for the first time in Chapter 25, thereby hinting only at the important role he will play in her life. Further on in the same chapter, Bea establishes his outstanding inclination for business as she praises him for his successful realization of an advertising campaign of which she had dreamed (175). Chapter 27 presents more hints by showing "Flake" in charge of an important part of the company management and taking care of Bea's public image (184, 186). Finally the mysterious Flake has become clearly Bea's most trusted business and personal advisor (201) by Chapter 29. Only after these intriguing positive allusions does the text in Chapter 33 yield a retrospective portrait of a conspicuously different regular B. Pullman customer who stands out from the boyish G.I's who brought the B. Pullman diner chain fame. It is also the first time that the mysterious man is introduced

by his full name, which is usually discarded for "Young Flake" or "Flake":

> Frank Flake came later. It was after the Armistice that the square-shouldered, lean-hipped young fellow with a spare square face that in profile was as sharp as a blade, began to repeat evenings, at a corner table of Madison Avenue Pullman .... (235)
>
> He seemed older than his twenty-eight years, was another reason why she had to curb the impulse to invite him home for an hour before her fireplace one evening at ten-o'clock closing ...Much older with quite tracery of blue veins showing beneath the pallor of his angular blond face and bright blue eyes the color of the carbon flame that comes spluttering off the coal. (237-8)

If the outstanding manly and sexualized portrait of the hard-working young student does not seduce the reader itself and establish Flake as the perfect seducer, who can resist the handsome young man, left without relatives (236), recovering alone from the horror of war and possessing an innovative spirit bound to make him a winner? Chapter 33 contains an accumulation of details about Flake intended to render him irresistible and to make him the perfect "seducer."

Since Flake's portrait in Chapter 33 is mostly presented through Bea's eyes, the text has also to establish him as irresistible to all the women, which is done in several instances, and the narrator clearly does not expect any woman to be indifferent to Flake's charms, as none of the female characters, young or old, can resist his type:

> the girls in the office force who giggled and thrilled in the locker-rooms over the personable young general manager with the straight, stern, intensely blue-eyed face and the long, supple hands that looked boneless but gripped with strength and decision (271) [....]The voices of older women, Weems and Lejanon, and even Mrs. Van der Lippe, no less than the youngsters whose manners were coated with sex when they had occasion to address him, curved, where Flake was concerned. (282)

Of course, Bea does not resist Frank, whose strangely colored eyes bring Delilah to give him the nickname "Blue Diamond" (254). However, the reader is more informed about his manly dispositions that makes him so attractive in Bea's eyes. First, she is fascinated by his business acumen with which "[r]epeatedly he had steadied what he considered her erratic and emotional susceptibility to having the wool pulled over her

eyes by the sycophants and inevitable double-crossers of business" (252). In the same way as Hurst portrays her husband's involvement in her career as an outstanding accountant and adviser in her biography, Flake's protective and clairvoyant business qualities balance Bea's stereotypically female business weaknesses. The Bea-Flake business duo relies on traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, values which tend to counterbalance Bea's unconventional position as a successful business women in love with a younger man. Second, many of Flake's traits are there to link him to traditional values. In particular, his "passion for surgery, inherited no doubt from an ancestor, Major Basil Flake..." (270) reinforces him as a upholder of tradition nevertheless able to exert a manly control over Bea's emotional turmoil and unconventional business power. He is the apple of her business eyes, taking care of the accounting jobs for which Bea feels unfit, just as Hurst's husband managed the author's money since she had always felt incompetent with numbers (Anatomy of Me, 280). Thus, although Flake is merely a sketchy portrait of an irresistible seducer, his character tends to connect more traditional and therefore socially acceptable values with the reluctant female "ground-breaker" and her overwhelming voice which pervades the whole text. Thus, Bea's voice and her infatuation for the perfect seducer leave hardly any room for Frank's voice nor any critical perspective on the traditional values he represents.

If there is no critical perspective on Frank the traditional "seducer" type in Hurst's text, tokens of Flake's seduction strategy on Bea are nevertheless present in the text, which makes the reader wonder if Flake is seducing her innocently or if he is one of the "villain seducer" types after all. The only certainty is that Flake's seduction deviates at the last moment, when Jessie falls in love with the "boy beautiful who has developed into the boy wonder," as she puts it in her own words (333-4). Flake's more or less hesitant seduction of Bea--which even contemporary critics such as Mary Ross have noticed (Ross, 4), leaves the reader with open questions about Flake's character and about Bea's inability to balance her life. Indeed, even though his tone is somewhat chauvinistic, Archer Winsten understandbly questions the

credibility of Bea's tragic loneliness as "an attractive woman under forty who is worth about six million dollars" when "[t]he author should have mentioned the men who must have been killed in the rush" (Winsten, 199). How could even a character such as Frank not have been somewhat attracted by Bea? And in Frank's compulsive seduction of his boss, how much is sheer mistake on Frank's part and how much is part of a maneuvering scheme? Since the test does not answer these questions as, throughout the book, Frank is seen through the limited perspective of Bea, the reader gets to question the validity of such a perspective and thus Frank's attitude as well only once the book has been closed.

To conclude about Frank Flake, although his character is based on the stereotype of the "seducer," the perspective in which the viewer is trapped leaves this character underdeveloped and sealed in his support of traditional values and his role as a "seducer." Only the destruction of Bea's marital scheme opens the way to a moral evaluation of Frank's character and role. However, this evaluation is unfortunately suspended by the sudden ending of the book on Bea's shattered hopes and thereby is left open to questions lingering in the reader's mind.

MR. CHIPLEY

If Frank Flake's character is a sketchy one based on the stereotype of the young seducer, Mr. Chipley's role in Imitation of Life dwindles into more that of a symbol rather than as a character. At first, Mr. Chipley starts out as a well-delineated character reminding us of Hurst's father's remoteness and her grandfather's boisterous patriarchal figure. However, Mr. Chipley's narrow-mindedness and physical impotence quickly reduce his role to the symbolic representation of the patriarchal ordering of the world in the last two-thirds of the novel.

At the beginning of Hurst's novel, Mr. Chipley appears as the ultimate patriarch exerting fully his tyrannical power, much in the same way Hurst describes her grandfather's attitude exerted toward his seven children and his wife, a "spare mirthless woman" who "mended, baked, scrubbed, laundered, reddened the brick sidewalk" (Anatomy of Me, 31). Except for his finickiness, Mr. Chipley's character derives clearly from

that of the stereotypical patriarchal figure reigning like a despot over the female world of his household, only to be replaced by another character, Mr. Pullman, based on the same patriarchal stereotype and who uncannily resembles Hurst's first beau who proposed to her, Mr. Barr (Anatomy of Me, 103). In fact, the second chapter of Hurst's novel already establishes how Bea is unable to cope with her finicky father and how her mother's own existence has revolved around Mr. Chipley's tyrannical domestic expectations. From the start, Mr. Chipley is described as confined in his own pride and as totally lacking in sensitivity to the female world that surrounds him--that is to say, first Adelaïde Chipley and, after her death, Bea. Stressing both Mr. Chipley's and Mr. Pullman's patriarchal ruthlessness and insensitivity to the women of the novel is the fact that, unlike that of most of the female characters, both of their first names are hardly mentioned more than once throughout the novel, although they do take part in the intimacy of the domestic events. At this early point of the novel, however, Mr. Chipley's resistance to the feminine world is still more than merely symbolic. He actively takes part in the plot, tyrannizing Mrs. Chipley and her daughter Bea so mindlessly as to bring about his own downfall. For instance, through numerous retrospective insights in the first twelve chapters, the reader learns how Mr. Chipley is responsible for a series of events leading to his downfall as a patriarchal figure: Bea's mother has slaved to satisfy her husband's finicky habits without consideration for her fatal illness (Chapter 2); his stubborn opposition to take a life insurance policy, in spite of his wife's wise insistence (Chapter 12), leaves the naïve Bea with no other alternative than conveniently marrying Mr. Pullman; in spite of his daughter's concerned request, Mr. Chipley's refuses to see a doctor, and consequently a long-impending stroke confines him to a wheelchair, turning his character into that of an irascible, impotent man, who does not hesitate to abuse his devoted pregnant daughter, in order to compensate for the loss of his patriarchal role to Mr. Pullman (Chapter 12). The text makes clear, however, that his own stubbornness and his carelessness are the causes for his eviction from his patriarchal throne in the household.

Up to the struggle between Mr. Chipley and Mr. Pullman for the patriarchal power over the female domestic world (Chapters 11 and 12), Mr. Chipley, even though physically diminished, is a character and functions as such taking part in the events of the plot. Only after Mr. Pullman's accidental death does Mr. Chipley's second stroke (Chapter 15) start a process of physical atrophy, reducing his character's role to that of a mute, mummified symbol of patriarchy. Thus, Mr. Chipley's ludicrous survival in a reptile-like shape throughout the novel has not to be taken literally but symbolically. In the aftermath of Mr. Pullman's death--signifying the impossibility of the perpetuation of the patriarchal order--and Bea's consequent assumption of her husband's identity through his business card, Mr. Chipley, the defeated patriarch, becomes symbolic as the pervasive reminder of the patriarchal order. Although Mr. Chipley's reduction to a symbolic-reptile state considerably limits his interaction and active role in the plot, his presence is nevertheless essential to the plot. His overbearing physical presence is constantly reminded to the reader throughout the novel by more or less heavy allusions (Chapters 17, 19, 22, 25, 26, 30, 40, 41, 43), often creating a strangely oppressive impression:

> Mr. Chipley had become wizened and incased in a tough skin that fitted him like a suit, several times too large, of loose old crocodile leather (116). During a silence roared into by the strophe and antistrophe of the old gentleman's breathing, who in his perpetual attitude of sitting up was asleep across the hall.....(309)...It [the spring air] lay in something sly and sudden in her father's old stone eyes. She [Bea] could feel it pressing against the china whites when his gaze seemed to follow her. He could not roll his eyes. They were locked into two fixed lights in the centers of their balls, but they were crowded with seeing, seeming to follow her to very corner of the room like the painted eyes of a trick portrait. (313)

By becoming a symbolic fossil of patriarchy, Mr. Chipley serves to convey to the reader the pervasive negative effects of the patriarchal moral ordering of the world, thanks to his mute approval or disapproval of some of the characters of the novel. Once reduced to his reptile-symbolic state, Mr. Chipley adopts an attitude toward the main female characters which remains constant and reveals to the reader what is

morally acceptable according to patriarchal social conventions and what is not. For instance, Mr. Chipley has a good relationship with Delilah, the sacrificial selfless mother figure, and with Jessie, his granddaughter who, contrary to her mother, has "no ambish" and is bound to become the perfect housewife. On the other hand, Mr. Chipley adopts an aggressive attitude toward the non-conventional women, such as Bea and Peola, with whom he engages in frightening "gaze struggles" (Chapter 22). No logical justifications can be found in the plot for Mr. Chipley's negative attitude, so that it has to be understood as part of the moral reading of the world as it is presented to the reader in Imitation of Life.

Although Mr. Chipley is a stereotype-based character as most of the characters are in Hurst's novel, the weight of the moral values he represents is so considerable in comparison to his actual role in the plot as to transform him into a symbolic representative of patriarchy. His presence is as pervasive as the influence of patriarchy on the domestic female world, and he reveals what type of feminine attitudes are suitable or threatening to the patriarchal order. At the same time, as the text clearly implies that Mr. Chipley's own narrow-mindedness and ruthlessness have caused his downfall, it invites the reader to take a certain distance from that patriarchal order.

DELILAH, EPICENTER OF THE BLACK SUBPLOT

The study of the main characters of the main plot already shows us how, besides Bea's role as a superachiever, the three characters of Jessie, Flake and Mr. Chipley represent traditional values which question and counterbalance Bea's inherent breaking away from socially established attitudes. Let us now examine how the Black subplot contributes to the moral reading of the world in Hurst's novel.

Delilah and her almost-white daughter, Peola, are the main and only characters of the Black subplot, if one overlooks some minor allusions made about Peola's father (91). Both Peola and Delilah are stereotype-based characters, as are Jessie, Frank, and Mr. Chipley, but in the case of the two Black characters, the stereotypes are heavily racial. In Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks, Donald Bogle

studies the evolution of the portrayal of Blacks and the performance of Black actors (ii, ix) and starts by defining the five racial stereotypes (14-18) which have shaped the representation of Blacks in movies: the Tom; the Coon; the Tragic Mulatto; the Mammy; the Buck. Although Bogle specifically studies movies and not novels, I maintain his definitions of Black racial stereotypes are valid as well for novels, since these racial stereotypes, which are part of the American culture, permeate various types of literary, dramatic, or cinematographic representations of a certain period. Furthermore, Bogle himself cannot help referring to the literary and folklorist precedents to some of the stereotypes that he studies in the movies: the Tom stemming from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin (6); the latest type of cinematographic representation of the Coon as a derivation of the harmless Uncle Remus with his "quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing"(8). Thus, we will see how Bogle's definitions of the Black Mammy and the Tragic Mulatto correspond perfectly to the stereotypes underlying Hurst's Black characters and how these stereotypes fit in the moral reading of Imitation of Life. Delilah, who appears in the novel when Bea cannot cope simultaneously with her business engagement and her domestic duties, is at the same time a paradigm of the "Aunt Jemima" type of Black Mammy, according to Bogle's definition, and an archetype of the mother figure.

Bogle describes the Black mammy as being "closely related to the comic coons" which "presen[t] the Negro as amusement object and buffoon" (7). According to Bogle, the "mammy is distinguished, however, by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous" (9), although he also distinguishes a sub-type of mammy, the "Aunt Jemima" type:

> Mammy's offshoot is the aunt jemima, sometimes derogatively referred to as "handkerchief head." Often aunt jemimas are toms blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture. Generally they are sweet, jolly, and good-tempered--a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong. (9)

This religious, good-tempered Black supporter of white culture fits as a glove to Delilah's character. Delilah is described as extremely

faithful to Bea--she refuses to take any wages or financial compensation (Chapter 16)--and is at least a reflection of the deferential behavior Blacks held out to whites or even a staunch defender of white culture as she herself enforces herself racial discrimination upon her daughter: "Tain't no use mah chile tryin' to get herself raised on de idea all men is equal. Maybe dey is in de eyes of de Lawd, but it's de eyes of man I's talkin' 'bout" (119). Instead of struggling against racial injustice, Delilah respects it to the point of trying to slow down her own daughter's tooth growth using Black magic in order to make sure that the white child's precedence is observed. Furthermore, Delilah is always good-tempered and thoughtless, even in the bleakest of financial straits, thanks to folklore wisdom: "Gimme one belly-laugh and three meals of belly-warmin'vittals and one belly-prayer a day, an' I kin keep misery outside mah door, like it was a cat" (114). However, many of her characteristics, such her size and her extremely religious and superstitious beliefs, make her an archetypal Aunt Jemima and often serve also to make her ridiculous in the eyes the reader because of Hurst's a racially derogatory undertone, probably more widespread in literature of 1930s than nowadays:

> Into every cranny and crevice of the strangely placed household there poured the red, black, and white personality of this immense woman. The red of her easily-hinged large mouth, packed with the white laughter of her stunning allotment of hound-clean teeth; the jug color of her skin with the gold highlights on cheekbones; the terrific unassailable quality of her high spirits, Baptist fervor, and amplitude reached and encompassed two infants and infantile old man, who turned his cold old bones toward her warmth. (96)

These exaggerations inherent to Hurst's depiction of Delilah often interfere with the pathos of the melodrama, undercutting the dramatic effect of some scene. For instance, Delilah's sorrow when Peola comes to announce her final decision to "pass" is described in such a way that it can only cause revulsion, therefore temporarily annihilating the reader's identification with Delilah's ordeal (Imitation of Life, 293). On the other hand, counterbalancing these heavy racial deformations is Delilah's stature as the archetypal mother figure; Delilah stands out as one of the wisest characters in the novel, able to grasp all the tricky

situations better than any other characters. Therefore, as the ultimate mother figure, first, she is the ultimate depository of the understanding of emotions of other characters, and second, the whole household revolves around her: although Delilah selflessly declines any credit for Bea's success, it is by using Delilah's folk mother figure that Bea makes it financially.

The text gives numerous examples of Delilah as the insightful motherly interpreter of other characters' feelings. Delilah handles the picky Mr. Chipley as smoothly as Bea's mother was able to do (Chapter 17). Delilah pushes Bea to get romantically involve with a man (Chapter 31), and she is the first one to discover that Bea is in love with Frank (Chapter 36). Delilah counsels Bea in her difficult relationship with her daughter Jessie (Chapter 30). The Black woman also detects her daughter's racial problem, as if it were a problem, at its very first stage--at the time of the gaze struggle game between Mr. Chipley and the strong-headed young Peola (Chapter 22), symbolizing Peola's resistance to the established social rules. Finally, Delilah predicts her own death, knowing that she will not survive her daughter's passing, and at this point, her perception of the world appears actually to go beyond normal understanding as she reveals to Bea that Peola has married Allen Matterhorn (Chapter 42), the young G.I. for whom she had predicted a doomed future (Chapter 33). Thus, the superstitious and mystical traits of the Black mammy, in the end, lead to the righteousness of the sacrificial mother. As the sacrificial mother figure, she inserts herself in the moral ordering of the novel, as a stronghold of the traditional and patriarchal value system, signified in the text by the contrast between Mr. Chipley's lack of aggressiveness toward Delilah and his fierce and apparently irrational behavior toward his own daughter, Bea.

If Delilah is the epicenter of the emotional world in Imitation of Life, she is also the basis for the tremendous economic success enjoyed by Bea. Bea--whom the text never presents as the ultimate housekeeper in spite of the fact that Bea in the end pictures herself as a "curtain-hemmer at heart" (Chapter 46)--simply exploits Delilah's motherly qualities to transform her into a "institution" (324): Delilah's

culinary talents and her housewifely thriftiness start the business of selling the "Delilah's Heart" maple syrup candies and transforms Delilah's stereotypical face into a trade-mark. As this lucky business find evolves into a waffle diner chain, under Delilah's trademark Bea is selling the public not only delicious traditional hot waffles flipped by an expert hand but, above all, the temporary warm atmosphere of a home: the description of the decoration of Bea's restaurant abounds with cosy, intimate details such as candle lights, real china dinnerware and all sorts of Americana to comfort the lonely home-sick G.I.s in the initial phase and the lonely love-hungry city dwellers once the war is over (Chapter 33). Thus, Bea sells Delilah, the archetype of the nurturing and love-caring mother, to a disoriented public and makes a fortune out of her.

To conclude, although Delilah is the heaviest racial stereotype-based character of Hurst's novel, she functions also as the archetypal sacrificial mother--standing in total contrast to Bea's role as the business woman who assume a man's role and identity and forgets all to long about her "curtain-hemmer" aspirations. Therefore, in spite of the questionable debasing traits emerging from the racial stereotype of "Aunt Jemima," Delilah comes through as a positive female character upon whom nurturing, domestic, religious traits and wisdom bestow a holy aura particularly visible during her imposing funeral (Chapter 43). In the moral reading of the novel, she represents the ultimate traditional archetype of motherhood in the western patriarchal value system. Hence, her death and funeral service during which a whole society buries an "institution" parallels Bea's mother's death on which the novel opens and clearly signifies the inexorable disappearance of the traditional mother not only as a personal loss but as the death of an archetype as well. As the mummified Mr. Chipley represents the pervading remains of a patriarchal structure promised a slow death, Delilah's death represents the disappearance of the archetypal mother. As such both these types fit the traditional role distribution in Hurst's parents' marital relationship.

PEOLA

Peola is a character who is able to pass for white in a melodramatic world where Blacks have to belong to the subplots and be content with menial jobs which provide them only with food and lodging. Peola is the most tragic character in the novel. Although the tragic mulatto type draws her dramatic impact from her racial identity dilemma, Peola appears less divided than one could expect in Hurst's novel. Already as a young child, she appears determined to pass for white, even when this means the rejection of her own mother. Thus, we will study how Peola actually epitomizes the white perspective of racial tensions. First, we will see how the figure of the "tragic mulatto" belongs to a North American literary tradition reflective of continental North American racial relationships. Second, in the case of Hurst, a striking parallel exists between her problematic ethnic origins and the way she treats the racial issues in her novel.

In order to understand the importance of the tragic mulatto in North American life, one has to examine the type of interracial relationship typical to American culture. In The White Man's Burden, Winthrop Jordan studies the regional differences in slavery and interracial relationships in the North American colonies. He notices that, although interracial sex occurred as soon as the slaves were brought into the colonies, attitudes toward offspring resulting from such relationships and the type of society outlasting slavery differed according to the demographic proportions of black and whites (70-72, 86): where the Blacks overwhelmingly outnumbered the whites--that is to say, mostly in the various islands--miscegenation was socially more acceptable and almost institutionalized, at least between white men and Black women. In the continental North-American colonies, in contrast, "mulattoes represented a practice about which men could only feel guilty" (86).

Consequent to these different interracial social arrangement, one can see why in the English literature of continental America, the character of the mulatto epitomizes, in a white perspective, all the fear and guilt resulting from miscegenation; complex feelings in which the white blood of the mulatto makes him/her so much more like white

people yet the stain of the Black blood seems irremediably insurmountable. In this white perspective, the "silent mechanism of passing" (85) represents a necessary accommodation "for those persons with so little African blood that they appeared to be white" (85) and a threat to the white racial identity. This dual nature of the mulatto, which Bogle presents both as tragic and sympathetic (9) in movie characters, is the stereotype underlying Peola's character in Imitation of Life. For this reason, she is seen through a white perspective and represents the experience of white guilt which can only be resolved through her tragic fate.

Therefore, in Hurst's novel, contrary to all expectations for a character with such a troubled identity, Peola is actually never presented as a deeply divided character but more as a character whose only possible choice is to pass, a choice which can only leads her to doom and unhappiness. Already within the early comparison between the two baby girls, Peola is doomed, despite her "pale and black pit of fierceness" (110). In spite of "this sublime democracy of childhood" (111) which allows Peola and the pink and blond, racially non-ambiguous Jessie to sleep in the same room, Delilah predicts that her almost-white daughter is bound to have a hard time "to stay on her black side" (141) and finds no other means to help her resolve her identity problem than praying and using black magic: "It's de white horses dat's wild, a-swimmin' in de blood of mah chile. Drive'em out, Lawd. Drive'em out, shameweed. If only I had a bit of snail water--" (227).

Although Peola is presented as a persistent struggler, bound to threaten the white race because of her drive to pass herself for white, she is nevertheless presented with sympathy. In my opinion, this sympathy is caused not only by "her white blood" which makes her a "victim of divided racial inheritance," as Bogle puts it, but also by a strong parallel between Hurst's own division over her ethnic origins. In Anatomy of Me, Hurst mentions how, even as a young woman, she would insist on being considered American and not Jewish (102), although she drew a large part of her inspiration from the multifarious immigrants in New York. In her article "Fannie Hurst and Her Nineteenth-Century Predecessors," Diane Lichtenstein also emphasizes how Hurst "was

simultaneously embarrassed by and proud of being a Jew" (26). This uneasy component of the author's identity is apparent not only through her treatment of Peola as a tragic mulatto but also in her treatment of various ethnic background characters. In fact, there is a definite parallel between the way Hurst deforms her racial and her ethnic stereotype-based characters. As Delilah's Aunt Jemima characteristics sometimes melt into a repulsive portrait of a mush of color, fat and tears, Jewish and Italian secondary characters are submitted to the same debasing treatment. One of Bea's high school friend's husband is presented as a horrible, chauvinist "Eyetalian" (Chapter 21), and the Jewish customers present in the Jewish hotel restaurant in which the wedding party takes place are not spared either:

> Everybody stared when the wedding party walked through the dining-room, the slightly greasy lips of the stout and pretty young Hebrew mothers of unmarried daughters, parting ... Hebrews were such artist about life, often bad artists, it is true, by walking in among the spice of those dark, lit, sometimes greedy, but strangely alive faces, it struck her that they must regard this groom of hers as so much oatmeal... unctuous oatmeal... (44-5)

Through these heavy negative stereotypes, Hurst establishes a strong parallel between her treatment of racial problems and her attitude toward ethnic identity. Consequently, using the Tragic Mulatto in Peola's character constitutes for Hurst the best way to present racial tensions to a white American audience, many of whom are more or less aware of and ambivalent about their own ethnic origins. In spite of her categorization as a Black character, Peola represents more a white perspective of racial problem and, perhaps, the only way to dramatize racial tensions in a sympathetic way for a white audience at that time. In fact, just as Bea constitutes a threat to patriarchy by her assuming a man's role and her late husband's identity, Peola is also a social transgressor in her trespassing another type of social boundaries, the racial dividing line. Peola represents another threat to patriarchy as she passes for white, and both of these transgressors, Peola and Bea, are portrayed in a way designed to stir up the reader's sympathy.

We have just seen how the different characters, Bea the working woman superachiever, Jessie the perfect housewife-to-be, Frank the seducer, Delilah the Black mammy, and Peola the tragic mulatto, were work by transgressing against or standing for the western traditional patriarchal values. The study of the characterization in Imitation of Life up to this point shows how Jessie and Delilah reaffirm traditional values and sex roles, whereas Bea, although reluctantly, is the ground-breaker and upsets the traditional patriarchal ordering of the world. As if it were done in respect to a reversed symmetry, Peola also appears as a threat to the traditional ordering. Peola's character shows how the Hurstian text uses the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto to introduce another attack against patriarchal tradition and how this white envisioning of the racial problems ties in with Hurst's problematical American Jewish identity. In other words, the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto constitutes, in fact, a projection of the white ethnic cultural conflict between ethnic cultural origins and American identity.

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

If the main characters of the novel and the stereotypes they are based on serve to establish a simplified and moral reading of the world, the secondary characters also take part in a moral reading of the world as they serve to present the reader with a larger spectrum of possibilities within which the main characters develop. One of the numerous sets of secondary characters, making short occasional appearances in the plot without incidentally taking part in it, is made up of various married and/or working women. Through these characters, Fannie Hurst clearly explores the multi-faceted problem of women's social role in marriage and in work, a critical theme in relation to Bea's role as the working woman superachiever and to the author's own personal experience.

The secondary characters representing the possibilities of the married woman are Mrs. Hanson, Mrs. Vizitelli, Mrs. Tannenhill, and Erna Posncarne. All of these women appear in the earliest part of the novel and form a spectrum of different marital situations which enlarge the

reader's vision about the social situation of the married woman. Some of these women are from Bea's mother's generation, such as Mrs. Hanson and Mrs. Vizitelli, and others are Bea's own friends or acquaintances, such as Erna Ponscarne and Mrs. Tannenhill.

Mrs. Vizitelli is hardly mentioned in the novels and appears mainly at the beginning at the time of Bea's marriage to Mr. Pullman. The text presents her as a neighbor housewife who has known Bea since she was a little girl and therefore could have provided a motherly support had she not been overworked by the demanding task of raising a large family (Chapter 15). She is the only sign of motherly female disapproval of Bea's arranged marriage to Mr. Pullman, as she refuses to attend the wedding ceremony in spite of her longing throughout Bea's childhood to be present at Bea's wedding (Chapter 7). Her refusal to take part fully in the ceremony confirms in the reader's mind that the marriage is a mismatch and that Mr. Chipley does not care about his daughter's emotional well-being. Mrs. Hanson is also one of Bea's mother's neighborhood friends and suffers notoriously from her third husband's unfaithfulness. Even without Mrs. Vizitelli's motherly warmth, however, she becomes intimate with Bea after her fateful marriage and serves as marital counsellor to her. Guessing Bea's frigidity toward her coarse husband, Mrs. Hanson advises Bea not to let her husband notice it and to simulate sexual satisfaction, as she knows by her experience with three unfaithful husbands what disastrous consequences an avowed frigidity can have on marital relationships (Chapter 10). Thus, marriage does not have a positive outcome for the women of the older generation who befriended Mrs. Chipley, and their experiences thereby consolidate a negative portrayal of marriage already emerging in the description of the Chipleys' own restrained domestic drudgery (Chapter 1).

If Bea's mother and her friends have to resign themselves to burdensome adaptation as married women, Bea's own acquaintances seem at first to have a better fate but which is one that only covers up further frustrations. Mrs. Tannenhill, contrary to the women presented up to this point, represents the kept woman who happily spends her days in an irregular relationship based on sexual pleasure. However, Mrs.

Tannenhill is not portrayed in a favorable light, as she appears as a physically repulsive and intruding woman with a smothering love for children (Chapter 15, 82-3). Her marriage in the end appears as to be a fake one (Chapter 15) and her lifestyle is undermined by the vicissitudes of the precariousness of her illegitimate status. Another description of a seemingly happy marriage which turns sour comes with the introduction of the beautiful Erna Ponscarne. A former high school classmate, Erna has "made it" socially by spectacularly marrying over her social status (Chapter 18). In a contrastive parallel with Bea's situation, Erna's social ascent is seen as the result of her "wanting passionately," whereas Bea is merely "needing passionately." Further allusions to Erna's extraordinary marriage, however, reveal that Erna's eagerness for social ascent also has its price since she has to put up with an incredibly sexist Italian husband, as Bea finds out at her own expense (Chapter 21). In the end, all of the married women whose experiences are given in comparison to Bea's own ill-matched marriage are presented in difficult situations that are the result of their binding themselves in the ties of their legal or common-law marriages. Thus, in Imitation of Life, none of the female characters is happily married, except for Virginia Eden who remains utterly in control of her life, as her financial situation and pragmatic attitude allow her to marry and divorce at the whim of her passionate love for this "somewhat wastrel husband whose major virtue was his frank realization of his merely ornamental rôle in the history of her success" (243). Virginia's unconventional series of marriages to and divorces from "a second husband whom she had twice divorced and twice remarried" (242) reminds us of Hurst's own unconventional "two-breakfast" marriage to Jack Danielson, a second-rate pianist who never enjoyed the glamorous and financial success that Hurst had as a writer.

In connection with working women, the text also presents various portraits which serve to underline some aspects of the topic, often echoing Bea's situation. These secondary characters appear throughout the story of Bea's own social climbing. Besides Virginia Eden, who is a major secondary character built on contrasts to and parallels with Bea, the text makes numerous allusions to characters who hardly take any part

in the plot and resemble snapshots of various situations of women at work. At first, when Bea struggles to find a job which would be acceptable according social standards, characters such as Miss Bogharthy (Chapter 14) emphasize the exceptional situations in which a woman can have access to a real job, a job which is not only for "pin money": Miss Bogarthy, an old spinster, is presented as having "inherited" her bookkeeper position in a hotel from her father. Then, once Bea relentlessly scours the town for maple syrup orders, the text mentions how the working women she encounters could not have been more ruthless than their male counterparts with their patronizing harassment (98-99). In this case, an anonymous hospital superintendant is used as an example on how these made-hard-in-business women jeopardize Bea's precarious financial situation by whimsically refusing a maple syrup order (98). Later on, in order to underline women's talents in performing jobs, three model employees--Miss Weems, Miss Lejaron, and Mrs Van Der Lippe--back up Bea in her extraordinary accomplishment as a business woman (Chapter 27). Although they vanish from the plot, they are presented at one point as important as Frank Flake is in providing Bea with advice and support (185-6). Very soon, these invaluable dedicated female co-workers leave the field to another kind of exemplary working woman, the lonely love-hungry Regina Elmp (Chapter 33). This secondary character appears as a regular of the warm, philanthropic B. Pullman diners at the moment when Bea starts to realize the emotional vacuity of her life as an alienated workaholic. If all these secondary characters are clearly used to stress some traits present in the complex portrait of the superachiever, Virginia Eden remains, however, the most fully developed secondary character and Bea's most interesting counterpart.

Finally, before concluding on the working woman series of secondary characters, it is important to note that Bea is not the only character in the novel whose portrait is mirrored by secondary counterparts. Jessie's lack of stamina and ambition is, for instance, emphasized by her own comparison to two of her rich classmates who nevertheless choose to work: Muriel Stroheim works in the American hospital in Paris; Vicky Ness begs a job on one of her father's newspapers (333). In spite of Bea's subsequent assertion to her spoiled

daughter that only personal fulfillment counts, the text, thanks to the working Muriel and Vicky, clearly indicates that "[u]p-and-coming American girls simply don't jell, like [Jessie], into weak sisters," as Jessie articulates it (333). In other words, the future is for working women and not for the perfect housewife, as Delilah's death already hinted.

This brief survey of some of the secondary characters of Imitation of Life shows how crucial secondary characters are in exploring some topic, such as the social status of women in the American society at the beginning of this century. These characters are often used to underline characteristics and values already present in main characters and thereby provide the reader with a fuller moral appreciation of these main characters and the values they represent. The complexity of the panorama offered by all these working women parallels Hurst's own interest in the topic--her career as a writer was her life, but she was also aware of the difficulty and conditions endured by women who worked at low-paid jobs in the same time period. In her portrayal of working women, she is torn between the traditional attitude favoring women's place in the home and the inevitable social changes which pressured women to work in order not to be caught in the trap of marriage.

This study of the narrative in Imitation of Life shows how the narrative structure and the characters reflect the conflicts between traditional and progressive values on issues such as women's work and racial relationships existing in the American society of the 1930s. Although racial relationships remain a subplot and are only understandable through the white perspective of the mulatto character and the archetypal mother, Hurst attempts to express a sympathetic approach to racial tensions. However, there are clearly no possible solutions to the racial problem: Delilah suffers tremendously as if she were expiating all social racial ills, and Peola is doomed to an unknown but terrible fate, after having renounced her womanhood in order to pass. On the other hand, the issue of women's work is more fully treated through Bea, her daughter, and a multitude of secondary characters. In spite of Bea's failure to achieve both financial success and emotional fulfillment, the fate of working women is not presented as

tragically as is the destiny of Black women. The novel leaves room for the possible balance between success in the working world and emotional happiness through secondary characters, such as Bea's successful counterpart, Virginia Eden. The book's concluding on Bea's striking failure as a superachiever not only reminds women how difficult it is to achieve such balance, but constitutes a distinct protest against women's social limitations.

As this study of the narrative points out, Hurst's novel deals marvelously with issues that were crucial to women of the 1920s and 1930s, and therefore was bound to be extremely successful with the female audience of this period. Furthermore, as Hurst builds her novel by drawing often on her own biographical experience, the flavor of the genuine experience seems to have been successful in counterbalancing the melodramatic exaggerations difficult to swallow in a period in which realism had become an important part of the canon.

III. STUDY OF THE MODES OF MELODRAMA IN "IMITATION OF LIFE"

In Chapter 1, it was shown how melodrama could be defined according to the principles of intensification, simplification, and plausibility and how these principles control not only the narrative of melodrama but the aesthetics of melodrama as well. As noted in that chapter, the aesthetic elements characteristic of the modes in expression of melodrama are excess, immediacy, and spectacle, which therefore will constitute the three different subheadings of the following analysis of the modes of melodrama in Imitation of Life. Thus, the purpose of our study here is to show how and how successfully excess (A), immediacy (B), and spectacle (C) are represented in Fannie Hurst's text.

A. EXCESS

Excess, as is noted above, is the set of stylistic devices through which the reader's feelings are exceedingly heightened comparatively to the cause for such emotion. By enhancing the reader's emotional

reaction, stylistic excess conveys what cannot be said by words or actions: it serves to identify the limitation of moral values and language at the same time it tends to override them. This section studies how the Hurstian text make three different literary uses of excess: excess in style, excess in stereotypes, and excess in images.

Excess in style is generally achieved in Imitation of Life by the conscious reiteration of apparently insignificant details. One of the most striking example of this stylistic expression of excess is achieved in Chapter 8 describing Bea's marriage ceremony. Throughout the chapter, a multitude of apparently innocuous details build up a paradoxical contradiction to the opening statement that "[Everything had gone very well..." (43). Thus, by frequently sprinkling the text with negative details undermining the first positive statement, the intimacy and solemnity of the scene, a strong reverse impression is created, and the awfulness of Bea's marriage comes through even more powerfully:

> Everything had gone very well, even with all the commotion out-of-doors and a section of the Reading train panting and coughing right through the ceremony and the strains of brass bands rattling the very window panes of the parlor as Bea and Mr. Pullman dropped softly to the floor cushion for the ritual of the marriage service.
>
> The ring, balking ever so slightly at the knuckle, had slid on. There was something protective in the soft creaking noises and breathing of Mr. Pullman as he knelt. She tried to marshal her mind during the ceremony. Here she was in the midst of this most important moment, perhaps in her entire life. *Love*. Did her gown, as she knelt, properly cover up the new white soles of her shoes? *Honor*. Some one had left the kitchen faucet running! *And obey*. There was an imperfection in the weave of Dr. Aspern's striped left trousers leg. and now a kiss, the taste and smell and temperature of bay rum...
>
> And there wasn't even a young girl present to catch the bride's bouquet. Pink roses and baby's breath. (43)

In this instance, the stylistic use of an accumulation of insignificant but negative details contradicting a strong positive opening statement serves to enhance the reader's experience of and emotional response to the text. This particular use of excess explores and overrides the limitation of language and achieves a stronger negative portrayal of the marriage by destroying the direct positive opening statement. It also indirectly serves to criticize marriage as a

social institution, thereby inciting a subversive reading of the text: marriage is officially presented as a "good thing" for Bea as the greatest day of her life "had gone very well" (43); subversively the day of her marriage is depicted as the worst day of her life.

All the different sorts of excess in style are expressed by an overabundant mention of one or more characteristics. In the marriage scene, the text abounds in indirect negative details about Bea's marriage. Another way in which stylistic excess is used to raise the reader's emotional response is by inflating to their breaking point the stereotypes on which some of the characters are based, pushing them into imbalance. The best example of this stylistically excessive treatment of stereotypes is most conspicuously used inherent on the most positively depicted character, Delilah, the sacrificial mother. Although at various instances in the plot, Delilah's religious and superstitious beliefs are portrayed as amusing traits of her Black mammy type (Chapters 15, 32, 36, 40, 42), nowhere does this local coloring of this character threaten her nurturing motherly and saintly aura. Interestingly enough, however, at the peak of the Black subplot which comes with Peola's definitive passing in Chapter 39, the stylistic treatment of Delilah's stereotype becomes so excessive as to deflect some of the reader's natural sympathy toward Peola, her renegade daughter. In the midst of what should be the most melodramatic confrontation of the novel, Delilah's portrait as the archetypal mother is so amplified as to distort it and make it seem utterly repulsive. Peola's sudden intrusion, "straight as a blade" (292) into her mother's daily routine, causes the old woman to change from the perfect saintly, nurturing mother into a slimy, overemotional character that becomes the dehumanized caricature of its own stereotype:

> The wide expanse of her face slashingly wet, the whites of her eyes seeming to pour rivulets down her face like rain against a window pane, her splayed lips dripping eaves of more tears, her throat even rained against, there was apparently no way that Delilah could capture the face of her child in an embrace. Rigid-eyed, it swung , the banana-colored mask, this way and that, away from the wetness. It eluded, it dipped, it came up dry and powdered with pallor, fastidiously untouched in the perfection of its maneuvers to escape the great wet crying surface that was after it. (293)

In stylistically pushing Delilah's stereotype to its breaking point, which renders it caricatural, the text not only reveals its own limitation but is able beyond language itself to offer a more complete rendering of its world by heightening some of the reader's sympathy for Peola. Instead of simply playing the card of the betrayed saintly mother against the wicked betraying daughter, the text questions the archetype of the perfect nurturing mother by showing how such a socially accepted character can turn out to be a daughter's worst nightmare. By breaking its own stereotype, the text goes momentarily beyond its own simplification, suggesting to the reader a fuller interpretation of the world. This interpretation inevitably upsets the traditionally established values. Thus, it is clear that in this case, stylistic excess allows the unmasking of the text's own ethical assumptions by their temporary subversion. Nevertheless, Delilah's traditional motherly archetype is reinstated by the institutional dimension of her funeral, in which all the social participants represented in the melodrama follow her remains and cry for the void caused by the disappearance of an archetypal figure epitomizing traditional motherhood.

A last and more subtle use of stylistic excess in Hurst's novel comes through the overabundance of certain types of images spread out throughout the novel. Most of these overused images in Imitation of Life strikingly belong to the female domestic world, such as ice, houses, furniture, legs and clothing, and attempt to express implicitly, thereby, a female ethical reality explicitly absent from the text's language itself. I will briefly examine the images and function of clothing in Imitation of Life, as the appearance of clothing imagery is highly significant in Hurst's novel.

Indeed, Hurst's text seems obsessed with details about clothing. However, in order to make the imagery work as a sign to be decoded by the reader and which goes beyond the text, the clothing imagery is used with an extremely repetitive insistence so that the reader must enter the code. Besides the initial insistence on Adelaïde Chipley's "bengaline dress" (1), which covers her dead legs in the first chapter,

clothing details become overwhelming in Chapter 2. The text of this early chapter discourses on clothing at length--roughly 1/3 of the whole second chapter--first as part of "myriads of these hitherto unrecorded little items [which] were to begin to stand out immensely against the all too brief span of each day" (6-7). The avalanche of clothing which Bea has suddenly to wash, iron, and sew as part of the "housekeeping for Father and Mr. Pullman" (7) represent, first, her incapacity to cope with the sudden irruption of a domestic, female world and way of thinking, which her overprotective mother had kept out of her knowledge. Second, this obsession with details about clothing is also used to indicate about a character's inner state. For instance, Mr. Chipley's grief is expressed through the textile imagery of a female world slavishly devoted to a male dominant world:

> Since her [Adelaïde's] passing, Evans Chipley was somehow, to his daughter, looking so dwarfed. Almost as if he had shriveled into his cloths and hung in the middle of them like a spider close to the center of his web. Poor father. Life for him must be made to proceed as closely as possible to the pattern she [Bea's mother] had woven about his fastidious little needs. (Imitation of Life, 7)

As early as in Chapter 2, Mr. Pullman's self-contentment about his self-taught intellectual (if limited) capacities is presented as the reason for his constant ruining of his clothing, consequently forcing Bea repeatedly to mend his buttonhole:

> Apparently, when Mr. Pullman lectured to the visitors on the life history of the tomato from the vine to the ketchup bottle (contains no benzoate of soda or other artificial preservatives) he was particularly hard on the faille silk lapel to his black broadcloth coat. The buttonhole of it was in a chronic state of being pulled and frayed, requiring him to frequently breakfast in his brown velveteen house coat while Bea whipped around it with a fine black silk thread. (13)

Furthermore, the clothing imagery in this chapter also gives an insight into Bea's psychological state, as it reveals her immaturity and her disgust for the physical intimacy which her laundry duties forces on her:

> But picking up all these male personal objects of apparel herself, was quite another matter (13)... Did it, she wondered, ever occur to him, as they sat evening after evening around the supper table, that there existed between them the strange intimacy of her monitorship over his soiled handkerchiefs, nightshirt, and underclothing? (14)

It is quite clear at this point that Fannie Hurst was drawing on her personal experience to describe Bea's immaturity about and disgust for the physical nature of the world. Indeed, in her autobiography, Fannie Hurst mentions her own terror over explicit references to or sounds recalling bodily functions which prompted her to beg her parents not to wash their teeth nor to use the bathroom when she had some friends paying her a visit (Anatomy of Me, 93). This autobiographical parallel is further emphasized by the modelling of Mr. Pullman's character after one of Fannie Hurst's first beaus as a young lady, Mr. Barr, who bursting with pretension and heaviness and, like Mr. Pullman, read a paper for a local literary circle about Abraham Lincoln, a speech he had copied from the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Anatomy of Me, 103), just as his fictive by-product does (Imitation of Life, 14). Thus, clothing imagery is not merely used to bring into the text the female world suppressed by the social patriarchal order, but Fannie Hurst uses it as well to give some kind of inner depth to her characters, using elements drawn from her own emotional and psychological experience.

Of course, the clothing imagery does not end with Chapter 2. It develops throughout the novel and helps to bring into the text an emotional shade that most of the stereotype-based characters of the melodrama would have a hard time to develop.

After the intense use of clothing imagery in Chapter 2, however, this stylistic device appears less regularly but continues to add depth to the text. It is first used to emphasize the mismatch of personalities between the innocent icy-frigid Bea and the gross, heavy-set middle-aged Mr. Pullman. As was previously mentioned, the physical description of some of the participants at the wedding ceremony gives the reader definite elements of portraiture through their clothing in the case of characters such as Mr. Pullman and Mrs. Doc Hanson. Furthermore, in Chapter 9, the description of Mr. Pullman's suits now

hanging beside Bea's own clothing just above his "strong Blüchers into which his strong feet on their heavy nature legs rested roomily" (53) are a final reminder of Bea's husband's coarseness that comes just at the onset of her wedding night. Later on, Bea's clothing exteriorize the changes she is going through. For instance, as she tries to enter the working world, her clothing becomes a visible sign of women's exclusion from the working world. Female clothing is described in terms of its inadequacies for the working world:

> If only, thought Bea, on occasion after occasion after defeat, I had more gumption? They feel in me how worried I am! That's no good. I look a fright. Perhaps I'm dressed wrong. The shirtwaist and skirt are all right, but it might be a good thing to leave off the taffeta petticoat which rustles so. Felt right silly, talking to old Mr. Massingham of the East Jersey Title and Guarantee Company, seeing in the looking-glass behind him the way those blue plumes kept shaking so on my hat when I talked. One of those plain short-back sailors, like the girls in the big offices in Philadelphia wear to work, would be more business-like. (75)

Once she is launched into the business world, in contrast to other women who are alien to the outside world, such as Mrs. Doc Hanson, the text underlines that Bea does not need to use her clothing as an armor, defending her femaleness from the aggression of a male dominated working world:

> Withal, the alleged perils, so vividly anticipated by Mrs. Hanson, who had always worn an extra enforcement of petticoats against an ever-potential Jack the Ripper, of a woman venturing into the ice-fields of business, had not dawned upon her experience. (97-8)

On the contrary, with Bea's adaptation to the maple business, her clothing becomes symbolic of her scouring new outdoor horizons rendered by the amazing capacity of her garments to retain odors which represent her multifarious experiences stemming from her newly-acquired freedom of movement (112). Finally, as Bea achieves her financial success story, Bea's focus on clothing parallels, first, her discovery of the importance of her public image--a fact that certainly did not escape the theatrical Fannie Hurst in the role of the lady-writer (Brandimarte, 66-68):

> It was impossible to live and move in an ever-enlarging world of business women and not both consciously and unconsciously ape their accouterments of dress and good grooming. It was as if, too, she could feel the accouterments of her success. (186)

Later on, her infatuation with Flake prompts her in a craving for trendier and even more fashionable clothing from Chapter 36 and on. At this point, Be changes from an old-fashioned style of "whaleboning" and "starched panties" (331) to a modern high-fashion style which impresses her own daughter and represents Bea's attempt to create the image of a new type of femininity which would be appropriate to the incredibly successful business woman type. However, her new image of femininity fails to work as Bea loses in the end to her daughter and her traditional yet remodeled role as the educated angel of the house.

As the previous analysis on Bea's clothing imagery shows its significant role in the reader's understanding of a moral reading of Imitation of Life, in the second half of the novel the clothing imagery is, however, not restricted to giving more depth to the superachiever. For instance, in Chapter 30, the reference to clothing points out the stifling nature of the relationship between Delilah and Peola. Delilah emulates in Peola's garb Jessie's clothes, hair-style, and color schemes (213) as a tribute to Jessie's devotion to her Black nurturing mother. Furthermore, it is important to point out that sometimes the color of clothing plays a predominant role in the interpretation of the clothing imagery. For instance, Jessie's yellow frock--which she wears during the scene when she confronts her mother with her fatal announcement of her soon-coming marriage to Flake--echoes Jessie's happiness and love for Flake which spreads its brightness all over her and makes her look like a flower in Chapter 47: "'Of course,' said the yellow spread of skirts from her cushion, with the brightness out over her face in its flood light...," a brightness that Bea's mind repeatedly refuses to interpret as a sign of her daughter's infatuation.

To conclude the stylistic use of excess in Imitation of Live, it is clear that excess plays a crucial role in Hurst's shaping of melodrama. Whatever its stylistic expression, excess in style gives more depth to the stereotyped-based character and exteriorizes in

explicit ways the implicit and sometimes repressed tensions of her melodramatic characters. We have seen how at some point the stylistic use of excess uncovers elements that Hurst has drawn from her personal experience; these elements were especially relevant in heightening the reaction of the female readers of her time as these addressed the home versus work dilemma. All the stylistic effects of excess question to a certain extent the traditional values which underlie the moral ordering of the melodramatic world, whether the stylistic use of excess concerns the details of one scene, a stereotype, or the overuse of a certain type of imagery throughout the text. All these excesses, which are traditionally criticized as a call on the reader to "overreact" according to the literary canon--in which realism prevails-- all these stylistic excesses are not to be taken literally but as a way Hurst adds a symbolic and questioning dimension to her melodramatic text.

B. IMMEDIACY

In the first chapter of this study, immediacy was defined as a stylistic property of melodrama in which the reading process offers an instantaneous understanding of the ordering of the melodramatic world. In other words, immediacy is the stylistic attribute by which melodrama tends to conceal the gap between signifier and the signified; this gap, has fueled modernism and existentialism. In melodrama, on the contrary, immediate experience of feelings through a certain literary configuration or image becomes the ultimate source of knowledge and a vision of the world.

The Hurstian text uses immediacy at various levels, from simple images to some key scenes around which a whole chapter revolves. Examples of simple stylistic images of immediacy usually bring to the reader either a whole ethical perspective or a profound understanding of an event in a few lines. For instance, in Chapter 6, which is a preliminary chapter to Bea's marriage, the description of the house already contains the condemnation of such an ill-matched union:

> Not that it was to be so much of an occasion. The odor of the tuberoses of Mother's death had lain too

> recently in the room which was to be the scene of her child's marriage to her boarder.
>
> The sensing of this was unanimous between the three of them. (Imitation of Life, 34)

From then on, although the text does not directly object to Bea's marriage to Mr. Pullman, the image of the smell of death pervading a marriage is enough to convey the unarticulated and repressed that everyone feels, the reader included--that is to say, the horrid nature of this union to come.

In the same way, stylistic immediacy is used to express the unspeakableness of such experiences as death, the invisible drudgery of the feminine world, and birth. Already in the first chapter, the image of Adelaïde Chipley's legs covered by her dress becomes the expression of the indescribable emotional shock induced by the passing of a loved one from the world of the living to the inert realm of the dead:

> She found herself, crying there beside the bier, thinking of her mother's legs. Such willing ones. They were locked now, as they lay stretched horizontally down the center of the parlor, in the rigidity of death. The bengaline dress, for which only four dreamlike weeks ago they had shopped together on the Atlantic Avenue, now lay decently over those dear legs. Dreadful counterpane to the physical fact that Adelaide Chipley's breasts and loins and femurs lay dead. (Imitation of Life, 1)

In addition, this focus on Mother's legs conveys to the reader the way in which the feminine domestic world is overlooked, discarded, and repressed by the patriarchal ordering of the world:

> There had been so little evidence, during her lifetime, of any aspect of her physical life, other than just the automatic processes of locomotion and eating and sleeping.... her legs had just carried her about through being wife to Evans Chipley, and mother to Beatrice Fay Chipley, and all things to the monotonous mosaic of little days in the little household. (1)

Thus, Adelaïde's legs become the immediate stylistic image of the shock of her death: a disappearance which lets appear for the first time a female domestic world, even as her death stopped her legs and her domestic drudgery.

In Chapter 13, however, immediacy works in a more complex stylistic configuration, as the traumatic physical experience of

parturition is conveyed as an explosion of Bea's world and inner self. In the shortest chapter of the book, Hurst gives to her readers a sense of the trauma of birth by stylistically establishing incongruous links between elements of Bea's physical pain and her emotional turmoil, as it had started to emerge in previous chapters. As a result, the reading conveys through its style the immediate experience of the physical trauma of birth and at the same time allows the resurgence of Bea's emotional trauma about her mother's death, her marital experience, and the sudden accidental death of her husband which has been repressed up to this point:

> She was having a premature baby in a hospital room which every so often came down over the face like a mask and Mr. Pullman was kicking and spinning father's wheel-chair, and when they started to try and amputate her legs by pulling them out from the sockets, she screamed, and there was the upper half of her separating from the something going from her... Mother, or somebody with a white headache--they all wore white linen headaches about their brows, no, not headaches. Of course not!--Mother or somebody was telling her to press and relax, and a classmate named Freda Uhl, whom she had not seen or heard of for at least ten years, was shoveling coals into a furnace--the furnace of an overturned steam engine which had spilled out onto Mr. Pullman, who was lying in the midst of it, the shape of a crazy old wooden cross... (72)

Bea's body and mind seem to explode in a delirious stylistic fireworks before in the end "God or somebody was putting her together again," and resulting in "Jessie was born" (Imitation of Life, 72). Contrary to the passage on Adelaïde Chipley's death wherein the unspeakable was introduced into the text through the image of her legs, in the case of Jessie's birth the inexpressible physical trauma and repressed emotions are conveyed by the dislocation of the style itself rather than a particular image.

In all these examples of the use of immediacy in Imitation of Life the immediate experience of feelings becomes the ultimate source of understanding for the reader, as it serves to express the unspeakable and to reveal the suppressed: the disruptive feeling emerging from the description of the smell of the tuberoses serves to convey to the reader the impropriety of Bea's marriage; the insistence on Bea's mother's legs expresses Bea's state of shock as she faces death and discovers the

suppressed feminine domestic reality; the stylistic dislocation of the passage on Jessie's birth discloses the physical trauma as well as the emotional suffering endured by the female superachiever caught in a patriarchal world.

C. SPECTACLE

The last aesthetic element of the modes of melodrama to be examined is spectacle. The best example of the use of spectacle--that is to say, of a scene of social importance which culminates in a public spectacle or event--is the episode of Delilah's funeral. Although the scope of this scene is apparently less social and historical than is stipulated in Cawelti's definition of spectacle, Delilah's funeral not only works as an intensifying episode culminating in a public spectacle but also lies at the heart of Hurst's domestic melodrama. Delilah's death is the symbolic death of the sacrificial mother figure and the Black mammy stereotype, through whom an entire society--according to the textual implicitly white perspective--grieves for the inevitable changes-to-come in its sex roles and racial relationships:

> Harlem, of which she had never been part, except by gestures of patronage and munificence, poured forth for the spectacle of this dead face of one of the humblest members of its race which had become an affectionate daguerreotype against the consciousness of a nation. (325)

If the text insists heavily on the institutional public dimension of Delilah's face and on the solemnity of her funeral, it also makes clear, however, that Delilah is more a creation of the white vision of the Blacks and that she is not fully part of the Black community, as the numerous nowadays disturbing racial comments in the funeral scene would even further prove. This contradiction between a spectacular scene which aims to convey the inevitable pain and anguish accompanying changes in social values and the impossibility in this very scene to express the core of the Black racial problem explains in part the failure of Imitation of Life's greatest spectacle episode: the scene has the social grandiosity of spectacle but lacks the emotional intensity that should be produced by spectacle.

This failure of this great spectacle scene indicates the extreme ambiguity of Hurst's melodrama concerning the racial and sex role issues put into question by the text itself. Just as the confrontation between Delilah and her daughter over Peola's passing loses in melodramatic intensity because of the breaking-down of Delilah's nurturing Black mammy-mother stereotype into a ridiculous smothering mass of weeping flesh, the funeral scene lacks the emotional intensity attributed to spectacle because of the incapacity of a melodramatic text so impregnate with the white perspective on racial relationship to render the emotional dimension of the Black racial problem. Imitation of Life addresses the racial issues but fails to exploit fully the melodramatic possibilities. As an editor purportedly told his young ambitious protegé named Fannie Hurst, "[s]tick close to what you know best and write about it" (Imitation of Life, 161).

IV. EVALUATION OF THE NOVEL AND PLAUSIBILITY

Besides the failure to melodramatize fully the Black subplot, this analysis of the characters and modes of melodrama in Imitation of Life has uncovered the ambiguity of the Hurstian text about the issue of the changes in sex role. An extreme tension exists between, on one hand, the text's implicit level which condemns the social dependance of women through the institution of marriage and glorifies the superachiever and women's active role in the working world and, on the other, Bea's failure to construct a new image of femininity which would have prevented her daughter from stealing her husband-to-be. Hurst fails to reconcile traditional and radical feminist attitudes by not being able to define a new feminine model between that of the "Angel in the House" and the "New Woman." Bea is punished for the lack of emotional understanding of human feelings at which Delilah was a champion; this lack goes hand in hand with Bea's assumption of a male business identity (through her husband's business card) but goes mostly unnoticed while its backlash is minimized by the wise nurturing Delilah who is there to mend the broken pieces. However, the strong advocating made throughout

the text for the participation of women in the working world makes Bea's final treatment look unfair and revolting, an impression which is amplified by the shock of having a melodrama unconventionally ending abruptly on its superachiever's failure. Hence, numerous negative comments about the ending were made by contemporary reviewers of Hurst's novel, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, as the study on the secondary characters has shown, Bea's final failure to achieve her sentimental fulfillment has to be placed in the broader panorama of all the working female figures of the book. What Bea has failed to achieve is not presented as impossible to achieve. Bea's meaner-in-business sister, Virginia Eden, is the "New Woman" who has it all: she still remains the symbol of a whole new ground-breaking perspective for women's social status to the female readership in the mid-30s.

If Hurst's novel still brings forward a powerful statement through its melodramatic stylistic and narrative treatment of women's issues such as women and work and women and marriage, her novel's flaws stand in her inability to treat genuinely racial issues. Hurst's treatment of women through the main and secondary characters, as we have seen, gives a plausible picture of the woman's social status in the 1930s, since it stems from her own experience as a woman's writer and her involvement in social issues of her time. On the other hand, as she projects her own ethnic dilemma as a third generation German Jew who wonders if she feels more American or Jewish on her melodramatic treatment of racial issues, the racial tensions as portrayed in her novel are not plausible. If they might have been enjoyable for some of the readers in the 1930s--some of Hurst's contemporary critics found the portrait of Delilah to be the most powerful part of her novel, as we will see the following chapter--nowadays Delilah and Peola are totally outdated and cumbersome stereotypes in a subplot whose melodramatic potential has not been fully exploited.

In a way, Bob Davis, Hurst's editor and friend, was right when he advised her to "stick close to what you know best and write about it" (Imitation of Life, 161) since it was there that she was at her best. From her experience, she understood perfectly well the dilemma of women in the 1930s: on the one hand, marriage was not ensuring them

satisfactory social status and happiness, and, on the other, the jobs to which they were allowed to turn to were usually underpaid and hardly likely to effect their spiritual fulfillment. Hurst was certainly not trying to delude her readership when the bottom line of her melodrama was warning them that work did not necessarily translate into happiness and independence but that happiness through work depended on one's passionate devotion to one's career. In a way, Hurst was aware of the exceptional situation that was hers, as much as Virgina Eden's and to a lesser degree Bea Pullman's: to be able to be successful by working in an exciting profession.

However, as soon as Hurst goes into the exploration of Black issues, she misses the point by projecting her own troubled Jewish-American identity on the racial issues of her time. If most of the people from various European ethnic origins were able to accomplish Americanization by rejecting, forgetting, or altering the culture from the old world as a painful but necessary assimilation process, the issue cannot be the same for Black people, who were brought to the colonies against their will, segregated and abused because of the color of their skin.

CHAPTER 4: CRITICAL RESPONSE AND CONCLUSION

Since criticism of Fannie Hurst's books is scarce, and since, besides the critical appraisals following each of her newly issued publications, the available articles in general give an overview of her complete works and do not specifically focus on Imitation of Life, the section dealing with the critical appraisal of Fannie Hurst's writings will not restrict itself to the criticism of Imitation of Life. It also includes criticism regarding some of her other works that is indirectly pertinent to the study of her 1933 novel.

After her death in 1968, Fannie Hurst's works were largely ignored for more than twenty years before some critics began reconsidering her writings (Brandimarte, 1). The reviews of her critical response can, therefore, be divided between recent criticism of her books from a twenty-year retrospective, and the reviews that her books and short stories received at the time they were issued. Moreover, because of the deprecation of popular culture and the anti-feminine socio-cultural trend predominating when her career as a writer was in its prolific phase, the critical appraisals in her own time fall into two categories: the reviewers who disliked melodrama--the "anti-melodrama" reviewers--scorned her works as mere sentimental "mish-mash"; and the reviewers who enjoyed melodrama--the "pro-melodrama"-- praised her ability to portray characters and to create "good stories."

Thus, the fourth chapter of this study aims to evaluate Imitation of Life in regard to the critical response the author received. It is organized in three parts: Critical Response in Hurst's era (I); Current Criticism (II); and a Conclusive Critical Appraisal of the Study of Imitation of Life (III).

I. CRITICAL RESPONSE IN HURST'S ERA

By going through the various yearly editions of the Book Review Digest from 1914 to 1961, one obtains a quick general overview of the evolution of the reviews that Fannie Hurst received in her own time through excerpts of reviews written right after the publication of her major novels and short story collections. Generally, her books and

short stories received mixed appreciation from which two categories of criticism conspicuously emerge. The reviewers who enjoy melodrama are generally enthusiastic about her works whereas the ones who despise melodrama as unworthy of any attention tend to judge them harshly. Thus, according to the Book Review Digest and Susan Currier's biographical essay on Hurst, her novels Lummox (1923), Appassionata (1926), Five and Ten (1929), and her short story collections Every Soul Hath its Song (1916), Humoresque (1919), and We Are Ten (1937), seem to have received the best reviews, that is to say the most lenient comments from the anti-melodrama reviewers, whose critiques could range from a simple labelling of her writings as "[F]or strictly feminine consumption"--a Booklist reviewer's comment on Hurst's God Must Be Sad--to outrageous comments about the quality of her works such as the following comment on Backstreet:

> One of the world's worst books written by a good writer. For Miss Hurst is a good writer. But she will not think before she writes. Her crude vulgar stuff might have been made powerful if she had taken care. (Hardwood, 528).

The main objections made by the "anti-melodrama" reviewers about her works were their unnecessary length, the constant repetitions and stylistic splurges, the sentimental and melodramatic tone of their content, the implausibility of her plots and, sometimes, the (feminist) propagandistic undertone of her stories. Upon her debut as a short story writer, the reviewers tended to be gentler, attributing the fault in her writing to her literary immaturity. Then, her harsher reviewers strongly objected to her style which they describe, at first, as overdone, affected, and repetitive, and later on, as a journalistic, conversational slush disrespectful of English syntax. Her verbless sentences and one-word sentences seemed to be the technique which aroused the most caustic comments, such as Mr. Lloyd Morris's patronizing remark on her novel Appassionata (1926):

> This book is a serious insult to the intelligence of readers. One recommends to Miss Hurst an elementary course in English, the purchase of a dictionary, and the expiation of fasting and prayer. (354)

Finally, at the end of her career, besides her autobiography that received fairly good reviews, one gets the sense from the critical excerpts on her last two novels --Family! (1960) God Must be Sad (1961) reviewed by the Cumulative Book Review Digest, 1961 and 1962-- that her writings became too old-fashioned and too sentimental for the literary taste of the day, and consequently she lost any consideration as a writer. Thus, Fool, Be Still (1964), her last novel, is not even mentioned in the Cumulative Book Review Digest. Even the conservative Library Journal, which had rather consistently and enthusiastically recommended her popular novels to libraries, virtually rejects God Must be Sad from purchase for the library shelves for its being oversentimental (Cumulative Book Review Digest 58, 589).

Contrary to the "anti-melodrama" reviewers, the "pro-melodrama" critics generally praised her books for their strikingly "true-to-life" characters and their thrilling plots which held her readers spellbound without sacrificing the humanizing sympathy which constituted the core of her stories. In the earliest part of her career, when she was acclaimed as one of "the great American writers of short stories" by the New York Times (Rev. of Every Soul Hath Its Song, 287), she was often appreciated for her "Americanness," that is to say, for "listening to the voices of America and interpreting them" ([D.L.M.], 287). Contrary to the "anti-melodrama" reviewers, "pro-melodrama" reviewers did not quarrel over Miss Hurst's style: they stressed its effectiveness. They found her images powerful, sometimes even brutal, and her style is repeatedly described as "vigorous." Eventually, for many of the "pro-melodrama" reviewers and contrary to the "anti-melodrama" reviewers who were irritated by Hurst's popularity, the financial success of Hurst's novels and short stories with the general public constituted evidence of her literary achievement and ability:

> If Miss Hurst makes money on "Song of Life" it will be because the public appreciates good workmanship, an authentic presentation of life, a mature and philosophic judgment of life, a very real integrity. The tiny bits of false color that cling to the portraits do not mar them to any great extent. Perhaps their very presence, as a contrast, adds depth and intensity. (Winslow, 1927)

The impact of her success certainly played an important role in some of the critical comments she received. The fact that several of her short stories appeared respectively in the 1915, 1916,1917 and 1921 editions of O'Brien's Best Short Stories of the Year and that she won various literary prizes--such as the 1919 O. Henry Prize for her short story "Humoresque" and the 50,000 prize awarded for Mannequin as the best novel of 1925--were influential factors for anyone attempting to write criticism on her books. However, the "pro-melodrama" reviewers' positive comments on Hurst's writing should not be taken too lightly either, since even the "anti-melodrama" reviewers, in spite of their scorn for her works, recognized the "vigor" of her style as a redeeming feature in some of her novels, such as Lummox (1923) or Five and Ten (1929). For instance, in the Saturday Review of Literature article reviewing Five and Ten, it is clear that the critic is impressed by the power of Hurst's writing, although he objects to the overabundance of descriptions and the implausibility of the plot:

> As entertainment, "Five and Ten" is pretty fair. Its apparently limitless energy carries us over the many rococo passages describing the Raricks' sumptuosity and dulls the blemishes on Miss Hurst's not quite convincing representation of the younger generation. Pages of impressive narrative are sandwiched between long-winded stretches of pretentious exposition, but nevertheless the narrative as a whole somehow manages to come out on top. (Cumulative Book Review Digest, 467)

To conclude on the general critical appraisal of her time, it is clear that beyond the gap separating the "anti-melodrama"literary reviewers from the "pro-melodrama" ones stands the fact that "[f]or all her vigor and vitality Miss Hurst is fundamentally a genteel and sentimental author" (Spectator, 17 August 1929, 143:227). Gentility and sentimentality are two literary specifications which were gradually to be devalued by the makers of the literary canon along with popular cultural forms, such as the melodrama, at the turn of the century. This shift in the literary standards is evident in the deprecation of Family! and God Must Be Sad, her last two novels reviewed in The Cumulative Book Review Digest, which were labelled as "old-fashioned," "sentimental," and "melodramatic," whereas in the earliest part of her career she had

been acclaimed as one of the "great American writers of short stories", and by some of The Cumulative Book Review Digest reviewers had been compared favorably to writers such as S. Anderson, Dreiser, O. Henry, and even Balzac and Maupassant, whose literary reputations are still established nowadays when hers has long vanished under the rapid erosion of time.

Fannie Hurst wrote Imitation of Life at the end of her second and most successful literary period, that is to say, at a time when she was still very popular. In fact, Imitation of Life was considered to be one of her major novels along with Lummo and Back Street (Brandimarte, 213). Even so, she started receiving bad critical reviews.

As we will see, the reviews of Imitation of Life at the time of its first release follow the trend of the varied appraisals she received in that period of her career.

As did most of her works in the 1930s, at its publication in 1933 Imitation of Life received mixed reviews in which the gap between "anti-melodrama" reviewers and "pro-melodrama" reviewers is clearly visible. The comments of Archer Winsten and the anonymous New York Times reviewer on Imitation of Life are symptomatic of the faults "anti-melodrama reviewers" found in Hurst's works, while the criticism of the Christian Science Monitor reviewer and Mary Ross from the New York Herald Tribune reflect more the appreciation and reactions of the general public.

Although he recognizes the powerful appeal of Hurst's fiction for the average reader which "anti-melodrama"criticism was unable to abate at that time, Archer Winsten despises Hurst's "sloppy, verbless prose, of sentimental hokum, of strange vitality, and of honest reportorial observation" (Winsten, 197) in Imitation of Life just as he did in her previous works. He finds the topic of the book itself, the "tragedy" of Bea Pullman, uninteresting, irrelevant, and even failing to achieve its dubious melodramatic effect:

> Since Miss Hurst's forte has long been her emotional wallop, it should be noted that this novel has less of that quality than Back Street or Lummox. The explanation probably lies either in the trite and predictable ending or in the fact that just now one finds it difficult to weep over the sex-starved life of an attractive woman under forty

> who is worth about six million dollars. The author should have mentioned the men who must have been killed in the rush (Winsten, 198).

This caustic, somewhat sexist, critic also discards the black subplot, finding some of its passages "overripe" and "ludicrous." It is clear that Fannie Hurst's sentimental and popular appeal are not congruent with the taste of Mr. Archer Winsten.

In less acerbic terms, the New York Times reviewer of Imitation of Life has basically the same grievance to make about Hurst's popular fiction, although he/she also emphasizes the decline in Hurst's literary achievements:

> In her dozen or more novels, Fannie Hurst has sometimes risen powerfully above the inadequacies of her style and instincts; and sometimes she has been smothered by an inherent commonplaceness.....Early in her career she dealt sincerely if not profoundly with the tribulations of an individual struggling for happiness in the face of adversity. That was in the '20s; social disorders and economical upheavals have since driven our novelists to widen their researches--and Fannie Hurst is not one to be left behind. Steadily expanding her canvas, she has tried to obscure the consequent dilution in a storm of details. (New York Times Book Review, 5 Feb 1933, 7)

Although, like Winsten, the New York Times reviewer dislikes the very topic of Hurst's novel, since "there is nothing duller than unopposed and unmerited success" (7), he/she finds some interest in the final twist of the plot which finally "touches" the real "tragedy of Bea Pullman's success" (7). Actually, he/she complains that Hurst stops just where the novel should have started. From this perspective, Imitation of Life narrates "Bea's monotonous advancement in the acquisition of worldly goods" (14), a "spiritual vacuum" (14) which is not even salvaged by the "many other themes [which] are picked up and tossed aside by Miss Hurst in the course of the novel" (14). Like Winsten, the New York Times reviewer labels Hurst's novel as uninteresting popular fiction, a type of fiction which could still be redeemed by the author's sincerity in the 1920s but which falls into mere triviality in the 1930s.

On the other hand, Mary Ross and the Christian Science Monitor reviewer appreciated Fannie Hurst's achievements in Imitation of Life. In the February 5, 1933 issue of the New York Herald Tribune Books, Mary Ross does not hesitate to compare Hurst's heroine, Bea Pullman, with Sinclair Lewis's Ann Vickers, but she points out Bea's total lack of feminist consciousness. Although Ross states positively that "from start to finish" Hurst's story "moves absorbingly through the gamut of two women's lives with the quick and sure sympathy that is Miss Hurst's cardinal quality" (4), she finds the first part of the novel dealing with Bea's struggle for survival more "real" than Bea's after-success story. Ross mostly objects to the abrupt ending of the novel, since it "leaves [Bea] just as she had come to realize her full capacities but before she had come to make peace between the conflicting currents of her life" (4). Therefore, contrary to the dichotomy between emotional fulfillment and top career priorities that Bea's story exemplifies for some readers, Ross's comment shows that at least some women in the 1930s could consider the conflict between domestic and professional world not to be without solution. Finally, contrary to the "anti-melodrama" reviewers such as Winsten, who sneers at the sentimentalism of the Black subplot, or the New York Times reviewer who passes it by, Mary Ross considers the black mammy, Delilah, as one of the highlights of Hurst's novel and one of the finest Hurstian characters since Bertha in Lummox, a 1923 novel which was overwhelmingly recognized as Hurst's best work during the author's lifetime.

The Christian Science Monitor critic, M. C., goes even further in the appraisal of Hurst's portrait of the black mammy. Actually he/she bases his/her laudatory review of Imitation of Life on the character of Delilah, going as far as asserting that the novel "is Delilah's story, really" (Christian Science Monitor, 25 February 1933, 10) which is a clear distortion of Hurst's plot: a quick look at the narrative structure of the novel shows that Delilah's and Peola's story constitutes the subplot which enhances Bea's story. Although M. C. has to recognize that "Miss Hurst has overcolored [Delilah's] portrait a little" in the sense that "it is as if a Cockney were made to drop every one of his h's" (10), he/she considers the main Black character and plot

as being the most interesting part of Hurst's novel: "In spite of that, the book belongs to Delilah. One cares much less for Bea, not minding particularly when, arrived at the pinnacle of her career, she has still within her grasp only an "imitation of life" (10). M. W.'s and Mary Ross's comments on the black subplot and Delilah are striking since nowadays Delilah appears as being such a cumbersome racial stereotype.

To conclude on the contemporary critical response to Hurst's writings, what stands out from this survey is the sharp contrast between the contempt in which "anti-melodrama" reviewers hold her novel and the praise coming from the "pro-melodrama" reviewers. This contrast suggests that these critics were not judging her novels according to the same criteria--at least, as far as "likelihood" or "plausibility" is concerned. The "pro-melodrama" reviewers, more sensitive to the taste of a popular audience and perhaps to Hurst's personal success story, were not taken aback by melodrama and were more prompt to judge how well the author had managed to create the stylistic and narrative effects expected in melodrama. On the other hand, it is obvious that, besides some more or less apparent biases against popular literature, "anti-melodrama" reviewers criticized Hurst's style and lack of "likelihood" in her narratives according to literary criteria which did not take into consideration the specificity of the melodramatic expression. The fact that, in spite of all, they were forced at some point to recognize the power of Hurst's writing speaks nevertheless for the author's ability to write "good" melodramas, and Imitation of Life is one of those.

II. CURRENT CRITICISM

If no extensive critical studies of her works were done during her lifetime besides critical reviews on her latest publication, present day critical responses to Hurst's works are even harder to come by. There are, however, one book, a dissertation, and several articles which focus on Fannie Hurst's writings or on some biographical aspect of her literary career, although none is strictly dedicated to the study of her novel Imitation of Life. This section will briefly review in

chronological order: Virginia M. Burke's 1977 article "Zora Neale Hurston and Fannie Hurst as They Saw Each Other," Mary Rose Shaughnessy's book Myths About Love and Woman: The Fiction of Fannie Hurst (1980), Cynthia Brandimarte's 1980 dissertation Fannie Hurst and Her Fiction: Prescriptions for America's Working Women, Elizabeth DaGue's article "Images of Work, Glimpses of Professionalism in Selected Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Novels" (1980), Gay Wilentz's 1986 article "White Patron and Black Artist: The Correspondence of Fannie Hurst and Zora Neale Hurston," Diane Lichtenstein's 1988 article, "Fannie Hurst and Her 19th Century Predecessors," and the most recent one, Susan Currier's 1989 article, "Fannie Hurst."

In her article, Virgina M. Burke explores a particular aspect of Hurst's biography, which is her relationship with Zora Neale Hurston, consequent to the Black writer's two-year-long employment at the service of Fannie Hurst, first as a secretary and later as a chauffeur in the mid-1920s. This biographical aspect of Hurst's life is evocative of her attitude toward racial and ethnic diversity: liberal but unable to understand and to appreciate the differences, as were many white patrons during the Harlem Renaissance. Burke unearths both Hurston's and Hurst's misconceptions of one another by looking at some of Hurston's and Hurst's articles and their respective autobiographies. If Burke easily points how Hurston unrealistically pictured Hurst as the only child born into wealth and how, at the other extreme, Hurst represented Hurston as being born in the utmost poverty (436), she also shows how of these two misrepresentations, Hurst's was the one which was most heavily distorted by relying on stereotypes and on superficial information:

> When Hurst wrote her profile of Hurston [published one year after Hurston's death], she had access to all Hurston's work, including her autobiography; but she did not, perhaps could not understand Hurston as well as the latter understood her. She ran afoul of stereotypes, in particular the classic stereotype created by whites during the Harlem Renaissance --the exotic primitive-- which prevented her from seeing very far beyond surfaces of the Hurston personality. (Burke, 446)

As the analysis of the black subplot and ethnic depictions in Imitation of Life has already revealed, Hurst's inability to understand Hurston is not an isolated faux pas but results from a limited apprehension of the black experience, partly inherent due to social structures in her time period and partly to Hurst's own ambiguity about her Jewish-American identity.

Shaughnessy's book Myths About Love and Women: The Fiction of Fannie Hurst is an attempt to establish how Hurst's attitude in life and all her novels are based on two archetypal myths, the myth of Psyche and Amor and the Catharist Myth of the Pure. The author maintains that these two myths which are crucial in "explaining psychic development of women" (1) have a major influence on women writers, and, at the same time, she considers them as being dangerous for women; therefore, Shaughnessy ultimately proscribes Hurst's fiction as a whole. In her interpretations of the Myth of Psyche and the Cathars' Myth of the Pure (6), Shaughnessy suggests that their didactic message to women are similar and pervade our literature, especially our "literature of love":

> Fannie Hurst was adept at beguiling readers with ancient myths in modern dress. Her two underlying myths tell of the immortal destiny of the soul, especially of the woman. The myth of Psyche tells the story of the mortal woman who was worshiped as a goddess, who was chosen by a god, who fell in love with and searched for that god in the darkness, who suffered the trials imposed to try her worth, and who at length was rewarded by passing beyond the frontiers of this life to eternal union with divine love. The other myth is the Catharist one of the pure soul who finds her self fallen from heaven, immured in the prison of this flesh and corruption. By yearning and suffering, by compassionate understanding of those who are also outcast in the darkness of this evil world, she eventually reascends further on her journey back to the light of her true home... Fannie Hurst used these myths to console her readers, explaining away the sufferings of the underdogs of society--chiefly women in her fiction. (142)

If Shaughnessy is most probably right in underlying the important influence of these two myths on the romantic, psychic, and literary consciousness within Western culture, her analysis of Hurst's works is not convincing. She overlooks the ambivalent message of Fannie Hurst's

fiction, probably because of the extremely brief analysis she is able to dedicate to each of the reviewed Hurstian works because of the ambitious number of novels and short stories included in her study. Although the biographical part of Shaughnessy's work emphasizes interesting biographical details, especially her establishing parallels between Hurst's life and her works, her study has, in my opinion, important flaws. The brevity of Shaughnessy's critical analysis of each work leads her inevitably at best to oversimplify and thereby to deform Hurst's often ambiguous vision, and at worst to include inaccurate material in her study. For instance, in her analysis of Imitation of Life, she seems to have confused Sirk's movie characters with Hurst's fictional ones: for instance, she mentions Steve Archer as the man for whom Bea Pullman falls, when this character is called Frank Flake in Hurst's novel (111). However, Shaughnessy's oversimplified critical analysis certainly serves well her aim: to condemn Hurst's sentimentalism for not being "feminist" enough. Hurst's feminist lapse is even more intolerable to Shaughnessy because it stands in sharp contrast to the popular author's lifestyle:

> How ironical that someone like Fannie Hurst should have preached this doctrine [of the all-sufficiency of love]--she who would not devote herself to her husband insisting upon separate quarters and a separate life, she who allowed her husband to devote himself to her more than she to him. (57-8)

Shaughnessy narrow approach to Hurst shows the importance of considering Hurst within her historical, literary and biographical context, thereby limiting the distortions inherent in our cultural and literary expectations and standards.

Brandimarte's dissertation resembles Shaughnessy's book in the scope of its impressive examinations of Hurst's works--both authors analyzing briefly most of Hurst's novels and short stories--the biographical and bibliographical sources used by Brandimarte in her study make it one of most extensive and best documented works ever written on Fannie Hurst's life and writing. Brandimarte makes the most

out of the mass of documents on Hurst contained in the Fannie Hurst Collection located in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas (HRC) in order to recreate for the reader the essential traits of Hurst's life and literary career: she recounts a solid biography of Fannie Hurst; her rise to success; the extent of her popularity and Hurst's own ability to exploit her public image; a comparison between Hurst's lifestyle, her public discourse on topics such as woman and work, and the way these themes were treated in her writings; and finally, a thorough survey of how, within the melodramatic genre, Hurst's novels and short stories "raised important questions about women's potential fulfillment in American society" (2). Brandimarte's study does raise questions about the author's ambivalence on issues such as woman and work, but she does not fully explore the significance of what appears to be a conspicuous contradiction between Hurst's lifestyle and predicament and the message she gave to her audience through her novels and short stories.

Elizabeth DaGue is also interested in the images of working women offered by English and American women writers. More particularly, she explores "to what extent ... working women in the novels recognize the idea of professionalism for themselves and other women" (50). In her essay, she examines some of the works of five women writers--Charlotte M. Yonge's Magnum Bonum, Elizabeth Gaskell's Cranford, Sarah Orne Jewett's Deephaven and A Country Doctor, Work by Louisa May Alcott and Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life--which she selects for their treatment women's professionalism. After a short summary of each novel, DaGue briefly analyzes the representation of professionalism (or the lack of it) emerging from each plot. She concludes that none of the novels surveyed gives a satisfactory and positive image of women's professionalism, which determination is rather consistent with the fact that women facing 19th-century ethical standards were excluded from the professional world. In my opinion, Elizabeth DaGue's essay exhibits the same bias as Shaughnessy book on Fannie Hurst: they both base their critical approaches on issues which are clearly pertinent to the second half of the 20th century without taking into account the shift in socio-

cultural behavior and standards. In doing so, DaGue misses in her succinct review of Imitation of Life how much in her novel Fannie Hurst situates herself at the turning point in the representation of women's professionalism: Hurst actually stretches up to the breaking point the nineteen-century conventions, which excluded women from the professional world, in an attempt to account for the increasing and necessary involvement of women in the working force. Obviously, this difficult attempt to reconcile such antithetical positions could not be achieved without contradictions or ambivalence. Thus, DaGue concludes that Hurst fails to represent adequately women's professionalism (according to 1970s standards) as much as her 19th-century predecessors. Actually, the progressive emergence of the question of women's professionalism should be retraced as the evolution of the treatment of such a theme in these women's writers works, although these treatments bear the mark of their time.

As does Cynthia Brandimarte, Gay Wilentz uses some of the materials from the Fannie Hurst Collection in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center as primary sources for his essay; but instead of exploring the theme of woman and work covered by Brandimarte, he/she completes Burke's previous biographical exploration of Hurst's and Hurston's relationship by examining the correspondence of the two women writers. The contents of their letters and of Hurst's letters mentioning Hurston to others further uncover Hurst's ambiguous attitude toward Blacks and her failure to understand and to accept them fully, as a consequence of Hurst's demeaning compassion for Hurston and the people of her race. What is remarkable in Wilentz's essay is the connection he clearly establishes between Hurst's own troubled Jewish identity and her contradictory attitude toward blacks and other ethnic minorities:

> Although Hurst denied her own ethnic background, she aligned herself with those who worked for civil rights, and she was active in helping attain voting rights for blacks (Wilentz, 23).... Hurst had strong activist beliefs and worked hard to improve the condition of women and other minorities, yet she incorporated the prejudices of her times into her novels, which are full of racist and anti-ethnic stereotypes, including anti-Semitic slurs. (Wilentz, 24)

Wilentz deepens his reading of Hurst's contradictory attitude toward ethnic diversity by giving an interesting analysis of Hurst's treatment of the passing of the mulatto through the character of Peola in Imitation of Life. As Wilentz acknowledges it in his footnote, his analysis of Peola's character partly stems from a 1984 personal conversation with Donald Bogle:

> The issue of passing had appeared often in the writings of both black and white writers of the Renaissance, but Hurst's book was the first to gain a widespread, national audience [partly thanks to the 1934 Stahl film version of the book] (38)..... Imitation of Life struck a cord in the lives of many black people, as film historian Donald Bogle suggests: "The Black community had mixed feelings about Peola. On one hand, they hated her for denying her race; on the other, they understood she was fighting for freedom." [from Bogle-Wilentz's conversation] (38-9).... Although most readers today would agree with Sterling Brown that Imitation of Life is racist (as well as anti-Semitic and anti-Italian), the novel should be studied in context. Hurst was one of the first authors to explore in popular fiction the painful dilemmas and decisions faced by people who pass. It seems likely and more revealing, that the character of Peola, the young woman who crosses over into white society, is based on Hurst's own experience rather than on Hurston's. By denying her Jewishness and passing for gentile, Hurst had learned first hand what it meant to break family ties and live in hypocrisy in order to experience the opportunities of the dominant culture. Trying to destroy any vestige of her own ethnic identity to assimilate into mainstream America, Hurst shared certain attitudes with blacks who were embarrassed about their heritage. Like Peola, Hurst refused to stay in her place and denied her own identity, but she was unable to comprehend that Hurston, by being herself, broke through barriers of race and sex. (40)

What is striking in Wilentz's analysis of Imitation of Life, is how much the mulatto character actually crystallizes Hurst's own uneasiness about her ethnic and cultural identity more than it represents Hurst's sensitivity and understanding about the conditions and dilemmas faced by Black people in her day: the mulatto is not a character promoting a Black perspective in the novel; on the contrary, Peola epitomizes the embarrassment that ethnic background could cause to someone trying to become "American."

Diane Lichtenstein further explores Hurst's ambivalent feelings about her Jewishness and femininity by placing her within the perspective of other 19th-century Jewish women writers, such as Rebekah Gumpert Hyneman (1812-75) and Emma Wolf (1865-1932). By examining the duality of the American Jewish woman identity and its progressive evolution into an unsolvable dichotomy, Lichtenstein points to the very cause of Hurst's ambivalence and contradictory attitudes. In her essay, Lichtenstein shows how the American Jewish woman in the 19th century relied on two models in order to construct her female identity: the Mother of Israel, dedicated to defending the Jewish identity by turning the family into a safe harbor of Jewish traditions; and the True Woman, the 19th-century idealized middle-class woman, who was supposed to be a gentle, sensitive, guardian of morality and religion and who represented for the Jewish woman the model to emulate in order to be considered as American (Lichtenstein, 28). However, with time the two models both changed to such a point that the question of Jewish-American identity became a tricky one:

> By the end of the century, the sentimentalized True Woman and the glorified Mother in Israel had evolved into new figures; both were supposed to be more independent and more involved with activities and people outside the home. Yet they were still expected to be family oriented and self-sacrificing. The assimilated Sephardic and German Jewish women grew confused about their duties as women. They also grew confused about their American and Jewish identities; since it was no longer clear how to be the model American or Jewish women grew confused about their duties as women. They also grew confused about their American and Jewish identities since it was no longer clear how to be the model American or Jewish woman, it was no longer clear how to display one's Americanness or Jewishness (Lichtenstein, 28).
>
> The issues did not neatly resolve themselves after the turn of the century. Throughout the twentieth century, American Jews have continued to feel the pull of dual loyalties; some have resolved the dilemma by returning to the question, is Judaism a religion or a race, and answering by rooting their Jewish nationality in Israel. And, certainly, expectations for women have continued to evolve. Because so much has changed for Jews and for women, it has become virtually impossible to define consistent requirements for appropriate American female and Jewish female behavior. (Lichtenstein, 29)

In her essay, Lichtenstein shows how the problem of intermarriage is central in Jewish female writers' representations of Jewish womanhood versus assimilation. She presents three Jewish female writers who adopted different attitudes toward the problem caused by their dual American Jewish identity; Hurst, the youngest of the three, has the most ambiguous and troubled response of the three, as the changes in women's social roles makes it more and more difficult for her to adapt the models of the True Woman and the Mother in Israel to fit the experience of being Jewish, woman, and writer in 20th-century America:

> Hyneman never doubted her Jewishness. Neither did Wolf, although she did question the effect of the changes in the expectations for women. Hurst, on the other hand, revealed more realistic ambivalent feelings about both femaleness and Jewishness. Her heroines are almost never completely satisfied with their lives or confident in their abilities to be independent and self-sufficient (Lichtenstein, 37)

Analyzing Hurst's writings through a Jewish and female perspective brings Lichtenstein to notice the ambivalence of Hurst's messages--contrary to the previous studies by DaGue and Shaughnessy. She sees Hurst clearly as a 20th-century writer but one who still has a foot in the 19th century. Hurst's transitional position, on the one hand, enables her to drag some 19th-century conventions and problems, such as the "struggle to balance her Jewish and American identity" (38), into her 20th-century writings and, on the other hand, makes it impossible for her to "supply a neat formula for achieving the balance" (38). All what is left to her is the ability of "raising many questions" (38) without giving a clear-cut solution on various issues, such as the dilemma concerning the American and Jewish identity in a novel such as Family! or on the professional woman's place in society in Imitation of Life. Obviously, Lichtenstein's perspective on Hurst yields the most sensitive understanding of the writer's contradictions so often noticed by various current critics:

> During her forty-year writing career, Hurst usually wrote about women who struggle to find safety in a world which can be treacherous for women. She wrote about Jewish women much less often, as if to find her own safety from a world which could be hostile toward a Jewish woman who

> wanted to be a successful writer, she also sought safety from her triple identity of American, Jew, and woman, a potentially painful and complicated identity (35-6).

The most recent critical article on Hurst is Susan Currier's "Fannie Hurst" in the Dictionary of Literary Biography. Currier's article contains a succinct biographical summary of Hurst's life and as well as a review of the critical appraisals of her short-story collections. Besides her puzzling understanding of Hurst's secret marriage as a means of overcoming her parents' opposition to it, Currier gives her reader an accurate picture of Fannie Hurst's life. As does Shaughnessy, she notices parallels between Fannie Hurst's life and the content of her fiction. As Currier focuses on Hurst's career as a short story writer, she enumerates the various awards, prizes, and official recognitions attributed to Hurst for some of her short stories --"TB" (1915), "Humoresque" (1919), "She Walks in Beauty" (1921), "Guilty" (1932)-- during her lifetime. Although Currier's perspective does not focus on Hurst's career as a novelists, she acknowledges Fannie Hurst's importance as a short story writer and yet confirms the decline in Hurst's critical stature, her being considered as "old-fashioned" in the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

While there are some articles about Imitation of Life dating from its publication, there are no current critical works focusing solely on this novel. However, some critics, as we briefly saw above, examine more specifically Imitation of Life within the perspective of their studies. First, Cynthia Brandimarte, one of the rare critics trying to evaluate Hurst's works within its socio-cultural context, underlines an important link between the narrative plot and the novel. She shows how Hurst somewhat modeled Bea Pullman after one of her contemporaries, Alice Foote MacDougall, who opened and expanded a chain of coffee and waffle restaurants after her husband's death (267). MacDougall was also an anti-suffragist and thought woman's best place was at home (Brandimarte, 140). All these traits correspond to Bea's characterization.

As already stated, in her critical analysis of Hurst's works Shaugnessy makes some pointed comments on Imitation of Life in particular, but her critical approach is impaired first by her confusion between the novel and either Stahl's or Sirk's cinematographic adaptation and by her feminist expectations which lead her to distort the message of the novel as she passes over Hurst's ambiguities. Shaughnessy sees Bea's lonely fate exclusively as the necessary suffering which Bea has to go endure in expiation for her lapses in motherly and feminine duties. If this interpretation is not without some truth, it is also an oversimplified view of Hurst's novel totally discards what judgment of "Bea's punishment" has been forced onto the reader. As examined in Chapter 3, many narrative and aesthetic elements in the novel render Bea's lonely fate unbearable to the reader. Although her forced loneliness is justified by some of Bea's lapses and by the mandatory return of social conventions at the end of a melodrama, the novel is done in such a way that the reader does not easily come to terms with the ending, as was previously shown in Mary Ross's reaction to the novel's conclusion.

The blatant lack of criticism on Imitation of Life and the sometimes rather superficial analyses calls for a more thorough examination of Hurst's novels. To conclude, the critical appraisal of Imitation of Life, as it seems impossible to summarize all the ideas advanced by the critics on Hurst's novels, I would rather confine my remarks to a more general observation: it is striking how, through the tension between "anti-melodrama" and "pro-melodrama" critics, the appraisals at the time of the publication of Imitation of Life actually reflect the shifts within the literary canon from which domestic sentimental melodrama was in the process of being expelled.

After Hurst received mixed reviews during her lifetime and was almost forgotten after her death, the author's career and biography were the first aspects to be unearthed by the critics in the late 70s. Since Hurst's ambivalence toward women as well as racial and ethnic issues was rather baffling, at first the critics were either more interested in her connection to Hurston or they would sharply criticize her works,

overlooking the ambivalence of her writings as well as the complexity of her position as a Jewish American woman writer in the first half of the 20th century. Only in the 1980s, with critics such as Brandimarte, Wilentz, and Lichtenstein, does one come to a clearer and more profound picture of Hurst as a writer. However, Hurst's works have not been explored in detail, and all the existing criticism tends to be on her works in general or on some biographical details of her life. Therefore, much remains to be done in order to give a full evaluation of Hurst's writings.

III. CONCLUSIVE CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Hurst's biography and the contextual analysis of her novel Imitation of Life have underlined the importance of the impact of the shifts in our literary standards and our cultural attitudes in terms of our appreciation of literary works. There is no doubt today that although Zora Neale Hurston never enjoyed the success and fame of a Fannie Hurst during her lifetime, the Black author is a much better writer than her ex-patron. Moreover, we cannot praise Hurst for the portrait of Delilah as some of Hurst's contemporary critics and readers did. Nevertheless, in spite of the unavoidable datedness of time-bound melodramatic expression, Hurst should still be studied today for her focus on women's issues and her ambivalent attitude toward American-Jewish identity. As a popular writer, focusing on women and ethnic-racial issues, she obviously struck a chord in her contemporaries' collective identity and thus contributed to the reworking of social values and the advancement of women and minorities. Obviously, although she does not meet our "high" literary standards, she constitutes a bridge between the 19th-century women writers who were writing melodrama and the 20th-century women writers who have much less trouble with the image of the "New Woman." That is why she continues to interest anti-melodrama critics today who study her works for their treatment of working and Jewish-American women. However, much remains to be done on her novels, which have not been analyzed in detail, and on their numerous adaptations to the screen, since Hollywood cinema has become a

bastion of melodrama. A comparison of Hurst's novel Imitation of Life and its 1934 version directed by John M. Stahl or its 1959 version by Douglas Sirk would constitute an interesting follow-up on the evolution of melodramatic expression in the 20th-century.

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VITA

Céline Bassetti was born in Paris, France, on December 1, 1962. She attended the European Community elementary and high schools in Belgium and Italy, and received her French high school diploma in Nîmes (France) in 1981. She entered Paul Valéry University in Montpellier and in June 1984 received a degree in Italian Civilization and Literature and another one in Anglo-Saxon Civilization and Literature. She moved to Paris and entered the English program at the Sorbonne from which she graduated in 1986. After obtaining another degree in Public Administration from the University of Créteil in 1987, she came on an exchange program and entered the Graduate School of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a degree for the Master of Arts in English. At the same time, she was a teaching French in the Department of Romance Languages, a Graduate Teaching Assistant position which she held from 3 years. From August 1990 to July 1991, she taught French and Italian in the same department.