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# WOMEN'S NOVELS, WOMEN'S MOVIES

Thirty-five years into the debate over whether Hollywood films for and about women encouraged their female viewers to consider their social positions more critically or schooled them to accept their lot by cautionary or pathetic tales of transgressive heroines, Imelda Whelehan's recent summary of these films' mission seems both deft and just: "The films mark themselves out for their focus on the domestic and, in particular, their drive to expose the realities of the inequities of women's lives – not, in the case of Classic Hollywood, to present any credible means of escape, but to make use of the theme's melodramatic possibilities"<sup>1</sup>. These melodramatic possibilities depend on a complex dialectic of solicitude and detachment, sympathy and irony, in the way they focalize their heroines. I'd like in this essay to consider two surprising aspects of this dialectic: the variety of ways women's movies combine intimacy and irony in their handling of the heroine's point of view, and their inheritance of this dialectic from the novels on which they are frequently based.

Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, first published in 1933 after its serialization as *Sugar House* in *Pictorial Review* (1932–1933), provides something like a normative handling of focalization in women's fiction. Although the story concerns the fortunes of two women, Beatrice Pullman and Delilah Johnston, who band together to forge a wildly successful series of restaurants that sell waffles and maple syrup but face mounting problems with the daughters they have been left to raise alone, Hurst's focus begins and remains on Bea, who does not even meet "the scrubbed, starchy-looking negress"<sup>2</sup> on whom her career will depend until Chapter 15. Except

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<sup>1</sup> I. Whelehan, *Don't Let's Ask for the Moon!: Reading and Viewing the Woman's Film*, in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> F. Hurst, *Imitation of Life*, New York: Collier, 1933, p. 91.

for brief passages tentatively entering the mind of Delilah in Chapter 33<sup>3</sup> and of Bea's sometime business associate Dorothy Eden in Chapter 34 (p. 241–247), the narrator, omniscient but limited, provides direct access only to Bea's thoughts, keeping the focus on her and presenting every other character, including Delilah, from her point of view.

The technique of maintaining sharp and exclusive focus on a pioneer heroine who struggles against long odds to create a business empire would seem to be an obvious choice for a novel designed to appeal to Depression-era women. Yet Hurst's focalization depends on a peculiar sort of irony that distinguishes it from James M. Cain's *Mildred Pierce* (1941), which dispenses with the Delilah character in order to concentrate exclusively on its heroine's similar success in creating a chain of restaurants that will support herself and her two daughters but eventually, like Bea, finds herself in a romantic triangle with one of them. Although Mildred Pierce enjoys a considerably more active sex life than Bea Pullman, both Hurst and Cain present their heroines as driven businesswomen whose obsession with their family's financial security impoverishes their own lives and marks them as wasted. Both restrict themselves entirely or almost entirely to scenes in which the heroine appears, and both employ a narrator whose limited omniscience is privy to the heroine's thoughts but to no one else's.

But Hurst works far closer to Bea than Cain does to Mildred, whose trademark staccato dialogue scenes tend to balance their participants more evenly. In presenting Bea's brief and loveless marriage to Benjamin Pullman, Hurst inflects every description with Bea's opinions and Bea's rhetoric. As she waits for the ceremony to begin, Bea reflects: "Marriage freed you from the nervous concerns of girlhood, eased your sense of being an outsider to life, even where your very dear parents were concerned, once they closed the door of their room behind them. Marriage established you. Gave you a sense of security and being cared for in a special private way that meant everything. That is, if the dear close snug things mattered a lot. They did to Bea"<sup>4</sup>. The use of the second-person singular, the sentence fragment that begins, "Gave you a sense of security", the sudden qualification of "That is", all mark this passage as *style indirect libre*, a presentation of consciousness intimately inflected by the subject's own language even though it is not set off in quotation marks. Such passages are a hundred times more common in Hurst than in Cain, who typically reveals his ironic attitude toward his hard-boiled heroine by emphasizing by turns the unremittingly practical nature of her thoughts and her vulnerability to bullying by her daughter Veda – "She was afraid of Veda, of her snobbery, her contempt, her unbreakable spirit"<sup>5</sup> – the weakness that will end up ruining her.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230–234.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> J.M. Cain, *Cain x 3: The Postman Always Rings Twice, Mildred Pierce, Double Indemnity*, New York: Knopf, 1969, p. 177.

In *Imitation of Life*, the result of the narrator's heightened intimacy with the heroine is to create a woman's world – more specifically, Bea's world – in which the heroine alone transcends the kinds of labels she attaches to the other characters. Mr. Chipley is simply Bea's father, defined and isolated from her by a series of strokes. Benjamin Pullman is nothing more than her boarder-turned-husband. Mr. and Mrs. Tannehill are her lodgers. Frank Flake is her accountant and business manager. Virginia Eden is her oversexed partner. Erna Sperwick's husband is “a little black-eyed, dandified Italian”<sup>6</sup>. Labeling members of other groups “Hebrews” and “darkies”<sup>7</sup> suggests that Bea, who takes considerable pains to conceal her gender from her business associates, is more than a businessperson, more than a member of a particular ethnic group, more than a mother, more even than a woman.

The irony of this assumption is that Bea is as alienated from herself as she is from the people she labels so confidently. As Virginia Eden confidently diagnoses her: “She doesn't know she is on earth, chiefly because she isn't”<sup>8</sup>. The intimate access Hurst's narrator has to her heroine, and only her heroine, does not make readers accept Bea on her own terms. On the contrary, Bea's unwitting estrangement from everyone in her life, and ultimately from her own life, is constantly revealed through her misjudgments. Despite her nervous confidence that marriage “eased your sense of being an outsider to life”<sup>9</sup>, nothing Bea does – not her marriage, her friendship and partnership with Delilah, her business success, her distant relationship with the daughter with which she has never been “really acquainted”<sup>10</sup>, or her calamitous amatory pursuit of Frank Flake – make her any less an outsider to life. Like the mother whose death she mourns in the novel's opening sentence of Chapter 1, Bea is resolutely estranged from her own physicality. She binds her budding breasts to minimize them, acknowledges that she feels “external and non-participant to the spectacle of the supreme emotion” she is supposed to share with her sexually brutish husband<sup>11</sup>, and repeatedly puts aside all thoughts of rest, sexual fulfillment, and closeness to the daughter she has sent off to boarding school. In her denial of her body's reality, Bea resembles no one so much as Delilah's daughter Peola, whose increasingly determined attempts to pass for white break her mother's heart and ultimately kill her. Like Peola's masquerade, Bea's life is nothing more than an imitation of life whose hollowness is revealed ironically through the narrator's very intimacy with the heroine.

John M. Stahl's 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life* does not maintain Hurst's sharp focus on its heroine. True, the film gives Bea (Claudette Colbert) signi-

<sup>6</sup> F. Hurst, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 44, 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 345.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

ificantly more screen time than Delilah (Louise Beavers). And it intercuts close-ups of Bea's reaction into many scenes between Delilah and Peola (Freda Washington), cueing audience members to read these scenes with Bea's anger or confusion or grief. But it cuts away from Bea at will to present many expository scenes in which she does not appear: the scene in which Delilah, going to school to pick up Peola, discovers that she has been passing as white; a pair of brief but troubled exchanges between Delilah and Peola at the party at which Bea first meets Stephen Archer (Warren William); a scene in which Elmer Smith (Ned Sparks) chides Stephen, "In the name of the National Recovery Act, would you leave [Bea] alone so that we can get some office work done at the office?"; the fateful first meeting of Bea's daughter Jessie (Rochelle Hudson) and Stephen just before Bea joins them; and the scene in which Stephen hangs up the phone after talking with Bea and Jessie enters and professes her love for him. The effect is to open out the film from Hurst's focus on Bea's perspective to an apparently more neutral perspective less obviously inflected by the heroine's sensibility.

Placing less emphasis on the heroine's limited point of view softens the film's criticism of Bea's values because she appears less blind to her own desires and less alienated from her body. Since she accepts Stephen as an eligible suitor very shortly after meeting him less than halfway through the film, the conflict Hurst sets up between living life and imitating life is replaced by a more comfortable and familiar conflict between work and love, a conflict Stahl's heroine recognizes in a way Hurst's never does. In Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra*, which she filmed the same year, Colbert, as Cleopatra, had told Marc Antony, "I'm no longer a queen – I'm a woman!" Substituting "captain of industry" for "queen" would make her outburst a perfect slogan for the second third of *Imitation of Life*.

But only for this second third. For although Elmer returns late in the film to chide Bea for neglecting National Brands' offer for Aunt Delilah Pancake Mix in favor of her romance with Stephen, even the conflict between love and work ultimately yields to a conflict between Bea and her daughter over Stephen – or more precisely between Bea's love for Stephen and her desire to protect the infatuated Jessie from the hurt she would feel if her mother married him. Unlike the novel, which ends with Bea recognizing that Frank Flake has never been in love with her, the film ends with Bea, secure in Stephen's enduring love, sending him away with the tentative promise that she will accept him in some indefinite future time and place and making her peace with Jessie, who cannot help her desire for Stephen any more than she can help "want[ing] my quack-quack" in the film's opening scene. Hence "the novel is about the price of success; the 1934 film is about the price of motherhood"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> M. Heung, "What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?": Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's "Imitation of Life", Rpt. in L. Fischer (ed.), *Imitation of Life, Douglas Sirk, Director*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 305.

Motherhood demands a still higher price in King Vidor's 1937 film *Stella Dallas* and the Olive Higgins Prouty novel on which it is based, first serialized in *American Magazine* in 1922 and published separately the following year. In her influential 1983 essay on the film, E. Ann Kaplan, noting the way its final scene reduces Stella to a masochistically satisfied spectator of her daughter Laurel's wedding to her upper-class beau Richard Grosvenor, concludes that "the mother can only be [a cinematic] subject to the degree that she resists her culturally prescribed conditioning, as Stella does at first. It is Stella's *resistance* that sets the narrative in motion, and provides the opportunity to teach her as well as the spectator the Mother's 'correct' place"<sup>13</sup>. Linda Williams contends instead that this final tableau, although it may resolve the complications of the plot, presents an image of Stella that is no more definitive than the images of her social climbing, her unwitting vulgarity, or her revolt against her preordained social role, so that "the female spectator tends to identify with contradiction itself – with contradictions located at the heart of the socially constructed roles of daughter, wife, *and* mother – rather than with the single person of the mother"<sup>14</sup>.

More recently, Edie Thornton, going back to Prouty's novel, has taken exception to Karen M. Chandler's assertion that Prouty "presents Stella through a prism of Darwinistic determinism that emphasizes the character's coarseness and aims to alienate readers from her"<sup>15</sup>. Thornton argues along Williams's lines that Prouty endorses Stella's attempts to achieve class mobility, first for herself, then for her daughter, by emphasizing Stella's skill and taste in copying original fashions in the dresses she sews for Laurel, complicating the uncritical lack of restraint she shows in her own wardrobe. Through her double status as consumer and master of style, "Stella demonstrates how style can be expertly manipulated to enhance social prestige... [S]tyle is made, not 'natural', and it can be copied by a mother to design a daughter in an image other than her own"<sup>16</sup>. Jennifer Parchesky, maintaining that Laurel's sense of style is inherited from her upper-class father, not created by her lower-class mother, agrees with Chandler that "[i]n contrast to later adaptations, Prouty's novel discourages identification with Stella, privileging the viewpoints of Laurel, Stephen, and Helen in the structure of its shifting centers of consciousness" in order to reassure the upper-middle-class readers of the *Ameri-*

<sup>13</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, 1983, *The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's "Stella Dallas"*, Rpt. in Kaplan 2000, p. 476.

<sup>14</sup> L. Williams, 1985, *Something Else Besides a Mother: "Stella Dallas" and the Maternal Melodrama*, Rpt. in Kaplan 2000, p. 493.

<sup>15</sup> K.M. Chandler, *Agency and "Stella Dallas": Audience, Melodramatic Directives, and Social Determinism in 1920s America*, "Arizona Quarterly" 51, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> E. Thornton, *Fashion Visibility, and Class Mobility in "Stella Dallas"*, "American Literary History" 11, 3, p. 428.

*can Magazine* by “acknowledging, but ultimately assuaging, the threat to their own class boundaries by an emergent consumer culture”<sup>17</sup>. Parchesky ultimately claims for the novel the same function Anna Siomopoulos ascribes to Vidor’s film: “the multiple identification employed in *Stella Dallas*... suggests that the solution to the problems of the heroine and isolated, impoverished women like her does not require a critique of class and gender relations, only a little more empathy on the part of characters and spectators alike”<sup>18</sup>.

This debate about the impact of shifting viewpoints in Prouty’s novel does not take adequate account of at least three complicating features. First, Prouty’s abrupt shift from Laurel’s point of view to Stella’s in the fifth chapter of her novel apparently reflects a change in her plans for the novel. As she says in her 1961 autobiography, she had been inspired by a story at a Beacon Hill dinner party about “a member of an old Boston family” who had “married someone beyond the pale socially” and separated from her shortly after their daughter was born, leaving the child, “a girl of twelve or thirteen now, quite lovely in spite of her mother”, to shuttle back and forth between the hopelessly disparate worlds of her parents. Prouty wondered “what would be the effect of such a situation on the ‘lovely child’, and also on the mother... left alone in her dreary apartment” by the daughter’s periodic visits to her father” and “[w]hy... such an apparently discriminating man [had] married such a woman”<sup>19</sup>. The novel begins with a forthright focus on Laurel, already thirteen in its first sentence. As Prouty acknowledged, “It wasn’t until I’d gotten well into the story that Stella began stealing the show”<sup>20</sup>, leading to a new emphasis on the intractability of her problems over Laurel’s.

Second, the mixture of irony and sympathy with which Prouty presents Stella does not remain consistent in the plan she ended up following. Thornton may well overstate the case in contrasting Prouty’s “initially vicious” and “nasty” tone toward Stella with the compassionate view of her adopted by Helen Morrison, who is “in sympathy with Stella’s motives rather than distracted by her appearance”<sup>21</sup>. But there is no doubt that after spending the first half of the novel satirizing Stella’s assiduous lack of taste, Prouty gradually complicates that judgment by demonstrating that coarseness is a relatively superficial fault compared to the other faults wrongly imputed to Stella. She puts a still harsher judgment about her into the mouth of the petty Phyllis Stearns: “Oh isn’t it sad?... that women exist who care so little for their

<sup>17</sup> J. Parchesky, *Adapting “Stella Dallas”: Class Boundaries, Consumerism, and Hierarchies of Taste*, “Legacy” 23, 2, pp. 183, 179–180.

<sup>18</sup> A. Siomopoulos, *I Didn’t Know Anyone Could Be So Unselfish: Liberal Empathy, the Welfare State, and King Vidor’s “Stella Dallas”*, “Cinema Journal” 38, 4, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> O.H. Prouty, *Pencil Shavings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Worcester: Commonwealth Press, 1985, p. 152–153.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> E. Thornton, *op. cit.*, pp. 437, 438.



children as Stella Dallas?"<sup>22</sup>. She presents a scene in which Stephen's divorce attorney recognizes but ignores Stella's innocence of adultery<sup>23</sup>. She reveals how Laurel pretends not to know the woman the new upper-class friends she has met at a seaside resort are ridiculing<sup>24</sup>. She shows how Laurel and Stella, after both overhearing a pair of gossips linking mother and daughter on the train carrying them away from the resort, each hopes the other is asleep and unaware of the gossip. Only after these scenes does she bring Stella to visit Helen, who validates Stella's ultimate decency and nobility by seeing her "with the eyes of a mother"<sup>25</sup>. Throughout all these scenes, Stella remains equally vulgar, but the importance of her vulgarity recedes as her other qualities become more obvious.

Third and most important, it would be as misleading here as in Hurst's *Imitation of Life* to take the adoption of a character's point of view as an indication that the author endorses that character's views. Throughout Prouty, as in Hurst, intimacy and irony go hand in hand. Indeed intimacy is the precondition for all of Prouty's most ironic effects. Apart from the scene in which the gossips aboard the train unmask Laurel as Stella's daughter, none of the scenes that show Stella's most admirable qualities are presented from her point of view. Instead, Prouty consistently adopts the viewpoint of each of her characters expressly in order to satirize them and their views of each other. Stella's ostentation and poor judgment, Laurel's naiveté, Stephen's romantic self-delusion are all revealed in chapters in which the omniscient narrator adopts both their viewpoint and their rhetoric, as in the opening paragraph of Chapter 7:

Stephen married Stella in January, four months after he first saw her. He thought he loved her. Most sincerely he thought he loved her. He desired to be with her – terribly, terrifyingly – more than he had ever desired to be with any girl. Moreover, he felt very tenderly towards her. He was aware of her limitations, her little crudities, but what if she did make a few mistakes in grammar, a few mistakes in taste, occasionally. She was wonderfully sweet-tempered, always amiable, always gay, as easily pleased as a child, as easily guided, he believed<sup>26</sup>.

Of course Prouty, in borrowing the romantic clichés on which Stephen is feeding, is not really adopting his point of view any more than Stella, in copying the latest fashion, is adopting fashionable codes of dress and behavior. Stella, at least when she copies her own fashions, is too categorical and superficial to be a faithful imitator; Prouty is too satirical. Her writing repeatedly uses intimacy as the basis for satire, as in her use of exclamation points, which serve exclusively as a marker

<sup>22</sup> O.P. Prouty, *Stella Dallas*, 1923, Rpt. in New York: Triangle Books, 1940, p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 171.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 224–226.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 289.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

of ironic distance between the characters and the narrative voice that judges them, whether in quoted dialogue (“It was she! I can swear to it!” cries a gossip who sees her with Ed Munn<sup>27</sup>) or in *style indirect libre* (“Why, her hair was snow-white on one side!” thinks Stella in a moment of brief triumph when she first meets Helen Morrison. “She couldn’t be a day under forty!”<sup>28</sup>). It seems likely, in fact, that one reason Prouty introduces the extraneous episode in which former lovers Stephen and Helen coolly and pointlessly flirt with each other after their twenty years’ separation<sup>29</sup> – an episode dropped from Vidor’s film – is that she finds it easiest to present characters in close-up if she is satirizing them, however gently. Even at their most intimate, Prouty’s identifications are always ironic, never unqualified.

Thirty years ago, Nick Browne analyzed the parallel relation between the narrative judgment and the intimacy accorded by adopting a character’s point of view in cinema. Discussing the limitations of optical point of view as a basis for audience identification in a sequence from John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), Browne concluded that “our point of view on the sequence is tied more closely to our attitude of approval or disapproval... [than to] any literal viewing angle or character’s point of view”<sup>30</sup>. Instead of being determined by the characters’ point of view, “the spectator’s place... is a construction of the text which is ultimately the product of the narrator’s disposition toward the tale,” even though “the film makes it appear as though it were the depicted characters to whom the authority for the presentation of shots can be referred”<sup>31</sup>.

More clearly and repeatedly than Stahl’s adaptation of *Imitation of Life*, Vidor’s film version of *Stella Dallas* provides many examples of the ways a film can pass judgments on its characters while seeming to refer the judgments to other characters. Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) is repeatedly unmasked as tasteless or vulgar by being surprised at compromising moments by Stephen (John Boles), whose judgment the audience is encouraged to share, and ultimately revealed as noble by Helen Morrison (Barbara O’Neil), whose appreciation of her sacrifices on behalf of Laurel (Anne Shirley) is presumed to be definitive. In addition, the film frames the audience’s likely response to Stella through manipulations of camera and mise-en-scène that are passed off as associations rather than effects of Stella’s behavior. Stella’s home, for example, is cluttered and dark compared to the Morrison home, with its clean, classic design and its high white walls consistently emphasized by greater distances between the camera and its subjects, making human figures smaller

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 243.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 186–189.

<sup>30</sup> N. Browne, *The Spectator-in-the-Text: The Rhetoric of “Stagecoach”*, 1975. Rpt. in Gerald Mast, Marshal Cohen, and Leo Braudy (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 219.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 221.



while creating a series of more open physical spaces for them to move through. Only Laurel's enthusiastic welcome by Michael, the family's Great Dane, threatens their home's perfect decorum. Apart from providing Stella and Laurel's faces unmotivated bright lighting for their big moments, Vidor softens the focus for Stella's close-up when she welcomes Stephen's Christmas visit, the estranged couple's last tender moment in the film, and when she is watching Laurel's wedding from the dark street outside the Morrison home.

In addition, *Stella Dallas* also provides neglected examples of the ways cinema can combine intimacy with irony in a remarkably close parallel to the apparently literary device of *style indirect libre*. The most obvious of these is the star discourse of Barbara Stanwyck, which conflates the heroine's repellent vulgarity with the Hollywood star's admirable performance of vulgarity. Indeed, throughout Vidor's film, the theme of Stella's indiscriminate imitation of her stylistic betters, so central in Prouty's novel, is eclipsed by the film's status as star vehicle, which overlays Stanwyck's daringly uninhibited performance on Stella's pathetically misguided performance. The result is to fuse the audience's intimacy with the star with their ironic distance from the character she is playing. Modern audiences who recognize character actors like Alan Hale as Stella's raffish suitor Ed Munn, Marjorie Main as her mother, and George Walcott as her brother Charlie can extend this pleasure by seeing these characters both as themselves and in recognizable relation to other characters these actors created.

Vidor frequently blocks and frames his characters in a way that creates both intimacy and ironic distance. When Stella returns from the hospital with baby Laurel, the nurse who enjoins her to stay in bed consistently keeps her back to the camera, as Stella's equally didactic father had done in the film's opening scene, directing primary attention to Stella, whose face looks out to engage the audience. The effect in both cases is to deliver a judgment against Stella that is referred to an unimportant character but readily generalized to the film's narrative. The long moment when Stella, surveying herself in the first of the film's many mirrors as she gradually realizes that following her mother's suggestion to take Charlie the lunch he left behind will give her a new opportunity to spend time with Stephen, illustrates the way Vidor's blocking and cutting favor Stella most clearly when the film is most intent on passing judgment on her, unfavorable or favorable, by allowing her the opportunity to give herself away.

When Laurel pretends not to know the gaudily dressed woman Richard Grosvenor (Tim Holt) and the other young guests at the Mirador are ridiculing, Vidor, instead of having Laurel see her mother from a distance, frames them in the same shot, Stella standing unwittingly behind Laurel, in the resort's soda fountain, increasing both the intimacy and the irony of Laurel's denial of her mother. When Stella and Laurel, lying in their births in the train carrying them away from the Mirador, both overhear the gossip that links them as mother and daughter, Vidor, instead of follow-

ing Prouty in presenting first Laurel's point of view, then Stella's, cuts back and forth four times from Laurel to Stella. Each of the four shots showing Stella's reaction is longer than the corresponding shot showing Laurel's, emphasizing the primacy of her realization that she is ruining her daughter's social opportunities. During Stella's tête-à-tête with Helen Morrison, Helen sits first in profile, then in quarter-face, looking intently at Stella, who accompanies her prepared speech about how she wants to live without Laurel in order to enjoy herself more by casting her eyes away from Helen, and therefore toward the camera. In the course of the speech, however, Helen gradually turns away from Stella and toward the camera herself, showing by her look of pained sympathy that she does not believe Stella's explanation of why she wants to give up Laurel but does accept her determination to do so. Here the faces of both Stella and Helen, framed together, display emotions too private to share with each other, suitable only for sharing with millions of movie spectators.

Finally, Vidor uses music and other sounds as a way of establishing an expressive tone for each scene without specifying an agency for the feeling the sound expresses. The gentle solo flute and solo violin that introduce Stephen's walk down a tree-lined road with Stella (in which he revealingly tells her, "I like you the way you are", something he never says in Prouty's novel and never says again in the film) contrast sharply with the honky-tonk music that accompanies Stella's first dance with Ed Munn and the noisy player piano that creates a similarly hectic atmosphere in the scene her husband interrupts of her entertaining Ed, Charlie, and Carrie Jenkins (Gertrude Short). In fact, the clutter that makes Stella's home seem so stressful is as much auditory as visual, and the noise level always abates for her most touching moments. After Stella begins her final scene with Laurel by turning on the radio while she arranges the flowers she has told Laurel are from Ed Munn, Laurel turns it off in distaste just long enough for Stella to deliver her last, most mendacious big line to her daughter – "A woman wants to be something else besides a mother, you know" – before turning it back on and settling back with a cigarette, cueing Laurel's horrified reaction by establishing a coarse tone that can be subordinated at will to the more pressing needs of histrionic address.

The most surprising feature of Vidor's modulation of point of view is that it has not been more widely recognized, for it is a feature shared with many another women's film. Jeanine Basinger has called John M. Stahl's adaptation of *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) "one of the greatest of all women's films" even though it is actually "a story about a man choosing between two women" because "the organization of audience sympathy is directed" to its author hero, Richard Harland, who makes a disastrous marriage to the murderously possessive Ellen Berendt<sup>32</sup>. Even before Ellen sets her sights on Harland because he reminds her of the father she worshipped

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<sup>32</sup> J. Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 96.

as a child, he is the most sympathetic character in both Stahl's film and the best-selling 1944 novel by Ben Ames Williams on which it is based. Yet Williams's and Stahl's manipulation of point of view insure that Harland is not the most dominant or memorable character in either the novel or the film.

Like Prouty, Williams complicates readers' sympathy for his suffering hero by switching among multiple points of view. The opening and closing chapters, which frame the intervening chapters, as in the film, as a long flashback, adopt an Olympian point of view that tracks Harland's return to the faithful woman awaiting his return without entering his thoughts. Chapter 2, which presents Harland's first meeting with Ellen aboard the train taking them both to Glen Robie's hunting lodge, adopts Harland's point of view, but Chapter 3 adopts Ellen's, recalling her childhood infatuation with her father, then retracing her opening scenes with Harland before moving forward to a love scene the film omits. Subsequent chapters not only alternate between Harland and Ellen but also shift to the viewpoints of Harland's young brother Danny (Chapter 4, 105–120) and Ellen's sister Ruth (Chapters 9, 11, 13, and 15)<sup>33</sup>. These shifting perspectives often reveal sharply ironic contradictions, as when Ellen reveals that “most of all she envied and hated Danny”<sup>34</sup>, the rival for Harland's affections who is guilelessly open to the claims of his brother's new wife, or when Ruth, unaware that her suicidal sister has already planted evidence framing Ruth for Ellen's murder, recalls that “[a]fter those last days with Ellen at Bar Harbor [she] had found a new sweetness in the other; and after Ellen's death, she was gratefully sure that they had never been so close before”<sup>35</sup>. The effect of Williams's multiple viewpoints is to shape the novel as a drama of the characters' growing awareness of each other's true natures and desires, as both Harland and Ruth gradually realize that Ruth is a jealously possessive monster determined to destroy anyone who comes between her and Harland – Danny by letting him drown at Harland's Maine retreat Back of the Moon, her unborn child by throwing herself down a flight of stairs in order to induce a miscarriage, and Ruth by swallowing arsenic and leaving behind a letter to Ellen's old beau, Boston District Attorney Russell Quinton, that will frame Ruth for murder if she ever marries Harland. Yet the effect of these dawning revelations is curiously asymmetrical, for only Ellen has any secrets worth teasing out. Ruth and Danny are far too straightforward to conceal anything from Harland or Ellen. And Harland's own secret – that he knew Ellen had deliberately allowed his brother to drown and concealed that knowledge from the authorities, making himself an accessory after the fact – although it precipitates the novel's courtroom denouement and ultimately sends Harland to prison for two years, is never a secret from Ellen, who knows from the beginning that “Richard,

<sup>33</sup> B.A. Williams, *Leave Her to Heaven*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944, pp. 192–225, 256–284, 310–361, 413–423.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 151.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 256.

whose love she held above all the treasures of the world, had seen her let his Danny drown”<sup>36</sup>. The irony implicit in Harland’s point of view lies not in his knowledge but in his ignorance, as when he vows to himself that “not even Ellen must ever know he knew” of her complicity in Danny’s death, even though she knows already<sup>37</sup>.

As in Prouty’s novel, the intimacy conveyed by sharing a character’s point of view goes hand in hand with an ironic sense of that character’s limitations. In Ellen’s case, the limitations are unreasonable jealousy, possessiveness, and a neurotic need for unconditional love; in the case of all the other characters whose point of view Williams enters, the principal limitation is an unawareness of Ellen’s monstrous nature. Although Harland may be the principal victim of Ellen’s machinations, Ellen remains incontestably the enigma at the center of the novel.

Stahl’s film adaptation of *Leave Her to Heaven*, like Vidor’s *Stella Dallas*, eschews multiple points of view for a single viewpoint. Yet this viewpoint, as in Vidor, is subtly modulated throughout the film, never exactly objective, often inflected by a particular character’s perceptions, and generally hard to pin down. The story is framed, for example, as a long flashback by Glen Robie (Ray Collins), who says in the opening scene that he is practically the only person who knows the whole story behind the two-year prison term Harland (Cornel Wilde) has served. This opening scene seems to set up a noir-inspired voiceover like those that shape *Laura* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Yet the source of Robie’s intimate knowledge remains a mystery, since he is a minor presence in his own New Mexico hunting lodge, never appears at the polio clinic where Danny (Darryl Hickman) lives in Warm Springs or in *Back of the Moon*, and scarcely says a word when Ruth (Jeanne Crain) goes on trial for murder, abundantly justifying his initial comment that “some might say I lost the case for him” in a scene that seems designed mainly to give him an excuse to return. (In Williams, Robie is a retired oilman who disappears from the novel long before the trial.)

If the film’s point of view is not Robie’s, whose is it? It is tempting to answer that it is Harland’s, since unlike Robie he appears in every new location and the film places primary emphasis on the trials Ellen’s possessive devotion visits on him. When he first meets Ellen (Gene Tierney) aboard the train, the camera alternates between shots of him staring at her and shots of her staring at him. Yet the effect is to present her from his point of view, partly because his gaze is motivated by the narrative (he has just noticed that she is reading a copy of his latest novel), partly because her face is framed in tighter close-ups for longer periods of time, implying something unnerving and uncanny in the gaze with which she fixes him (a motif that is playfully developed when she teases his flirting as derivative of the novel she does not recognize as his and then disconcerts him by accepting

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 174.

his fumbling criticism of his own writing in a brief episode that has no precedent in Williams).

It will not do, however, to conclude that the film is presented simply from Harland's point of view. The few brief scenes in which Harland appears alone – his abortive attempts to work on his novel at Robie's lodge and at *Back of the Moon*, his sitting grief-stricken on the rocky shore after Danny's death – are tentative or remote, as if he had no inner life that could not be revealed by external dramatic interactions. Sitting at a typewriter marks him as a writer; sitting and clutching his knees indicates his sorrow over the loss of his brother. These brief scenes are in striking contrast to the film's equally brief but far more charged scenes showing Ellen alone. The famous episode in which she scatters her father's ashes in the New Mexico foothills is presented from Harland's point of view, but there is no observer to watch her choosing a pair of heeled slippers that could plausibly catch on the carpet and send her tumbling down the stairs in order to kill her unborn child, or pouring a white powder into an envelope preparatory to her fatal picnic with her sister and husband. Both scenes show Ellen's behavior as pointedly enigmatic. Both are staged for viewers who are wondering what her behavior means. Although these questions will soon be answered, both scenes point to a deeper enigma – the question of why Ellen is willing to do violence to herself in order to hurt someone who threatens her hold on Harland – that the film will never resolve.

The most celebrated of all these intimate moments is the close-up of Ellen's face, enameled in makeup and lipstick, her eyes concealed by sunglasses, as she sits in a rowboat, supposedly providing a safeguard for Danny as he swims across the lake but actually waiting for him to drown. The unnerving shot of Ellen's beautiful, blank face faithfully captures the import of the corresponding passage in Williams:

Ellen in this moment made no conscious decision. She knew that Danny was drowning, and with the knowledge came a tremendous, billowing, exultant comprehension. If Danny drowned, then she could make Richard wholly hers! She did not think: "I will let him drown!" But neither did she think: "I can save him!" Nor did she make any move to do so. A frozen paralysis held her, and she submitted to it. Like a disinterested spectator watching the playing out of a tragic drama which is about to end contentingly, she sat utterly still, making no movement at all (159).

In this supreme moment of decision, Williams presents Ellen as making no decision, allowing her paralysis to assume the agency for her actions. Despite its intimate access to the workings of her mind, the passage presents Ellen only as analyzing the situation and her reaction to it, not as authorizing any particular course of action. In fact, it says less about what she is thinking than about what she is not thinking, as if her mind were a blank even to herself. In the same way, Stahl's close-

up of Ellen's face is a portrait of her not thinking about what is happening and what she is doing. Harland, Ruth, and Danny can be revealed with ease; Ellen's homicidal, suicidal passive-aggressiveness remains a mystery even to herself.

But not even Gene Tierney's blankness as the murderous Ellen can compare to Lana Turner's all-encompassing blankness as Lora Meredith, the least self-aware of all these heroines, in Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*. The stylistic devices through which Sirk deconstructs the Hollywood melodrama have often been catalogued, most influentially by Paul Willemen<sup>38</sup>. And it is fascinating to watch these devices proliferate as Lora climbs the ladder of success and sacrifices her daughter Susie (Sandra Dee) and her lover Steve Archer (John Gavin) in the process. After beginning with a relatively neutral *mise-en-scène*, Sirk traces Lora's rise to wealth and fame as a Broadway actress by adopting an increasingly baroque style. He gradually multiplies over-determined musical cues, chiaroscuro lighting of interior facial close-ups, splashes of bright color, reflective surfaces, doorways and windows that frame his characters within the frame of the movie screen, and unmotivated high- or low-angle shots; extends his interior sets further and further into deep space; and fills them with objects and barriers, often highly metaphorical, that divide the space into an ever larger number of distinct planes, until he finally arrives at the fractured visual symphony of the church in which Mahalia Jackson sings for the funeral of Annie Johnson (Juanita Moore). But if Sirk's inveterate use of mirrors to reflect his characters' doubleness or vanity is distinctive, still more distinctive is his direction of Lana Turner, who "gives the impression she is looking at herself in a mirror even when she is not"<sup>39</sup>. Sirk's mirrors are merely props that offer his heroine one more opportunity to display her self-absorption.

As Willemen points out, the intimacy implied by Sirk's restless reframing is constantly belied by the distance his camera maintains from his characters<sup>40</sup>. The result is that all focalization in Sirk's film, as in Prouty's *Stella Dallas*, is ironic; whenever the film establishes intimacy with a character's image or gaze, it is always with an ironic view. Hence the shift in the dramatic emphasis of the story, which begins as if it were going to be all about Lora but ends up giving her less and less screen time, gradually subordinating the energy and urgency of her movie-star domestic dilemmas to the more pressing yearning of Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) to embrace a new racial identity, does not mark a heightened sense of irony toward Lora but rather a lack of interest in her as a dramatic center. If Sirk presents a woman's world, it is a world less like the women's boarding house of Gregory La Cava's *Stage Door* (1937), in which the powerful men who control the characters' destinies are given only a marginal place, than like the dressing rooms and salons of George Cukor's

<sup>38</sup> P. Willemen, *Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System*. Rpt. in Fischer 1991, p. 276.

<sup>39</sup> M. Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 272.

<sup>40</sup> P. Willemen, *op. cit.*, p. 277.



*The Women* (1939), in which, as the cameos of the stars dissolving into different animals in the credits suggest, viewers are invited to eavesdrop from the camera's privileged position on a female zoo from whom they are clearly invited to remain ironically detached.

Nowhere does Sirk's corrosive irony emerge more clearly than in his constant use of staircases as stages for dramatic conflict or crossing over, beginning with the outdoor staircase at Coney Island on which Lora and Annie first unwittingly pass one another. Whether Lora is yielding to Steve's embraces in the corridor outside her cold-water flat, then accepting his suggestion that he won't be around to rescue her from the next show-business wolf with a spiteful, "I'd like it that way – forever", or Lora, at the top of a staircase, is trying to persuade Sarah Jane, at the bottom, to accept her subservient role in the domestic circle by running one more errand, staircases in the film systematically intensify conflict, sometimes to the point of hysteria.

Yet here Sirk is less exceptional than he might seem. Charles Affron, Michael Stern, and Jeremy G. Butler have all contrasted Sirk's expressionistic visuals with the "near-invisible stylistics" of Stahl's 1934 *Imitation of Life*<sup>41</sup>. As Butler puts it, "the 1959 version constructs a world of dynamic disequilibrium, when compared to 1934's equilibrium and stasis" (Butler 1986: 299). Stern more pointedly contrasts the "cataclysmic eruptions" that break out on Sirk's staircases with Stahl's use of staircases to provide "a quiet but unavoidable reminder of the social stratification at the root of the film"<sup>42</sup>. In Stahl's opening scene, first Bea from below, then Delilah from above, is shot through the banister at the top of the second-floor landing outside Bea's bedroom, momentarily suggesting that each one is imprisoned in a role she cannot escape. Even when Bea moves into a fashionable New York apartment overlooking the East River, she is repeatedly shown imprisoned in the gilded cage suggested by her Art Deco banister as she comes down from her private domain upstairs to the public world below. Peola is similarly trapped behind the banister when she slowly descends from the first floor to the floor below, indicating her oppressive sense of her socially pre-ordained place. In Stahl, staircases freeze the characters in their roles; in Sirk, they are sites of negotiation.

The more important point, however, is that Sirk's full-throated expressionism has its roots in Stahl's more subtly symbolic *mise-en-scène*, in which doorways and windows are as important as in Sirk, though a good deal less emphatic. Sirk's "critique of both bourgeois ideology and the conventions of 1930s melodrama", which Butler pronounces "more a function of the genre than of the solitary genius"<sup>43</sup>, is incipient in the genre even in the first adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. In

<sup>41</sup> Ch. Affron, *Performing Performing: Irony and Affect*. Rpt. in Fischer 1991, p. 212.

<sup>42</sup> M. Stern, *Douglas Sirk*, Boston: Twayne, 1979, p. 184.

<sup>43</sup> J.G. Butler, "Imitation of Life" (1934 and 1950): *Style and the Domestic Melodrama*, 1986. Rpt. in Fischer 1991, p. 300.

fact, it goes back even further, to that genre's literary roots. For if Stahl's adaptation softens the irony of Hurst's novel, Sirk's sharpens it in a way that is eminently Hurstian, since Lora's increasingly self-estranged narcissism is much more faithful than Bea's deeply felt romantic entanglement to Hurst's premise that her heroine is living a mere imitation of life. Even at its most sympathetic, even, more frequently, at its most intimate, it provides a transcription of its heroine's self-absorbed folly more faithful than anything in Stahl – and a reminder that taking women seriously has never exempted them from criticism.

This sample of four films based on three novels is far too small to serve as a trustworthy basis for either a theory of identification in women's movies or a sketch of the genre's historical evolution. It provides compelling evidence, however, that sympathy and irony not only coexist but frequently intensify each other from the very beginning of the genre as an inheritance of its source in women's fiction. If later critics have adopted a variety of attitudes toward the suffering heroines of these novels and films, a primary reason why these texts are receptive to such a wide variety is that their own attitude toward their heroines is so productively contradictory. The insistence on emphasizing a single overriding impulse toward intimacy or irony in any of these novels or films, from Prouty's *Stella Dallas* to Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, reveals more about the disposition of the analyst than about the narrative's attitude toward the heroine.

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## FEMINISTYCZNE POWIEŚCI, FEMINISTYCZNE FILMY

### Streszczenie

Hollywoodzkie filmy feministyczne – dla silnych niewiast i o silnych bohaterkach, stawiających czoła trudnościom związanym z byciem kobietą – przedstawiają problemy dotyczące kobiety w dwudziestowiecznej Ameryce poprzez dialektykę współczucia i ironii pod adresem ich walczących heroin. *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Zostaw ją niebiosom* (1945) oraz obydwie wersje *Imitacji życia* (1934, 1959) powołują swoje bohaterki do życia i ustanawiają ich punkt widzenia przez połączenie intymności i ironicznego dystansu w sposób, który pozwala te sprzeczne ze sobą techniki oraz postawy przez nie sygnalizowane zintensyfikować. Autor artykułu docieka sposobów, w jakie wymienione filmy ustanawiają ową kombinację syntonii i rezerwy, podkreślając zakorzenienie tej dialektyki w bestsellerowych powieściach kobiecych, których te cztery filmy są adaptacjami. Wszystko po to, by dowieść, iż dwudziestowieczna amerykańska *fiction*, literacka (powieściowa) czy filmowa, charakteryzuje się nieredukowalną, ale produktywnie ambiwalentną postawą wobec swoich heroin.

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