

Love in Black and White

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The following three movies, *Raintree County* (1959), *Band of Angels* (1957), and *Imitations of Life* (1957) include many of the same features, stereotypes and underlying meanings to push particular notions about mixed people and black people. The mulatto character is demonized but yet sexualized in her being. The combination of the two races, black and white, is seen as inadmissible which is where the women are demonized. They are demonized not because they are seen as a bad person but because they are the product of miscegenation. Then they are sexualized pushing along the Jezebel stereotype that black women's bodies are promiscuous in itself. White men are to be seen as the ideal man and the heroes. They are sought after as if they are the prize and being with the white men solidifies their identity. These movies explore the relationship between mulatto raced women and white men to both demonize, stupify or sexualize them, emphasizing on the "love" of white men from the mulatto women, the lust of white men after the mulatto women and the abuse of white men towards the mulatto.

One of the main characteristics that all of the mulatto women in this group of films have in common is their love for white men and approval from these men. In *Raintree County*, the mulatto character Susanna is desperate for the approval of Johnny. She tricks him into a marriage and consistently says that she is unsure if she is good enough for him. In the movie she states that she lied about being pregnant with a baby and says, "I lied because I wanted you more than anything in my whole life." She clearly puts this man on a pedestal and professes that there is nothing she wanted more than to be with this white man. The surface level interpretation of this would allude to the idea that either she is actually in love with him and that he is the prize. Taking a deeper look into the intradiegetic view from Susana's perspective, she could be seeking security in the case that someone discovers her true racial identity. Essentially, she is trying to

escape the treatment that comes with being the Other in society. Johnny is a white man with money and securing her position as his wife would allow her to proceed in society with no worries. It allows her to receive privileges a woman of her status could never even dream of. However, in the end she does kill herself because she feels as if Johnny does not love her. This suggests an even deeper need for approval to be white. She cannot flee from her actual racial identity if her husband is still choosing a white woman over her. This final realization of never being able to a white woman is what caused her to kill herself. She was implied to be insane because of the pressure of being the product of miscegenation. Throughout the story, she was demonized for her exaggerated mood swings and endangering her child. It is almost as if she is the villain for both trapping the white man, getting pregnant, and having mental illnesses. She is portrayed as conniving for these reasons however I'd argue that she is just trying to do what is best for a black woman in that time frame. She wants the access, that status and the privilege. In *Band of Angels*, the main character, and Other, Maunty sought and was sought after many different white men. She had many love interests but the main and most controversial was her captor. Maunty was another but the difference is her racial masquerade was not originally intentional. She grew up with the intention of marrying a white man because that was what she was taught by her white peers, teachers, and father. Her realization of her black identity came full forced with the harsh reality of being sold into slavery. She was sold to a man who portrayed himself as a hero for treating his slaves "right" and allowing them their "freedom" to leave the plantation. She fell in love with him in a horrendous case of Stockholm syndrome. She fell for the same brainwashing that kept the rest of the slaves on the plantation. Even a full black slave had fallen in love with him further emphasizing the idea that the white man is the most desirable. Even after her escape she still pursues relationships with white men. She falls in love

with a union soldier who defends her and then is reunited with a former love interest, a preacher. Through the mistreatment of white men who abused their knowledge of her racial status in order to advance sexual propositions, she believes that Hamish, her “former” captor is the only man for her and goes back to him. This is the biggest betrayal of her racial identity and it almost makes her look downright stupid. While all of the other slaves are being freed, it seems as if her love is desperate for this slavemaster. From the extradiegetic view, it seems crazy to run back to the man that bought you but from the intra diegetic view, she is just trying to resume her life before she knew that she was black. She is desperate for that stability, rather than desperate for the white man, instead of changing her whole life. It is also implied through her experiences that if she lives her life as a mulatto woman, it will ultimately lead to her being sexually assaulted. This means that she is also desperate for acceptance; for a man that can accept the fact that she is of mixed race. In the *Imitation of Life*, Sarah Jane is arguably the most desperate of these mulatto characters to be perceived and shows that through her interest in white men. She yearns for these white men to accept her and to find her attractive. Her first boyfriend, who she kept a secret, was a white man who would never accept her racial identity. He beat her and yet she still chased down the attention from white becoming an adult at a white club. They fired her and yet again she finds another job as a dancer at a white club because she is feverishly seeking that white male validation. That she is white which is all she ever wanted. She is portrayed as rageful as she fights to be seen as something she is not and she is both the clear other and clear antagonist. All of these portrayals of the mulatto women chasing after the white men after abuse, and neglect by any means necessary is to show that white men are that desirable, no matter the circumstances. This all makes sense because the directors of these films are white directors, so they manipulate the extra diegetic gaze to seem as if they are more desirable by any race of women.

In these movies, particularly *Raintree County* and *Band of Angels*, the white men have an undeniable lust for these mulatto characters. The interesting thing about it is as the Other, you are the undesirable entity in society. It is almost as if they are seen as the forbidden fruit, the thing that they cannot have which makes them want it even more. Many mulatto characters are deeply sexualized which also pushes along the Jezebel stereotype. According to “The Black Feminist Journal”, “The 'Jezebel' stereotype is an image meant to control Black women's sexuality. The Jezebel stereotype portrays Black women as sexually promiscuous. The stereotype leads to a societal belief that Black women need various forms of social control.” In *Raintree County*, Susana is perceived as the beautiful mysterious girl who seems innocent, but if you take a deeper look into the details, Johnny’s interest in her is purely physical. Johnny had sex with her before marriage and he knew nothing about her before they married whereas with his white romantic interest, he knew much more about her personality. She even possessed more of a personality beyond the craziness that Susana presented. A better example of this would be Amantha, Maunty, in *Band of Angels*. On countless occasions, Maunty is lusted after these white men. Only after they learn that she is fact a women of mixed race, do they try to rape and sexually assault her. She attract this attention from many men on different occasions including the men who sold her into slavery, a neighbor of her slavemaster, and most notiaibly a preacher. There was nothing Maunty had done to attract or warrant this type of attention except be black. She was never dressed any differently from the other white women on the street. Her blackness caused white men to lust but more than anything, seek control over her body. They believe because she is black but is perceived as white that she is promiscuous for “tricking” them which is something they use against her. They also believe that because she is black they have a right to control her body. Finally, they also believe that because she is the result of miscegenation that she should be

punished, but these are only excuses for these white men to carry out their carnal desires whilst morally trying to excuse their own behavior. In *Imitation of Life*, Sarah Jane is looked at in a sexual manner by men along with white women though. Both the director and Sarah Jane are sexualizing her body for the white male gaze. She wants to be lusted after and the director makes this mixed raced character seen as a sexual object to viewers too. In “Imitation of Life: The Black Woman’s Double Determination as Troubling Other,” it says, “...This is prelude to a conversation in which she reveals that her rebellion against her blackness has been initiated by her sexuality.” Her character pushes along the Jezebel stereotype and the sexualization of mulatto characters by making herself into a sexual object. It is purposefully done so that she can be sought after by white men in order to deny her blackness. Men sexualize women’s bodies in general, but they were able to justify the sexualization of black women.

As mentioned before, many of the white men in these relationships abuse the mulatto women. In *Band of Angels*, Maunty was constantly under threat of being sexually abused which is why she ran to the one white man that never attempted to hurt her in that way. He was not sexually abusing her but he was mentally taking advantage of her. In this film, watchers never see Hamish take advantage of any white women in the same way he took advantage of Maunty. In, *Imitation of Life*, Sarah Jane is physically abused by her first boyfriend who is a white male. He beats her up for being black. These examples make the point that these white men are portrayed and even seen as heroes in the eyes of these women but in reality they could arguably be the villain. It also shows that they treat these women so badly because of the simple fact that they are black. They would not have treated white women the same.

In conclusion, these women love these men because it fulfills their desire to escape their identity not knowing the abuse that follows and that only lust will be reciprocated.

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