Tomorrow's Children (1934)

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Tomorrow's Children is a film that tells the story of Alice Mason, a young woman whom the US government seeks to forcibly sterilize because she comes from a family with a history of alcoholism, mental illnesses, and physical disabilities, traits that they considered biologically determined and inferior. The film, released in 1934, was directed by Crane Wilbur, produced by Bryan Foy, written by Wilbur and Wallace Thurman, and released by Foy Productions Ltd. *Tomorrow's Children* criticized forced sterilization and the eugenics movement in the United States in addition to protesting film censorship regulations in the early 1900s.

The eugenics movement in the United States originated in the early 1900s. The eugenics movement advocated for what is were claimed to be better, genetically superior families through methods of positive and negative eugenics. Supporters of positive eugenics encouraged those deemed to have superior genes, typically those who were white and wealthy, to have many children. To promote positive eugenics, governmental officials, public health officials, and supporters of eugenics created contests that provided prizes for families who had many children that met certain eugenic criteria, like physical appearance, intelligence, or athleticism. Supporters of negative eugenics advocated for eliminating bad genes from the human population by prohibiting those who they considered biologically inferior or unfit to reproduce. Typically, the people they considered unfit were impoverished, physically disabled, or mentally ill—all traits that they considered to be heritable. In the 1920s and 1930s, the United States passed legislation legalizing forced sterilization in twenty-four states. Forced sterilization, the process of permanently removing a person's ability to reproduce, was a practice of the eugenics movement in the United States during the early 1900s. Supporters of the eugenics movement encouraged those with genes they considered superior, like intelligence and physical attractiveness, to continue reproducing (positive eugenics) Similarly, eugenics supporters discouraged those with genes they considered inferior, including physical and mental disabilities and negative social behaviors, from reproducing with the intentions of removing those bad genes from the human race (negative eugenics). The US primarily used forced sterilization to prevent handicapped, mentally disabled, immigrant families, and the poor from reproducing. Families that were able to afford private care for loved ones with similar disabilities or undesirable traits were able to avoid the practice of sterilization common in public institutions.

The film opens on Alice Mason and her fiancé, Jim Baker. Baker wants to get married, but Mason is hesitant, concerned about the welfare of her unemployed family. Her father drinks excessively and spends most of their money on alcohol, while her mother remains in bed all day, neglecting her children and housework. Mason's mother is characterized as continually producing children with inferior genetic traits Mason's siblings are each physically or mentally disabled or mentally ill. Mason breaks off Baker's marriage proposal, worried that getting married would prevent her from helping her family.

The film next shows the Mason household. In the Mason house, Doctor Brooks, a physician, comes to check in on Mason's mother who had just given birth to a stillborn child. The house is messy, and Mason's brothers are huddled in a corner, playing with broken alcohol bottles. Brooks speaks with Mason's father, who is drinking a glass of liquor. Mason's father does not care about the emotional state of his wife, claiming that she had already been through stillborn before. Brooks offers to help the Masons by requesting welfare checks from the government and promises to check in again. He leaves the house just as Mason returns, and she thanks him for his kindness. Mason enters the house and begins to care for the children and her parents. She gives money to her father so that he can pick up some groceries and tells him twice that the money is for groceries only, not alcohol.

The film continues, and while Mason is at work, a social worker and a public health official come to the house. The social worker acknowledges that for Mason's mother and father to receive government help, they must be sterilized to prevent them from further passing down their genes The social worker also orders that Mason be sterilized, even though Mason is shown to be a good, moral person. The social worker says that because Mason comes from a family with biologically inferior genes, Mason could also pass down those traits if she were to have a family of her own. Mason's parents agree to sterilization because they want the welfare checks, but they worry about the fate of Mason because, the film implies, Mason is not actually their biological daughter. The scene explains why Mason is so unlike the rest of her family.

In the next scene, Mason returns from work the next day and finds the social worker and the public health official waiting in the house. The film indicates that her parents have already been sterilized and that the government officials are waiting for Mason. The social worker and the public health official inform Mason that to receive welfare checks, she must also be sterilized. They wait for her to get her things so that they can take her to the hospital. Mason goes up to her room, disguises herself in masculine clothing, and sneaks out her bedroom window to escape. She eventually makes her way to the train station, but before she can leave, a policeman apprehends her and takes her to the hospital for sterilization.

Mason's ex-fiancé, Baker, hears about Mason's sterilization orders, and he finds Brooks and convinces the doctor to speak on her behalf to the court to reverse the sterilization order. Brooks agrees, and they go to the courtroom. However, because Mason is a woman from a

poor family that exhibits biologically inferior genes, the court refuses to listen to Brooks or Baker. The judge quotes US Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and states that three generations of feeble-mindedness, the inability to make intelligent decisions or judgments, is enough. The film references the case of *Buck v. Bell*, which ruled in 1927 that forced sterilization did not violate US constitutional rights to due process and enabled forced sterilizations to take place across the country. Moreover, the *Buck v. Bell* case affirmed the eugenic claim that traits like feeblemindedness, mental and physical disabilities, and mental illness were hereditary.

The film shifts to show Mason in the hospital waiting room, and Brooks and Baker are trying to find ways to reverse the sterilization order. Brooks and his fellow physicians discuss the claims of eugenics, questioning who had the right to tell people who could and could not have children. They discuss whether or not the poet Edgar Allen Poe or the scientist Albert Einstein would have existed if governments had forcibly sterilized their parents. The next scene shows Mason anesthetized and wheeled into the surgical room. Mason's mother confesses that Mason is not her biological child but that she was left on the doorstep. Baker and Brooks relay the confession to the hospital surgical room, interrupting the surgery and preventing Mason's sterilization. Mason awakes, and the film ends with Brooks returning to his work and Mason getting married to her fiancé.

Tomorrow's Children did not receive approval from the Production Code Administration, an organization based in Washington, D.C. that reviewed all films to be screened in mainstream theaters and enforced motion picture regulations, because the surgical scenes were considered too graphic, so upon release the film was screened at few theaters. The discussion and criticism of eugenics, in addition to extensive hospital and surgical scenes with graphic discussions about forced sterilization, led many large theaters to ban the film. The regulations and censorship against *Tomorrow's Children* further limited the film's audience and garnered negative reviews.

Sources

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