

BREAKING THE LINGUISTIC PERMAFROST
OF CURRENT AMERICAN ANTI-LIFE
FICTION:
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS OF LITERATURE

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RECENTLY I PRESENTED A PAPER at a medieval conference at McMaster University wherein I noted that many women in Thomas Malory's tales of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table are often not the sweet virginal creatures denoted by the term "damsels." I noted further that, since the term is popularly joined to the prepositional phrase "in distress," the combination phrase ("damsels in distress") was an example of how some words have become frozen in a "linguistic permafrost."

Contemporary American fiction, shackled by a corrupted, anti-life, feminist literary theory and by the oppression of nine-month legalized abortion, presents few works of fiction where women characters can be in any way denoted as "damsels in distress." As I pronounced those words to my audience then, I had two thoughts. First, what a, as our students would say, "cool" idea to enunciate. Secondly, I thought that, regarding the presentation of the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia in contemporary American fiction, there is a similar linguistic permafrost perpetually freezing terms such as "abortion," "choice," and "rights" in anti-life writing.

There is a summer, however, even in Siberia. I believe that the linguistic permafrost which has enveloped contemporary fiction will eventually shatter, for there are fissures in the surface of the ice now. You can hear the subterranean rumbling. It will be my task here to present evidence of the breaking of the linguistic permafrost so that it will be obvious not only to ourselves but also to our students that the literature of the United States—even now, as it is being churned out in these nightmare decades of legal killing of the unborn child, the handicapped newborn, and the elderly—even now, our literature supports life-affirming principles.

The first half of this paper will focus on current fiction-titles which primarily present an anti-life theme.¹ What are some defining features of current anti-life fiction? Faulty characterization of pro-lifers tops the list of attributes of anti-life fiction, followed closely by a corollary point, a blindness to the pro-life viewpoint. On a secondary level, anti-life fiction frequently suffers from poor diction and historical inaccuracy. Finally, in at least one

noticeable case, spelling, grammatical, and even typographical errors abound in one work of anti-life fiction. I will focus on Sue Robinson's *The Amendment*,ⁱⁱ Walter Kirn's *She Needed Me*,ⁱⁱⁱ and Mary Logue's *Still Explosion*.^{iv}

The plot of Sue Robinson's *The Amendment* is unique in its boldness to "solve" what the author presents as a future "problem": how to bypass a constitutional amendment which restores the first civil right to life. Once the Human Life Amendment has been ratified, Robinson's characters engage in guerrilla-warfare tactics to enable mothers to have abortions. Underground abortion-clinics spring up around the country to do their killing work. Frances Foster is an elderly woman who lost not only her grandchild but also her daughter in a botched abortion in one of these illegal underground abortion-clinics. She is resolved to guarantee that mothers continue to have the right to kill their unborn children. She suggests to her accomplices that they can frustrate the protection of the Human Life Amendment by kidnapping the head of the pro-life movement, First Lady Mary Morgan. Unlike our unfortunate real First Lady, Mary Morgan is the force behind the national pro-life organization which brought about ratification of the Human Life Amendment, the Rights for the Unborn League. This kidnapping is a plausible feature of the plot because Foster has documentary evidence that it was Frances Foster's secret-abortionist father who aborted the future First Lady's child.

In Robinson's fictive world, the strategy works; a blow is struck against the protection of the Human Life Amendment. The First Lady and pro-life groups are forced to deposit \$100 million into a Swiss bank account so that Frances Foster and her pro-abortion gang can open an abortion-clinic in Sweden which would cater to the killing needs of the mothers who come to them.

The plot of the novel can be torn apart with one stroke of deconstruction. One statement by a minor character can be deconstructed enormously. At the University Faculty for Life conference last year, I suggested that, as current literary theories have been used to distort and contort texts into versions foreign to the author's intention, or at least what has been considered the canonical reading for decades or centuries, these same literary theories can be used to valorize pro-life readings of texts. While many academics may argue over the profound philosophical assault which deconstruction makes on substantive readings, the theory can be used in the case of this novel to unravel its anti-life rhetoric.

Just before she is abducted, the First Lady's hairdresser exclaims, "I want to live" (188). Note that the character does not say merely "Oh" or "What's

happening?" This spontaneous life-affirming exclamation is an odd statement to admit into a novel ostensibly concerned with declaring the acceptability of killing. The statement should immediately enable students to polarize themselves around two camps: those for the right to life and those against it.

Here is a character, blacking out from the application of chloroform, whose last thought before losing consciousness is life-affirming. Immediately, the case can be made that any human being automatically responds to the threat of death by declaring the opposite, perhaps because this automatic response is that innate right to life with which we are endowed by the Creator. Since J. Hillis Miller asserts that deconstruction is not nihilistic, once the polarities of life and death are established, students can deconstruct the anti-life intent of the novel and replace it with a life-affirming criticism.^v

Moreover, pro-life academics and students will be struck by the vengeance dominating the anti-life characters in the book. Note that, instead of working legislatively to overturn the constitutional amendment restoring the first civil right to life, Frances Foster and her pro-abortion gang resort to illegal activities: kidnapping, threatening government-officials, and deliberately breaking a national constitutional law. What is the paramount emotion directing Frances' and other characters' behavior? Hatred of the First Lady, who is reduced either to a "little bitch" (162) or a "pricey little bitch" (205). Hatred of the pro-life movement, which is described by one anti-life character as "an organization she detested with a pure hot loathing that made her tremble with fury" (93). Hatred of individual pro-lifers; the same anti-life character trembles with hatred again as she dehumanizes a pro-life character by calling him "the loathsome creature from the Rights for the Unborn League" (93). Frances Foster similarly voices her violent thoughts. At one point, looking at another pro-life character, Thomas B. Tuttle, she feels the urge "to grab Mr. Thomas B. Tuttle by his skinny neck and wring it until he was dead" (141). She reduces his humanity to a synecdoche; he is part of a larger "monster," the Rights for the Unborn League (141). Specifically, Frances Foster reduces the pro-life man to being only "a curling fingernail, a piece of dirt under its claw" (141).

Of course, such dehumanization should be typical. If anti-lifers do not respect human life in the flesh, why should they respect fictional human life on the printed page?

Walter Kirn's *She Needed Me* is another boiler-plate, anti-life novel. The main characters are the descriptively-named Weaver Walquist, pro-life activist, and Kim Lindgren, with whom he has a sexual relationship.^{vi} There is also a pro-lifer named Lucas Boone, who is the leader of the Conscience

Squad, an Operation Rescue-type activist organization.

Walter's bossy mother eventually helps Kim obtain an abortion. Using a cultural-criticism approach, pro-life academics and students are able to note the absences of pro-life educational groups and positive pregnancy-support centers in the novel.

The trio of Weaver, Kim, and her brother Ricky (perhaps even Lucas in substitution for Ricky) is reminiscent of the characters in Richard Brautigan's *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* (the Librarian, Vida, and Foster), all of whom collaborate in securing the killing of Vida's unborn child.^{vii}

As is typical with anti-life fiction, Kim's novel contains some faulty legal citation. A reference to state law is questionable: "*If all Kim does for the next four weeks is watch TV and eat, she'll have to keep the baby. At the end of the first trimester, state law will tie her hands*" (88, all italics in original to show that this is what Weaver is thinking). Perhaps it would be too shocking for Kim to acknowledge that in the reader's real world abortion is legal throughout the nine months of pregnancy and that, even if a state were to outlaw abortions, federal law in its abortion-distortion dominates the will of the people at the state-level.

Again, as is typical of most anti-life novels I have read, the baby, unfortunately, is aborted at the end of the novel. The reader is left with the distinct impression at closure, however, that Weaver's and Kim's romantic/sexual relationship has ended. Moreover, Kim, the aborted mother, hints at what pro-life academics and students would recognize as Post Abortion Syndrome. Weaver relates that "Kim said it sometimes after sex, in the dark: 'I can still be a mother someday'" (227).

In any respect, Kirn's book is tame contrasted with the more invidious *Still Explosion* by Mary Logue. The cover of *Still Explosion* has the following quote from Nancy Pickard: "The best I've read in a long time." Apparently, Pickard hasn't been reading very much lately. Critical reviews of the novel have been equally faulty.^{viii}

The plot is stereotypically anti-life. An abortion clinic is bombed; pro-lifers are "obviously" suspect. Anti-life journalist Laura Malloy solves the crime with little police help. All is saved so that the abortion-clinic can continue to kill unborn babies, harm their mothers, and estrange the fathers of aborted children from their former lovers. In essence, *Still Explosion* has such a predictable plot that anybody could write it.

The characters are not only typically rendered by someone who probably is an anti-lifer; they are stereotypically rendered. Pro-life activists are described either as devout Roman Catholics or fundamentalist Christians.

Furthermore, pro-life people are portrayed as chauvinists. The leading pro-life activist, Tom Chasen, treats his wife as an inferior. Another pro-life character, Paul Jameson, is portrayed not only as one who suffers from the abortion of his own child, but also as someone who resents women.

Another character, who "got pregnant when she was in high school" and decided to give birth to her unborn child, is described gratuitously as a young woman who "said there was no way she could have had an abortion. Catholic and all" (136).

Pro-lifers know that many talented people contribute to this, our civil rights movement of the 1990s. Pro-lifers are liberal and conservative, religious and atheist, Christian and Jewish, Democrat and Republican. There is even, reportedly, a pro-life homosexual group. The diversity of the pro-life movement is something which certain anti-life writers cannot understand.

By novel's end, the major pro-life characters are taken away (as in "by the police") or blown away (as in "by a bomb"). Perhaps this is Logue's subliminal desire to "solve" the "problem" of pro-lifers.^{ix}

In fact, the most engaging "character" in the novel is Fabiola, Laura Malloy's pet ferret. (Gee, I wonder if, unlike her owner, Fabiola is pro-life? Maybe that's why the heroine keeps poor Fabiola in a closet.)

Immediately, the pro-life reader is hit with one of the favorite assumptions proclaimed by anti-lifers. Malloy wonders about the mothers going for abortions and wants to "find out what had brought them to this point in their lives and how they would feel if this right were taken away from them" (3). What "right"? Abortion is a wrong, not a right.

The moral blindness on abortion from which all anti-lifers suffer is evident in several passages. One in particular is quintessential anti-life rhetoric. Malloy enumerates the following as sufferings in the world which greatly disturb her:

AIDS killing babies and otters caught in oil spills. The otters always got to me, I could picture them so clearly just swimming along like they had done all their lives and then this black, smelly, gluey stuff would get in their eyes and noses, cover their bodies and they would drown. (27)

Pro-lifers immediately would query how someone could be more sensitive to the needs of the world's seals than to the needs of the unborn. In fact, we who are pro-life academics can use the above passage as an assignment for either an old-fashioned in-class writing exercise or a new-fashioned reader-response revision by having our students "translate" the passage into "pro-life":

Abortionists killing babies in saline abortions. The babies always got to me. I could picture them so clearly just swimming along like they had done all their unborn lives and then this burning, saline solution would get in their eyes and noses, and burn their lungs and the skin of their unborn bodies and they would drown in a saline ocean.^x

Again, Malloy must be either ignorant of fetology or unwilling to accept the truth enunciated by the pro-life movement when she states to pro-lifer Tom Chasen, "Well, for one thing, it isn't a child. And for another when a couple decide to use birth control, they are making a decision together about whether they want her to get pregnant" (125). First, if the unborn child is not a child, what is he or she? A rock? A clump of cells from the mother's body which magically—poof!—becomes a unique human being? A car? Second, birth-control is either contraception or other non-artificial means of reproductive control. What does that have to do with the fact that after fertilization a human life exists?

Quick: a test. Take out your pens and put all books under your desk. Circle whatever might be incorrect with this next passage while I hum to myself the tune played during the final Jeopardy question:

I remembered when some members of a militant pro-life organization called Pro-Life Action Ministries raided a dumpster behind a family planning clinic in Robinsdale and found twelve "aborted babies." ...The legislature had passed a "fetal disposal law" and even though Planned Parenthood sought an injunction on the grounds that it was unconstitutional, the law was finally made official. It asked that the "human remains of an aborted or miscarried fetus be disposed of in a dignified manner, either burial or cremation." (149)

What's wrong with the above passage? Right, Alex! When not quoting someone or introducing a word used in a different and unique manner, the use of quotation-marks around certain terms diminishes the importance of those terms. It is as though the "being" of the term or phrase is lessened. Why are there quotes around "aborted babies"? Either the pro-life activists (note that they are gratuitously called followers of a "militant" pro-life group) actually did find babies who were aborted or they found objects which they purported to be babies which (not "who", since that pronoun denotes humanity) were aborted. Which one is it? Of course, an anti-life author would not want her readers to sympathize with pro-lifers in this matter. Finding bodies of aborted babies in a dumpster is gruesome and could sway some people who are undecided on abortion closer to the pro-life side.^{xi} Why, too, is it necessary to use quotes around "fetal disposal law"? The same

line of reasoning can assert that the words are used correctly and need not be called into question with quotation-marks.

Malloy speaks a fundamental dishonesty about the theological issue of when the soul enters the human body when she states "that was the crux of all the controversy. When did the soul come into the body? At conception, at quickening, at birth?" (185). Today's anti-lifers can be respected for at least one thing: when they advocate the killing of an unborn child, they do not consider this theological argument. Permit me to make more sweeping generalizations. Anti-lifers do not care about the theology of abortion. They demand taxpayer funding of abortions. They demand censorship of pro-lifers. They know human life begins at fertilization, but so what? Women must be able to kill their unborn children if they so desire. An anti-life author shows great disrespect for the intellectual underpinnings of the abortion wrongs movement, and lowers his or her own credibility within that community, when he or she classifies abortion as a theological issue.

When "pro-life" Paul Jameson recounts his girlfriend's abortion to Laura Malloy, he states, "OK, I know it's not a baby, it's a fetus, but in my mind it was a baby" (224). Logue reduces with one prepositional phrase the entire war between pro-lifers and anti-lifers as a version of the phenomenalist argument: it's all in your mind. If you think it's a baby, then it's a baby; if you think it's only a choice, then it's a choice.

Similarly, when another mother describes her abortion to Malloy, she states that the abortionist told her

the fetus was too little to see, but I didn't believe him. Not that I wanted to see it (*sic*). I think about it (*sic*) a lot. It (*sic*) would've been a baby. Right before the abortion, I tried to tell it (*sic*) it was nothing personal. That at another time I would have felt different. (112)

Note the extensive use of the impersonal pronoun for a child who was either a "he" or a "she." The use of the impersonal pronoun presents another problem to readers who support the first civil right: the necessary correction which such readers must make (as evidenced by the numerous "*sic*"s which I introduced into the passage quoted) impedes the progression of the text. Thus, the comprehension of the anti-life intent of the passage is severely hampered.

As the opening pages of the novel hits pro-lifers with an assault of anti-life rhetoric, so does the last page, which attempts to summarize the functions of the characters and to bring closure to the book:

Christine's reasons for having an abortion, Tom Chasen's fears of women using it as a means of birth control, Sandy Chasen's religious fervor, Donna Asman's [the

abortion-clinic director] commitment to providing women of all income brackets with a choice, Meg Jameson's Catholic views, and Sheila Langstrom's desire to have a baby, coloring her attitude on abortion, and Paul's question of where do men fit into the decision. (234)

Note that in the above litany, the anti-life characters are described positively.

It is a definite good being communicated to the reader that Donna Asman, responsible for the deaths of thousands of unborn children, has her career of violation of the first civil right to life as a "commitment"—itself a powerfully positive word—"providing women of all income brackets with a choice." This positive description of Asman's abortorium-work needs to be translated by pro-lifers into something more accurate, such as:

Donna Asman's obsession with lowering the population, especially of poor minority women, and making sure that they understand that killing their unborn children is their only choice and that they owe it to society not to bring more of their kind—African American, Hispanic, Vietnamese—into the world.

Logue's diction makes the main character obviously anti-life, a fatal flaw for a newspaperwoman who admits her bias to the reader. Bemoaning the fact that she "had to cross the street and brave the cluster of protestors who were handing out pamphlets," the seasoned pro-lifer will halt at Laura Malloy's scorchingly negative continuation, "harassing the women who entered the clinic" (1). This first-page example of slapping pro-lifers continues throughout the book.

Prepositions show relationships between nouns and pronouns (a very positive and pro-life thing for a part of speech to do). An overuse of prepositions, however, can considerably slow down the reading and comprehension of a passage:

After I had been parked *in* front *of* the bondmen's offices *across* the street *from* the station *for* five minutes, I saw Tennison walk *in* the main doors *of* the station. I sat *in* my car *for* a few minutes to give him some time alone, then walked past the bronze Father *of* the Waters *in* the foyer *of* the building and down a long narrow hallway *to* his office. (21, emphasis added)

Despite the use of "for" in adverbial phrases, all of the above italicized words "read" to the eye (as does the "to" in the verb infinitive "to give") as prepositions and can distract the reader from the more important work of deciphering what the author tries to convey. The same can be said for the use of "down," although this is a truncation of the parallelism in the verb forms "walked past" and "walked down."

On several occasions Laura Malloy's comments read more as intrusions than as reminiscences or clarifying thoughts. Speaking about a fountain of which she is particularly fond, Malloy describes how she

went and stood by the fountain and watched the water squirt out of the fishes' mouths in a ring around the nymphet. Over the years, she had turned a light blue streaked-bronze color and seemed happy. It was nice to see women's art celebrating women in a public place. (172)

Malloy's comment about women's art being celebrated in public does nothing more to enhance her character; the reader is quite aware that Malloy is an anti-life feminist. It does, however, intrude a feminist political position unnecessarily.

Of lesser importance, yet annoying, are the numerous grammatical, historical, and typographical errors in the novel. Usually, readers are tolerant of such mistakes. Sometimes, however, when a novel contains numerous errors, the quality of the work as a whole suffers.

Two instances of grammatical errors cannot be attributed to the poor linguistic skills of the characters. It is Laura Malloy, supposedly a professional newspaperwoman, who states "the business and editorial office of the *Twin Cities Times* were on University Avenue, quite close to the dividing point between Minneapolis and St. Paul" (54). The principle of subject-verb agreement dictates that the sentence should either be "business and editorial offices ... were" or "office ... is on University Avenue." The other grammatical error is contained in a statement by the leading pro-life activist in the book, Tom Chasen: "One thing that is sacred to my wife and I is our time alone together" (67). We ain't got no ambiguity here. The sentence should read "sacred to my wife and me."

Is "analyzation" a word, as used in "Well, if I may do a little Malloy analyzation here, you don't give yourself a break" (136) or does Logue mean to say "analysis"?

An example of an historical error in the book is Saint Thomas Aquinas' statement, oft-repeated by anti-lifers, about when the soul enters the human body, which is mistakenly attributed to Saint Augustine: "But the quote that affected me the most ... was by St. Augustine from 1140: 'He is not a murderer who brings about abortion before the soul is in the body'" (185). Saint Augustine died in the year 430 A.D. Perhaps Malloy got confused; after all, anti-lifers are very confused people. "Augustine" sounds a lot like "Aquinas"—as much as "abortion" sounds like "reproductive choice."

Another historical inaccuracy occurs in Malloy's brief history of abortion (cited by Kuda in her review):

In 1812, the first abortion case in the United States was heard and the Supreme Court ruled that abortion was legal with the woman's consent if it was done before quickening, which is when the woman feels the fetus move within her, usually near the mid-point of gestation.... At this time abortion was often called "menstrual regulation." (185)

I will stand—and even sit—corrected on this if need be, but a search of legal databases using the terms "abortion" or "menstrual regulation" shows no such case decided by the United States Supreme Court in 1812.

Finally, the abortion-clinic has a variety of names. This can confuse the reader into thinking that there are several abortion-clinics involved in bombings. The abortorium is named the "Lakewood Family Planning Clinic" on page 1, "Family Planning Clinic" (capital letters) on page 206, and "family planning clinic" (lower case letters) elsewhere. Finally, on page 234 it is called "Lakeview Clinic." Which one is it?

Is dwelling on such minor points justifiable? Isn't this merely an *ad hominem* attack on an anti-life character, or, at the least, evidence that the author exercised her freedom of choice by choosing a poor printer? No. When the quality of an anti-life work suffers in so many areas, maybe this is evidence that the writer, having no respect for the unborn child, has subconsciously demonstrated her lack of respect for the born reader.

But wait, the book is so bad ... maybe Laura Malloy is, like her pet ferret Fabiola, a closet pro-lifer? Maybe this book is written so poorly from an anti-life perspective that people will see through the anti-life rhetoric and become pro-lifers?

The three novels which I have highlighted all have a dominant anti-life theme. I will now consider how certain novels which present a pro-life viewpoint contrast with these anti-life novels. These are novels which are forcing cracks in the linguistic permafrost of anti-life writing. I will change my presentation order, starting with Lois Lowry's 1993 book *The Giver*^{xii} and then proceed to Carlos Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn*, which was published in 1989.

There are few recent novels which primarily present a pro-life theme on infanticide and euthanasia.^{xiii} Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is one novel which incorporates infanticide and euthanasia themes and combines the two issues from a thematically pro-life perspective.

In writing *The Giver*, Lowry has written a testament for respect for human life and thus qualifies as a hallmark of pro-life fiction. It is a vision of the

future, a utopia which is frighteningly possible.

By definition utopian literature has the capability not only of depicting a futuristic society, but also of commenting on contemporary society. Utopian literature may also serve to warn contemporary society of what frightening changes may occur in the future. Consider this book a masterpiece along with B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*—another American novel of a utopia gone wrong. *The Giver* presents us with the utopia of American society gone wrong, where quality of life becomes the overriding concern versus the fact that human life, in whatever imperfect state it exists, is worth protecting.

Set in a time when it will have been possible to eradicate emotions, Jonas, the twelve-year-old hero of the story, is selected by the "Community" in which he lives to be the "Receiver" of memories. A corresponding character, the "Giver," is an older man who imparts to the boy all his memories. These memories include life as it once existed before the Community adopted stringent controls; they also include memories of emotions, especially the most powerful emotion—love.

Pro-lifers immediately know to be alert to certain words. When a novelist mentions the word "release," pro-lifers think immediately that the book they are reading will concern itself with euthanasia. In Lowry's dystopia, however, the one term "release" applies not only to the killing of defective newborns, but also to the elderly, who have only a set number of years to be alive in the Community.

One infanticide-scene in *The Giver* is especially graphic. In the following scene, Jonas' father, whose job in the Community is that of "Nurturer," decides to release a newborn baby, called a "newchild," who has not met the Community's standards regarding birth-weight. Jonas is watching this on videotape:

[Jonas'] father began very carefully to direct the needle into the top of newchild's forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed. The newborn squirmed, and wailed faintly. His father was saying, "I know, I know. It hurts, little guy. But I have to use a vein, and the veins in your arms are still too teeny-weeny." He pushed the plunger very slowly, injecting the liquid into the scalp vein until the syringe was empty. *Now* he cleans him up and makes him comfy, Jonas said to himself.... The newchild, no longer crying, moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion. Then he went limp. He (*sic*) head fell to one side, his eyes half open. Then he was still. *He killed it! My father killed it!* Jonas said to himself, stunned at what he was realizing. (149-150)

No doubt, anti-lifers will want to ban the book from high school libraries. Cuyahoga County Public Library, which serves the metropolitan Cleveland

area, rightfully catalogs this title as a work of juvenile fiction—rightfully, because it is appropriate that our young people should come to realize how close to practicing euthanasia our nation has come.

Where Lowry's *The Giver* is bold enough to tackle infanticide and euthanasia, Carlos Fuentes' *Christopher Unborn*^{xiv} directly assaults the anti-life distortion of abortion. *Christopher Unborn* may not qualify for inclusion in this study since it is, first, not an "American" (that is, North American) work of fiction. If it is necessary to affix any label to it, then it is a Latin American work, a work of fiction by a Mexican author.^{xv} Fortunately for me, Fuentes' novel has been translated into English and has made a stunning impact on critics in the United States.^{xvi}

Fuentes himself is enigmatic; his political positions can only be expressed in a series of complex sentences. Fuentes, who is called a leftist, supported the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, yet he thinks that Cuba needs more democracy. Although his novels are replete with the Roman Catholic fascinations of politics, sex, and religion, he has ridiculed what he has called the Catholic Church's "repression" of sex. Finally, although he states that he has found "stability" after being married and having children with his wife Sylvia, feminist critics think that Fuentes has a fear of women.^{xvii}

Given these skeletal biographical facts, how could such a person write *Christopher Unborn*, which has such a profoundly dominant pro-life theme? While he may have been thinking immediately of the holocausts which are universally known, Fuentes once declared that "Everybody is capable of violence in the twentieth century" (*Crossing Borders*). Thus, pro-life academics and students can demonstrate successfully that even a so-called leftist author like Carlos Fuentes acknowledges that not even the womb is as safe as it once was.

The plot of the novel is ultimately simple. Christopher, an unborn child, recounts in vivid, omniscient-narrator mode the circumstances of his conception, his fertilization, and the nine months of his gestation in his mother's womb. Christopher realizes that he has been conceived mainly because his parents want to win the Christopher Contest, sponsored by the government of Mexico in celebration of the founding of the New World by Columbus. This is the ostensible reason for the child's existence.

Fuentes has done in fiction what *The Silent Scream*^{xviii} does in video educational efforts: the unborn child is given a voice. It is difficult to ignore a narrator as he describes how half of him was shot out of his father during his fertilization.^{xix} It is difficult to ignore a narrator who engages in frequent fetological descriptions according to the stages of his gestation, such as "I,

Christopher, was a cluster of well-organized cells, with defined functions, learning the classic lesson, innocent that I was, about the unity of my person" (220).

Later, Christopher enumerates a wide variety of activities which he calls "essential":

My hands, for example, have grown more rapidly than the arms they're attached to, they first appear with the fingers looking like buds; the last phalanx has emerged from the palms of my hands, my fingertips have formed, little tiny nails have appeared on all my fingers and toes, and the transparent and cartilaginous skeleton I had in my first four months is now bone and I move my arms and legs energetically; I have little accidents, I scratch my face with my nails unintentionally; I have pleasures: I suck my thumb incessantly; I make discoveries: I can touch my face. (408)

It is difficult to ignore a narrator who describes how his life seems threatened by other characters in the novel who may want him dead. It is difficult to ignore a narrator who depicts from the unique perspective of one who resides in what should be a safe womb how assaulted he felt when his mother was violently raped. Moreover, it is difficult not to personalize a narrator, an unborn child, who, in the reverse of apostrophe, directly addresses an absent character who becomes a character by virtue of his willing it so: the "Reader."^{xx}

Finally, with the exception of the other thematically pro-life work I have discussed (Lowry's *The Giver*), *Christopher Unborn* can give to the reader for his or her patient efforts to plow through 531 pages of sometimes incomprehensible word-play a satisfaction which is absent at the conclusion of the other thematically anti-life novels. It is like the joy of being at a birth. Does anybody not at least have a tear in his or her eye when a baby is born? Or, considering the polar opposite, does anybody cry for joy as the parts of an unborn child are dragged piecemeal from the mother's womb, sucked through the vacuum-aspiration tube? Can anyone imagine future fiction where characters proclaim with rapture, "Oh look, there's the left arm! Why, look at those pieces there! That's the head! That's the head of the fetus we're aborting!" Of course not. While abortion may be sanitized as an abstract right in anti-life fiction, the birth of an unborn child still engenders happiness.

In fact, what happens to Baby Ba is an added treat for the patient reader. More importantly, the epiphany of Baby Ba is truly a surprise. Do you want to know what happens to Baby Ba? Do you want to know who Baby Ba is?

I won't tell you. You'll have to read the book.

Listen. Listen carefully. Let us tell our students also to listen, to listen carefully, to the cracking of the ice, the fissures in the permafrost.

Let us tell our students to listen for the voices of unborn children and comatose persons in our literature. They are there, trapped beneath the massive weight of a decades-long linguistic permafrost. Fortunately, the love we show the unborn and others who have been marginalized in American fiction may warm the surface of the frozen ground and may melt just enough of the ice so that these nightmare decades of living without our first civil right to life may soon come to a close.

NOTES

i. Thus, while numerous other novels may contain characters who have had abortions, they will not be considered here since these novels are usually only tangentially concerned with the first right-to-life issue.

ii. Sue Robinson, *The Amendment: A Novel* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1990).

iii. Walter Kirn, *She Needed Me* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992).

iv. Mary Logue, *Still Explosion* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1993).

v. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant deMan, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987) 9.

vi. It is significant that the main character in this Minnesota-locale novel is not named a strongly-masculine "Mitch Viking" or "Todd Icelander." The name "Weaver Walquist" is particularly descriptive since it combines several items from the popular culture. "Weaver" resonates with the associations "wimp" and one who is uncertain about where he or she is to go, someone who literally "weaves" from one position to another. "Walquist" similarly resonates with at least one association, "quisling." In Kirn's prose, Weaver can indeed be a traitor not only to his girlfriend but also to his purported pro-life views.

vii. Richard Brautigan, *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

viii. Not many reviewers have the conciseness of Rex E. Klett, a reviewer for *Library Journal* [118 (April 1, 1993) 135]. Designed with the needs of the librarian working in a public library in mind, Klett's review can be condensed to an abstract of a simple sentence: "A workable prose, plot, and issue make this appropriate for larger collections."

At the other extreme, consider Marie Kuda's abstracted review in *Booklist* [39 (April 1, 1993) 1415]: "As (Laura Malloy, the main character in the novel) goes after both the bombing and the abortion story that led her to it, Logue develops both major sides of the abortion issue and includes a capsule history of abortion. Then, what appears to be a bloody fetus is left on the doorstep of Bobby's grieving girlfriend, and the pace

accelerates to an explosive ending."

Then, there is the ridiculously-biased and intellectually dishonest abstracted review by Gillian Gill which appeared in the *Women's Review of Books* [10 (July 1993) 40]: "Malloy is a sympathetic and persuasive detective, cast in many ways in the mold of the old detective hero as eulogized by Raymond Chandler—a tall loner (Malloy is five-ten) who searches for social justice in the city streets.... From the first tragic explosion that destroys a beautiful young man, Logue holds our attention and gives us the kind of excitement we expect from detective-thrillers. The violence is never gratuitous, however, as Logue wants not merely to entertain but to make some statement about abortion.... The pro-choice politics are upfront, expressed even more forcefully by the plot line and the characterization than in the journalistic conclusions written up by the fictional detective."

ix. Perhaps, too, it was a Loguesque person who tried to kill one of the nation's most effective lobbyists for the pro-life movement. Ms. Jan Folger, Legislative Director for the Ohio Right to Life Society, recently had her car bombed. Presumably perpetrated by anti-lifers, the car bombing is a compliment to Ms. Folger's effectiveness with Ohio's representatives, senators, and governor. Whether the anti-life person responsible for the bombing thought of the idea on his or her own or was inspired to it by reading Logue's novel is an intriguing question, but one which I cannot answer at this time.

x. Of course, the revision would be purely to allow students to understand the contrast between an anti-life character and a pro-life one; we would never use the revision-process to proselytize as anti-life feminist literary critics have done.

xi. Readers interested in one of the more well-known cases of unborn children's bodies found in a dumpster may wish to read S. Rickly Christian's account in *The Woodland Hills Tragedy* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1985).

xii. Lois Lowry, *The Giver* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

xiii. We who study literature are, of course, all engaged in an archaeological effort: digging beneath accretions of anti-life criticism to get at the intent of a work which is essentially life-affirming. Instances of pro-life literature abound; stories which are thematically pro-life are being "discovered" continuously. For example, a literature-discussion in one of my research-paper classes excavated a thematic function behind Graham Greene's short story "The Destructors." I must thank a student in the course, Rob Poelking, for first pointing out what should have been obvious: the story can be interpreted in pro-life terms to be a story of euthanasia. In Greene's story, a centuries-old house in London, a house which survived natural catastrophes as well as the human-made holocaust of World War II, is destroyed from within by a gang of British youths who seem to have nothing better to do than to destroy artifacts of their society. My student's insight, that the story could have euthanasia overtones, was, I think, strikingly brilliant. The centuries-old house could be compared to an elderly person of today: both are unwanted by some in society who see no value in either. The societal solution to the problem of old folks (and old buildings) which go nowhere and do nothing and do not contribute to the cash flow of the society is obvious: get rid of them both.

xiv. Carlos Fuentes, *Cristobal Nonato* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1987),

translated by Alfred MacAdam and the author as *Christopher Unborn* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1989).

xv. There is another reason to justify the inclusion of this novel in the study. Now that we are more aware than ever of the "inclusion" principle which is working to expand the canon, especially to include those works from non-Western writers, it is only appropriate that we acknowledge the importance of such a cosmopolitan author like Carlos Fuentes.

Another conference-participant informed me that a Czech novelist, Jiri Grusa, included in his novel *The Questionnaire: or, Prayer for a Town and a Friend* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982) a passage written from the perspective of the unborn child also. In the light of Ms. Mercedes Wilson's remarks about the oppression of the Third World by the anti-life First World nations, it is interesting and noteworthy that Second and Third World writers like Grusa and Fuentes are writing for the First World novels which are thematically pro-life.

xvi. Some reviewers, however, seem to have missed the pro-life point of the novel completely, arguing that it is more concerned with criticizing the Reagan years in the United States than it is with criticizing certain U.S. social policies and the deleterious effects of those policies on a nation such as Mexico. One reviewer's abstract reaches the generic conclusion that "Five hundred years after the discovery and conquest of Latin America, the utopia has become dystopia.... Only caustic, corrosive humour, it seems... can release new energies from the dead hand of history and state power..." John King in *Times Literary Supplement* (Dec. 15, 1989) 1386.

Another reviewer's abstract reads more as prophecy than literature review: "(Fuentes) has given an unborn babe the power of speech in order to bring the "odious eighties" to account.... Until American novelists take it upon themselves to muckrake the Reagan years with equal vigor, Carlos Fuentes, with this book, must rank as our leading North American political satirist." Suzanne Ruta in *The New York Times Book Review* (Aug. 20, 1989) 1.

xvii. See *Crossing Borders: the Journey of Carlos Fuentes*, written by Stephen Talbot, readings by Carlos Fuentes, directed and edited by Joan Saffa, a videocassette produced by Novel Productions in association with KQED, Inc. (n.p.: Novel Productions, 1989).

xviii. Donald S. Smith, *The Silent Scream: the Complete Text of the Documentary Film with an Authoritative Response to the Critics* (Anaheim: American Portrait Film Books, 1985).

xix. Another tangential thought about *Christopher Unborn*. If the theme of the novel does not attract attention, then the playful and sometimes raunchy sexual scenes should.

xx. In several instances Christopher addresses the reader as though he or she is a judge, but of what judicial authority is uncertain. The questions can then be begged of Christopher: are you on trial? what for? why are you on trial and not your parents? what will happen to you if you are found guilty? The reader of the novel is addressed as "your honor" (178), "your worship the reader" (210), or "your worships" (249). Does the Reader have the power merely to stop reading the book or does the Reader, especially by doing so, have the power to end Christopher's life? In several instances,

Christopher engages in word-play with the quasi-judicial Reader, begging "mercy" from the Readers as though they were judges.