

ABORTION AS METAPHOR

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to analyze the symbolic function of abortion in two disparate works of art: Alfred Hitchcock's film *Lifeboat* (1944) and Terrence McNally's play *Master Class* (1994). At first glance, these two works might appear unlikely candidates for an exploration of the aesthetics of abortion. Neither work treats abortion as a primary theme. Neither elaborates a case for or against abortion. Indeed, neither even uses the word "abortion." Nonetheless, in each work, abortion functions as a metaphor for a series of homicidal acts, both social and personal.

LIFEBOAT

Based upon a story by John Steinbeck,ⁱ *Lifeboat*ⁱⁱ depicts the struggle for survival by nine people stranded on the Atlantic. Set in World War II, the film opens in the immediate aftermath of a U-boat attack upon an Allied freighter. In the cramped single set of a lifeboat, the survivors battle nature, their conflicting temperaments, and, finally, the brutal enigma of the Nazi creed.

In the opening scene the journalist Constance Porter (Tallulah Bankhead) sits perfectly coiffed in the lifeboat as she films the wreckage of the attack. The lifeboat gradually fills with other survivors: John Kovac (John Hodiak), a Communist engineer; Stanley Garrett (Hume Cronyn), a radio operator; Alice MacKenzie (Mary Anderson), a nurse; Charles "Ritt" Rittenhouse (Henry Hull), a millionaire businessman; Gus Smith (William Bendix), a merchant marine; "Joe" Spencer (Canada Lee), an African-American steward; and Mrs. Higgins, a shock victim from the obliteration bombings of Bristol who brings her dead baby aboard.

Into this social microcosm crashes Willy (Walter Slezak), a German survivor from the U-boat, which the Allied freighter had sunk before its own destruction. The film pivots around the tension between Willy and the Allied refugees. At first trusted by the survivors because of his

navigational ability, Willy gradually reveals his identity as a murderer to the viewer and, more slowly, to the other lifeboat members.

Throughout the film, it is the journalist Connie who confronts the illusions of each boat member. She challenges the cowardice of Ritt, the adultery of Alice, the brutality of Kovac and the fatalistic piety of Joe. She plays the principal role in unmasking the true identity of Willy. And in this unmasking, the viewer discovers the Nazi's identity as an abortionist.

In the middle of the film, Connie exposes Willy's status as captain of the U-boat by a verbal trick in German. He is not, as he had previously claimed, a simple member of the crew. A medical crisis provides the opportunity to unveil Willy as an abortionist. The nurse Alice warns that Gus's wounded leg has gangrened and that it requires immediate amputation. Connie informs the other passengers: "He (Willy) says that he's a surgeon. He's performed many operations." Kovac retorts: "They were probably illegal. If he's a medical man, why isn't he in the medical service?"

This reference to illegal operations clearly alludes to abortion. Given the Motion Picture Code's ban upon the use of the term "abortion" in scripts,ⁱⁱⁱ the term "illegal operation" had become the standard euphemism in 1940's films. Willy expertly performs the operation in the midst of a gale. The nurse praises his skill: "He (Willy) did a swell job." The successful operation confirms the earlier suspicion that Willy is indeed an abortionist.

The exposure of Willy as liar, abortionist, and U-boat captain forces the viewer to re-interpret the beginning of the film. Earlier in the saga of the lifeboat, several refugees described how the German U-boat had not only attacked the merchant ship, but had deliberately shelled the escaping civilians. The opening shot of the film, a scene of Red Cross medical supplies floating in the ocean, visually underscored the brutality of this direct assault upon civilian life. When several passengers originally tried to kill Willy in retribution for this attack, Connie had defended him as a crew member just following orders. The establishment of Willy's identity as captain, however, confirms his status as a war criminal.

In an early scene Mrs. Higgins thrust her dead baby into Willy's arms

and blamed Willy for her child's death. The viewer can no longer interpret this confrontation as an act of hysteria. It now appears as a statement of truth concerning Willy's responsibility. The identification of Willy as an abortionist makes intelligible the contempt for life motivating the inaugural action of the film: the deliberate homicide of civilians, even children.

The unveiling of Willy as abortionist also clarifies the mysterious first death aboard the lifeboat, that of Mrs. Wiggins. When Mrs. Wiggins realizes that her son is dead, she attempts to throw herself into the ocean.

The other passengers restrain her and tie her to a chair. Willy, however, greets this salvage operation with a yawn and proceeds to take a nap. In the morning, Mrs. Wiggins has drowned, still bound to the boat by the rope of salvation. Willy serenely sleeps just a few feet away. In retrospect, these small gestures of boredom manifest a depraved indifference to the loss of human life, especially the life of the mentally deranged.

In the latter part of the film, Willy the abortionist metamorphoses into Willy the euthanist. The amputated Gus sinks into hallucinations as the exhausted crew deteriorates from lack of food and water. Gus spies the supplies which Willy has hidden and which permit Willy to commandeer the boat. After a confrontation, Willy shoves Gus overboard and refuses to help when Gus cries out before he drowns.

When the refugees finally realize the cause of Gus's death, Willy offers a euthanasia defense: "The best way to help him was to let him go. I had no right to stop him.... He was a poor cripple.... What good would life be for a man like that?" Outraged by Gus's murder and the attempted genocide by starvation, the lifeboat victims beat Willy to death and cast him overboard.

The execution of Willy is the film's most ambiguous sequence. On the surface it appears a justified act of capital punishment. However, the film's saint, the steward Joe, condemns it. Earlier Joe had established himself as the protector of Connie (whom he had placed in the lifeboat) and as the savior of a suicidal Mrs. Wiggins. When the refugees grieved for words at a funeral service for Mrs. Wiggins's son, Joe recited the Twenty-Third Psalm from memory. As the crew assaults Willy, Joe cries

out to the nurse: “Please don’t do it! Please, Miss Alice!” Does the execution represent the righteous killing of the aggressor? Or has the Nazi spirit of homicide now overwhelmed the refugees themselves?

Lifeboat’s portrait of an abortionist as the consummate Nazi illumines the Third Reich’s culture of death. Willy represents an analogy of murder: abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, war crimes, genocide. At the end of the film, the refugees confess their incomprehension of the Nazi mentality. Ritt exclaims: “To my dying day, I’ll never understand Willy and what he did.” Kovac asks: “What are you going to do with people like that?” Stanley responds: “I don’t know. I was thinking of Mrs. Higgins and her baby—and of Gus.” Agnostically, Connie ends the film: “Well, maybe they can answer that.” The contempt for the life of the innocent at the heart of the Nazi creed remains inexplicable. But, in the figure of Willy, the film suggests that abortion constitutes the silent prelude and partner to this lethal enigma.

MASTER CLASS

Terrence McNally’s drama *Master Class*^{iv} is a fictionalized biography of the opera singer Maria Callas. Toward the end of her career, Callas had actually offered several master-classes at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. The play’s conceit is that we, the audience, are watching one of these classes in the early 1970’s. Callas successively coaches three aspiring singers: the soprano Sophie, the tenor Tony, and the soprano Sharon. Her sardonic critiques and her imperious asides mold the bitter humor of the piece. The play pivots around two flashbacks in which Callas re-lives events evoked by the musical arias sung by her fledgling students.

At the end of the first act, Sophie’s rendition of an aria from Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* reminds Callas of her own triumph decades before at La Scala in the same opera: “And here I am. Dead-center-stage at the greatest theatre in Europe singing roulades in full voice. Hurling notes like thunderbolts. Daring anyone to challenge me.”^v This moment of artistic glory is tinged with romantic and economic triumph. The obese singer of provincial Greek houses has become a svelte world celebrity. She has begun an affair with the tycoon Aristotle Onassis. Her

anticipated marriage to Onassis will seal her triumph over childhood adversity. The applause of the La Scala audience washes over Callas as she re-lives the apex of her professional and personal success.

The second flashback occurs at the end of the second and final act. It depicts Callas's abortion. The artistic frame for this reverie about abortion is the aria "Vieni! t'afretta" from Verdi's *Macbeth* sung by the soprano Sharon. This aria draws upon the "Letter Scene" from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to consider assassination for the sake of political ambition.

Callas struggles to help the dull-witted Sharon to grasp the passion for murder at the center of the aria:

MARIA: She's going to kill the king! Do you know what that means?

MARIA: Is there anything you would kill for, Sharon?

SOPRANO: I don't think so.

MARIA: A man, a career?

SOPRANO: Not off the top of my head.... I've never really thought about it.

MARIA: That's because you're young. You will. In time.

Know how much suffering there can be in store for a woman.^{vi}

The contours for Callas's abortion are set even before the flashback begins. The abortion involves homicide, a homicide tied to career and romance, a homicide bound to the distinctive suffering of women.

In the flashback's long monologue, Callas recounts the abortion. At first, she joyously tells Onassis of the child they have conceived:

I am so happy! This moment is why I was born. I have news, Ari, such great and wonderful news. I'm going to have your child. No, our child, our son. I would not insult you by giving you a daughter. And we will name him Odysseus for the greatest Greek hero of them all, like you, and because he wandered the world the longest, like me, until he came home to love.^{vii}

Callas not only rejoices in motherhood. Earlier in the play, Aristotle had promised her that the birth of a child would seal his commitment to marry her.^{viii} Sensing the coldness of Onassis at the announcement of the pregnancy, she defensively insists upon the value of the child she bears:

No, I don't need your child to feel like a woman. I am a woman. I don't need anything. Some people say I don't need you. I want a child. Your child. I love you.^{ix}

She stoutly rebuffs Onassis's insistence upon an abortion:

Don't ask me to do that. Why would you ask me to do that? What do you mean, you've changed your mind? I'm not a young woman. This may be my only chance. I'll give up anything, my career even, everything I've worked for, but not for this. Then don't marry me. I won't do it. You can't make me. I won't let you make me.^x

Nonetheless, Callas submits to Onassis's pressure in a desperate effort to salvage the faltering romance. In the play's most lyrical line, Callas addresses the child she will kill through abortion: "O child I will never see or know or nurse or say how much I love you, forgive me."^{xi}

The abortion, of course, has not saved the relationship. It has doomed it. When Callas kneels at the end of the flashback and begs Onassis, "Marry me, Ari. Your canary is asking you to marry me,"^{xii} the audience knows that Onassis has abandoned her for a more glamorous celebrity. The aria of *Lady Macbeth* returns, embroidering Callas's choice of a homicide that leads to personal destruction.

Not only does the script tie Callas's abortion to her humiliation as a woman. It links the abortion to her professional decline as a singer. In the immediate aftermath of the abortion, she confronts Onassis:

It's done, Ari. Now what? Sing? You're telling me to sing? Sing what? "Stormy Weather"? Sing where? In the street? I'm losing my voice! Don't you read the papers? I'm getting on by sheer nerve. I always did. That's what's going, not the voice.^{xiii}

As she contemplates her professional collapse, she condemns Onassis as a murderer:

They fired me at La Scala. At my last performance, in the final scene, I went right to the stage apron, just meters from where the general manager was sitting in his box, the same man who had said my services in his theatre were no longer

necessary, and I pointed right at him and I sang “Il palco funesto!”..Ghiringhelli reeled from the force of it. But it wasn’t him I was speaking to. It was you. “Il palco funesto!” “The fatal scaffold!”^{xiv}

Callas unmasks Onassis as her executioner. He has killed her child through a coercive abortion. He has destroyed her integrity by forcing her to sacrifice the one being she valued above her career and romance. Through the abortion he has sealed the destruction of their relationship. And in Callas’s reverie, the abortion intermingles with her disintegration as an artist.

Master Class’s evocation of abortion is stark. The framing of the incident of abortion within the aria of Lady Macbeth ties abortion to a broader network of murderous impulses and acts. Callas’s poignant farewell to her child—one of the few non-ironic passages in the play—exposes what abortion is: the killing of a child. Rather than being a labor of choice, *Master Class*’s abortion is a work of coercion. Rather than liberating women, abortion emerges as a blunt tool of oppression by abusive patriarchs like Onassis. In Callas’s reveries, abortion functions as the cause of more than the death of her child. It imposes itself as the sign of the moral, psychological, and professional suicide of an individual of genius.

CONCLUSION

Both *Lifeboat* and *Master Class* depict abortion as a homicidal act tied to social and personal destruction. In Hitchcock’s film abortion serves as the sign of a society that has abandoned all respect for the lives of the innocent and has willfully suppressed all pity for its victims. In McNally’s play abortion emerges as the token of an individual’s moral and professional suicide. Both works evoke, rather than demonstrate, abortion’s place in the culture of death. They witness the persistent linkage between abortion and violent death in popular Western culture. This is an intuitive correlation that our efforts to rationalize abortion—such as our current labor to abolish the pejorative term “abortionist” in favor of the cumbersome “abortion provider” or the oxymoronic “abortion doctor”—cannot suppress. Even in the symbol factories of Broadway and Hollywood, abortion’s complicity in death still stains the

narrative.

NOTES

i. For critical analysis of the original story by Steinbeck, cf. Steven J. Federle, "Lifeboat as Allegory: Steinbeck and the Demon of War," *Steinbeck Quarterly* 12 (1997) 14-20; Robert E. Morsberger, "Adrift in Steinbeck's Lifeboat," *Film/Literature Quarterly* 4 (1976) 325-38.

ii. *Lifeboat*, 1944 (20th Century Fox, 96 min.), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, script by Jo Swerling, original story by John Steinbeck. Constance (Tallulah Bankhead), Willy (Walter Slezak). For detailed presentation of history and plot summary, cf. *The Internet Movie Database Ltd.* (www.us.imdb.com+Lifeboat): 20 pages.

iii. Cf. "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930": General Principles II.7. *The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (The Hays Code)* (www.connecti.com/~bynum/ram-hays-cod.html): 3 of 13.

iv. Cf. Terrence McNally, *Master Class* (New York: Plume, 1995). The play opened at the Golden Theater in New York City on November 5, 1995 after a national tour.

v. *Ibid.* p.28.

vi. *Ibid.* p.53.

vii. *Ibid.* p.59.

viii. Cf. *ibid.* p.26.

ix. *Ibid.* p.59.

x. *Ibid.* p.59.

xi. *Ibid.* p.59.

xii. *Ibid.* p.60.

xiii. *Ibid.* p.59.

xiv. *Ibid.* p.59.