

Cinematic Treatment of Abortion: *Alfie* (1965) and *The Cider House Rules* (1999)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cinematic portrayal of abortion in the films *Alfie* (1965) and *The Cider House Rules* (1999) from the right-to-life perspective. Various aspects of the abortion content of each of the films are considered, including criticism from academia and commentary on the fidelity to the written works on which the films are based. A substantial part of the paper comments on the effects on the audience of camera angles, images, use of color, and the other cinematic techniques that construct the abortion scenes. Finally, the paper evaluates the perspective on abortion suggested in each film and determines which film is more worthy of study and artistic appreciation.

THE ICONS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE are cinematic. Certainly, for example, the famous still photograph of the young woman kneeling and shrieking over the dead body of her fellow Kent State student is iconic. Contemporary icons, however, demonstrate a kinetic quality not only to be enjoyed in a theater or at home, but also to be worthy of continued critical discussion. The scene of epiphany between the tramp and the young woman whose sight he helped to restore in Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* is as poignant today as it was in 1931. Kim Novak's slow and sensual walk towards Jimmy Stewart in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is as iconic as Gloria Swanson's final walk towards the camera in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or the famous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960). Moreover, films occupy an important part of contemporary culture. Fiction, music, and poetry are not ignored in contemporary culture, but neither of these art forms has the glamour encapsulated in the phrase "Hollywood production"—a production that combines all of the previously mentioned art forms.

This paper, however, is not concerned with the claims of film studies *per se* as it is with an evaluation of what films have to say on one of the most urgent issues of our culture, the right-to-life issue of abortion. Time constraints and the quantity of material available on the first life issue do not allow a comprehensive examination of the other two life issues (infanticide and euthanasia).¹ Thus, I will focus on two major abortion films, *Alfie* (1965)² and *The Cider House Rules* (1999).³ More importantly, what right-to-life criticism can say about these films is substantial and can indicate how other films on the life issues can be reviewed.

While there has been some scholarly examination of abortion in late twentieth-century films,⁴ much more has been written about documentary films on the life issues, and most of that academic writing can be classified as anti-life attempts to cope with the growth and success of the movement towards the re-establishment of the first civil right, the right to life. For example, although he struggles to account for the conversions of famous abortionists like Bernard Nathanson to the pro-life movement in narratological speculation about conversion rhetoric, Robert James

¹ Some scholars have already begun to address the other life issues. See, for example, Michael Burleigh, "Euthanasia and the Third Reich," *History Today* 40/2 (1990): 11-16. Burleigh analyses Nazi films—not only documentaries, but also fictional accounts—meant to persuade the public to adopt euthanasia, such as *Ich klage an* [*I Accuse*] (1941). See also Martin S. Pernick's work on *The Black Stork* (1917), an infanticide and euthanasia film by the American eugenicist Harry Haiselden. Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures since 1915* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

² *Alfie*. Director: Lewis Gilbert. Performers: Michael Caine, Shelley Winters, Millicent Martin, Julia Foster, Jane Asher, Shirley Anne Field, Vivien Merchant, and Eleanor Bron. 1965. DVD. Paramount, 2000.

³ *The Cider House Rules*. Director: Lasse Hallstrom. Performers: Tobey Maguire, Charlize Theron, Delroy Lindo, Paul Rudd, and Michael Caine. 1999. DVD. Miramax, 1999.

⁴ For discussion of *The Cider House Rules* I particularly recommend Josie P. Campbell's *John Irving: A Critical Companion* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1998), Rod Dreher's review "'Cider House's' Abortion: Right vs. What Works," *The Christian Science Monitor* (7 February 2000): 11. See also Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson's *John Irving* (Boston MA: Twayne, 1986).

Branham uses typical anti-life language to describe the impact of pro-life documentaries, saying that “Documentary films and videos have played a particularly crucial role in the campaign to limit abortion rights.”⁵ He dismisses *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason*, assigning unfounded and sinister motives behind the pro-life purpose of the films and ending his discussion with an apparent attempt at verbal irony, thus:

In their use of the convert tale to denigrate women’s rational capacities and diminish their moral responsibility, *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason* seek to legitimize the prohibitive intervention of judicial and legislative agencies “on her behalf.” By portraying women as ignorant, irrational, and gullible in order to deny them the ability to choose, the films themselves eclipse reason.⁶

Sometimes criticism of films from entrenched academically correct literary perspectives, especially if they are classified as “feminist” and meant to advance an anti-life agenda, can lead to, if not academic babble, then inflated or incredible claims loaded with all the politically correct terms from an anti-life feminist lexicon. Consider the following passage from Karyn Valerius: “I argue that the gothicization of bourgeois, white pregnancy enacted by *Rosemary’s Baby* contests the essentialist conflation of women with maternity and the paternalistic medical and legal restrictions on women’s access to abortion prior to *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which enforced that conflation in practice.”⁷ Maybe the problem is one of academic diction involving layers of subordination. Isn’t there a simpler

⁵ Robert James Branham, “The Role of the Convert in *Eclipse of Reason* and *The Silent Scream*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 407-26, at p. 407.

⁶ Branham, p. 423. Other critics attempt to revile these pro-films using terminology that borders on *ad hominem*. Consider, for example, Jessie Givner’s analysis of the importance of the unborn child in *The Silent Scream*, paraphrasing concepts from several critics: “If the fetus is placed in a sacred, holy sphere the technologies which image the fetus are similarly associated with that sacred realm.... The notion of the sacred fetus and the sacred high-tech image of the fetus belongs to a whole fantasy of immaculate conception.” Jessie Givner, “Reproducing Reproductive Discourse: Optical Technologies in *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 28:3 (1994): 229-44 at p. 235.

⁷ Karyn Valerius, “*Rosemary’s Baby*, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects,” *College Literature* 32/3 (2005): 116-35, at p. 119.

way of claiming that some films advance abortion?⁸

Struggling to understand the academic discussion of contemporary films on the right-to-life issue of abortion led to this year's paper. What does this art form have to say about abortion that is broadcast to the public for their cultural consumption? How should the public not only understand, but also respond to images that show the demeaning and destruction of human life?

ALFIE (1965)

The subject of this 1965 film (that it would be interesting to follow a sexual libertine as he goes from one woman to another) may no longer be as exciting as it once was, especially since films since the sixties are often raunchier in ways that were not possible for the audience of the sixties. However, interest in *Alfie* can be renewed because of its two abortion sequences.

The plot of the film (and both the stage version and the novel) is simple. Set in Britain in the sixties, the film highlights Alfie Elkins, a sexual libertine who is adept in the ways of women. The opening scenes show Alfie's romantic control over Gilda, who sincerely loves him. When she becomes pregnant and decides to keep the baby, Alfie is content to be

⁸ Of course, not all anti-life criticism should be ignored, especially when it can be used by pro-life theorists as well. For example, besides stating that "scholars must recognize the value of [personal testimonies of mothers who aborted]," Barbara A. Pickering also suggests that "incorporating the subjective realm of personal testimony as an acceptable form of proof is crucial to building a model of argument theory which embraces feminist thought." See Barbara A. Pickering, "Women's Voices as Evidence: Personal Testimony Is [sic] Pro-Choice Films," *Argumentation & Advocacy: The Journal of the American Forensic Association* 40 (2003): 1-22, at p. 20. Thus, for Pickering, "Personal experience in the form of women's voices must be incorporated as a legitimate form of proof if argumentation theory is to expand beyond its traditional parameters to a more inclusive theory which values the contributions that feminist theories can make to our understanding of argument in public policy discourse" (p. 21). Since the majority of women are pro-life, and since being feminist necessarily means supporting the first civil right, the right to life, applying Pickering's principles would greatly help to validate the voices of pro-life women who support the right to life when they express their desire for pro-life legislation.

a weekend father; while he genuinely loves his son Malcolm, Alfie cannot accept the daily responsibilities of being a husband and father. Gilda eventually asserts herself, telling Alfie that she no longer respects him and that Humphrey, another man who has loved her while she knew Alfie, wants to marry her and be a real father to Malcolm. Alfie leaves Gilda and picks up Annie, known for being scrupulous about cleaning everything in his apartment. When Alfie reads her diary, Annie leaves him for this breach of privacy. Soon after this, Alfie develops tuberculosis and stays at a sanatorium where he meets Lily Clamacraft, the wife of his hospital roommate. Alfie has a sexual interlude with an older woman, Ruby, while he is pursuing Lily. Alfie and Lily have a quick adulterous affair, she becomes pregnant, and Alfie arranges to have an abortionist come to his apartment. After the abortion is induced, Lily returns to her husband and children, and Alfie returns to his sexual libertinism.

Stylistically, all three texts (the original drama and the novel written by Bill Naughton,⁹ and then later the film) have two important narratorial features. First, Alfie communicates his wisdom about women and life to the audience in second-person language. The second feature, an annoying consequence of the first, is that, when Alfie's direct address to the reader and the audience occurs, we are to presume that the other characters in the background do not hear him address us. Using second-person in the novel may have been an ordinary narratorial technique, especially since the reader cannot see the persons around the narrator; moreover, lower class people, such as Alfie, will often use second-person address to get their point across. However, its use in the film, which is meant to shorten the distance between Alfie and the reader, contributes instead to a sense not only that Alfie is trying too hard to communicate his moral axioms, but also that his moral quips are as insincere as the possibility that people around him will not hear him as he speaks. The use of second-person language has another important rhetorical element in Lily's abortion episode that I will elaborate later.

Moreover, an important character aspect must be mentioned here before the abortion episode can be examined. Alfie's religious situation

⁹ Bill Naughton, *Alfie* (New York NY: Ballantine Books, 1966). Bill Naughton, *Alfie: A Play in Three Acts* (London UK: Samuel French, 1963).

is just as vapid as his lifestyle. Although the novel has an interesting few sentences about religion, Alfie's *carpe diem* attitude toward life reduces religious principles to an aesthetic concern. While the stage production and the film mention them briefly, the novel elaborates the religious elements more. When Alfie happens to witness the baptism of the new child that Gilda had with Humphrey, now her husband, Alfie asserts:

I quite liked that little bit about the devil and God. I think the sooner you get all that into a kid's head the sooner he'll know where he stands. After all, each one of us, we need somebody to turn to in this life. I mean it's not so much whether you do right or wrong, in my opinion, but that you know the difference between them.¹⁰

Although there are slight differences between the stage production and the novel, there are several important cinematic differences involving the two abortion discussions in the film, Alfie's discussion with Gilda about her pregnancy and Lily's abortion episode. The first sequence involves only discussion of abortion; Alfie has made his girlfriend Gilda pregnant, and they review choices available to them. The second episode actually involves the choice to kill the unborn child, although Lily's abortion is technically an induction of abortion (the abortionist makes this clear in the film).

It is easy to see that Gilda is an example of how a young woman who becomes pregnant should handle the matter of an untimely pregnancy. Although the text of the drama makes it clear that she has tried abortifacients,¹¹ once she realizes that she is a mother, Gilda asserts herself and decides to keep the baby. Gilda has a community of women who help her after the baby is born; although she intends to work hard as a single mother and to raise her son, her situation persuades Humphrey to propose

¹⁰ *Alfie*, p. 185. The only other reference to religious principles in the novel is a casual one about purgatory and heaven. In his typically skewed sense of life, Alfie asserts that "When you get down to it, the average man must know in his own heart what a rotten bleeder he is[:] he don't want someone good around to keep reminding him of it. That's why a good bloke will always prefer to marry a real bitch. It means he's doing his purgatory on earth. Every time she does the dirty on him he's got another reason for looking up to heaven" (p. 153).

¹¹ *Alfie*, p. 10.

marriage. They will marry, and towards the end of all three texts, Gilda and Humphrey are happily baptizing another child.

In contrast, Lily's abortion episode illustrates how a woman should not resolve the complications surrounding an untimely pregnancy, and the complications are serious. Before her abortion, the novel clarifies that Lily's family, especially her mother-in-law, would know that she had an adulterous affair and that the child she carries is not her husband's. After the abortion, Lily disappears from the action, presumably having gone back to her husband and her children and out of Alfie's life.¹²

The cinematic rendering of Lily's abortion episode—about eighteen minutes, or nearly 15% of the entire film—is striking in six noteworthy respects, three of which seem relatively minor until they are examined in greater detail. First, it is filmed almost entirely without the jaunty jazz music that accompanies Alfie on his other sexual excursions and daily events. Music returns to the film only when Lily and Alfie leave the apartment, but then it is notably subdued. Second, the setting, the interior of Alfie's apartment, is cluttered, not only because his former lover Annie (the immaculate one who cleaned everything) has left, but also because the scene gives the viewer the unconscious perception that Alfie is as careless and out of order as the abortion itself. Third, the scene is filmed in low light. Either it is late afternoon or early evening outside, and the opening shot shows rain falling on the kitchen window, so the lighting inside the apartment is darker than normal—certainly much darker than the brightly lit room of Gilda, his former lover who chose to carry her child to term, get married, and live happily with her new husband and family.

Fourth, the absence of color in the abortion sequence is particularly noteworthy. Even though many scenes are filmed in industrial areas of

¹² The film almost exactly matches the original drama of 1963. While the abortion episode summarized above is followed closely in all three texts, there are some differences in the film. As if to convey to the audience that he isn't such a bad character after all, Alfie restores the twenty-five quid that Lily paid to the abortionist by secreting the money in her purse. In the stage production, Alfie quibbles with Lily over how much to pay to the abortionist and does not return the money to her. Another difference is that, immediately after he sees the body of his aborted child, Alfie runs out of his apartment and needs to confide in a male friend, an episode missing from the other texts.

London where the weather contributes to the drabness of the background, other scenes in the film are bright with color. Gilda's final scene with Alfie, when she tells him that she does not respect him as much as she respects Humphrey, is bright with white diapers hanging to dry and colorful clothes surrounding them. Humphrey discusses marriage with Gilda on a bench in a quiet London park during lunch, and the emotional resonance of the scene is positive, even though the background is industrial. Alfie's romantic interlude in another lover's apartment (that of Ruby, an older, richer woman) is surrounded by fine furniture and sensual red and gold items. Lily's abortion scene in Alfie's apartment, in contrast, is drab. The dominant color is gray, and the emotional resonance of this color is common knowledge.¹³

Fifth, Lily's abortion scene is one of only a few instances where language seems to disintegrate, an aspect vitally important for character development. Language is often halted and truncated. When Lily states, "You're the man who—," her voice trails off as though the words that would complete the sentence ("will perform the abortion" or "is the abortionist") are unutterable. Alfie illustrates an extreme disintegration of language; he silently weeps when he sees the body of his unborn child, and the silence continues for nearly a minute, a significant amount of time in a film, equivalent to the idea of "dead air" in radio.

Finally, the sixth cinematic feature involves camera angles, which are significantly altered in the abortion episode. After the initial view of rain outside the window, the camera shows us Lily's feet, trudging up the stairs to Alfie's apartment. The camera angle is sometimes below the eye level of the characters, a move designed to make persons in the film seem more important than they are. There are significant panoramic views of Alfie's apartment. The camera often follows characters as they move around the apartment, in contrast to other portions of the film where characters move in and out of the stationary camera position. In one shot the camera presents Alfie's back to the viewer so that we cannot read his face; the viewer sees Alfie only through a reflection in a mirror. The

¹³ Joseph M. Boggs and Dennis W. Petrie discuss the emotional reactions to various colors in chapter seven of their *The Art of Watching Films* (Boston MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

inability to read Alfie's facial expression changes, however, when he enters the kitchen where the abortion has occurred; the close-up as he views his unborn child shows just how tortured he is by the realization that he is responsible for having killed his child.¹⁴ After a cut to Lily, resting on a sofa in the other room of the apartment, the camera returns to Alfie, whom we see behind the glass of the side window of the kitchen, wiping away his tears. The compilation of the details of these camera angles suggests that Lily's abortion has generated excruciating sorrow and hopelessness instead of the security of her reputation that was the reason for the abortion in the first place.

The film seems to give final commentary on the abortion episode when the sequence is merged with the baptism scene of Gilda's new child by Humphrey. The baptism is obviously joyous for Gilda and her family. For Alfie, however, the baptism is a symbolic abortion; he has lost Malcolm to the perfected family of a stable father and mother, just as Lily and he have lost their child through abortion.

THE CIDER HOUSE RULES (1999)

If *Alfie* was the British version of an abortion film, then *The Cider House Rules* (1999) is its American counterpart.¹⁵ The plot of the film is much simpler than that of the novel on which it is based. The six hundred pages of the novel are reduced to less than two hundred in the screenplay, and, of course, the number of pages is reduced further because each page of the screenplay has less than one-third the quantity of words that a normal book would have. Moreover, numerous scenes of John Irving's effort to sound Dickensian were eliminated for the American film audience.

Set at an orphanage in St. Cloud's, Maine during World War II, the

¹⁴ The novel states Alfie's anguish more emphatically: "Then I think how he had been quite perfect, and the thought crossed my mind: '*You know what you did, Alfie, you murdered him.*' I mean what a stroke for the mind to come out with, a thing like that. '*Yes, mate, you set it all up and for thirty nicker you had him done to death.*' And then it struck me that the main idea in my head had been how to get it done a fiver cheaper" (p. 207; italics in original).

¹⁵ It is probably purely coincidental that Michael Caine, who, in the role of Alfie, arranged the abortion in the earlier film, becomes the abortionist himself in this later film.

film depicts the lives of the orphan Homer Wells and Wilbur Larch, who not only births babies of unwed mothers who come to the orphanage, but also performs abortions for those mothers who request them. Homer grows up in the orphanage and at first disassociates himself from Larch's abortion practice. Homer leaves the orphanage with a young couple, Wally and Candy, who had their child aborted there, and secures a job as an apple picker on the estate of Wally's mother. When Wally goes off to war, Homer falls in love with Candy. During one apple picking season, Mr. Rose, the leader of the migrant apple pickers, impregnates his daughter, and Homer aborts her. After performing this abortion, Homer decides to return to the orphanage where he assumes the role of the abortionist Larch, who had died by an accidental overdose of ether.

When the text of Irving's novel is contrasted against that of the screenplay and then the film itself, the omissions are significant.¹⁶ In the novel Homer experiences several conflicts about Larch's abortion practice. Although Homer is not identified as having come from any religious background, his moral qualms about assisting Larch with abortions are covered in several passages. In one such passage, Homer recounts fetological evidence:

Homer Wells had seen the products of conception in many stages of development: in rather whole form, on occasion, and in such partial form as to be barely recognizable, too. Why the old black-and-white drawings should have affected him so strongly, he could not say. In *Gray's [Anatomy]* there was the profile view of the head of a human embryo, estimated at twenty-seven days old. Not quick, as Dr. Larch would be quick to point out, and not recognizably human, either: what would be the spine was cocked, like a wrist, and where the knuckles of the fist (above the wrist) would be, there was the ill-formed face of a fish (the kind that lives below light, is never caught, could give you nightmares). The undersurface of the head of the embryo gaped like an eel—the eyes were at the sides of the head, as if they could protect the creature from an attack from any direction. In eight weeks, though still not quick, the fetus has a nose and a mouth; it has an expression, thought Homer Wells. And with this discovery—that a fetus, as early as eight weeks, has an *expression*—Homer Wells felt in the presence of what others call a soul.¹⁷

¹⁶ John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (Toronto ON: Bantam, 1985). John Irving, *The Cider House Rules: A Screenplay* (New York NY: Hyperion, 1999).

¹⁷ *The Cider House Rules*, p. 168, emphasis in original.

After this speculation, Homer recognizes the humanity of the unborn child and decides not to perform abortions.¹⁸

Homer's position against killing the unborn quickly changes, however, for several reasons. Besides the fact that Irving himself was stridently anti-life when he wrote the novel,¹⁹ Homer's abortion of the baby created by incest coalesces his principal moral belief that he should be "of use" in the world.²⁰ Homer is a typical "lost boy"—one who has no moral compass besides the utilitarian perspective of being "of use" on which to base his decisions, as this passage in the novel illustrates:

But what he already knew, he knew, was near-perfect obstetrical procedure and the far easier procedure—the one that was against the rules.

He thought about rules. The sailor with the slashed hand had not been in a knife fight that was according to anyone's rules. In a fight with Mr. Rose, there would be Mr. Rose's own rules, whatever they were. A knife fight with Mr. Rose would be like being pecked to death by a small bird, thought Homer Wells. Mr. Rose was an artist—he would take just the tip of a nose, just a button or a nipple.

¹⁸ Homer does not, however, have any moral qualms about being complicit in abortion. Chapter three of the DVD shows Homer carrying aborted remains to the incinerator outside the orphanage.

¹⁹ Consider, for example, the following excerpt, where Irving's hostility toward right-to-lifers is evident by the use of derogatory terminology and *ad hominem*: "Think of the Right-to-Life movement today. It is fueled by something stronger than a concern for the rights of the unborn. (Proponents of the Right-to-Life position show very little concern for children once they're born.) What underlies the Right-to-Life message is a part of this country's fundamental sexual puritanism. Right-to-Lifers believe that what *they* perceive as promiscuity should not go unpunished; girls who get pregnant should pay the piper.... Let doctors practice medicine. Let religious zealots practice their religion, but let them keep their religion to themselves." John Irving, *My Movie Business: A Memoir* (New York NY: Random House, 1999), pp. 38-39, emphasis in original). Moreover, in an essay titled "My Dinner at the White House," Irving admits that he "gave a rousing speech in favor of abortion rights, and lambasting [President] George Bush—from an exclusively Planned Parenthood perspective, mind you." John Irving, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed* (New York NY: Arcade, 1996), p. 166.

²⁰ Chapter two on the DVD version of the film contains the key philosophical foundation of this abortion movie. It is here that the abortionist Larch utters his belief that people should be "of use."

The *real* cider house rules were Mr. Rose's.

And what were the rules at St. Cloud's? What were Larch's rules? Which rules did Dr. Larch observe, which ones did he break, or replace—and with what confidence? Clearly Candy was observing some rules, but whose? And did Wally know what the rules were? And Melony—did Melony obey *any* rules? wondered Homer Wells.²¹

In the film, however, and the companion screenplay, these moral musings are reduced to quick one-word and one-line ruminations, poorly expressed and even more poorly dramatized. In one scene, when Homer and Candy have sex, even though she is attached to Wally, they emerge from the woods, blandly claiming that their having sex was “right” (p. 114).²² Similarly, the only instance where the profundity of “rules” is discussed is a scene where the rules of the cider house are read to the migrant workers. Mr. Rose exclaims,

“Somebody who *don't* live here made them rules. Them rules ain't for *us*. *We* the ones who make up them rules. We makin' our *own* rules, every day. Ain't that right, Homer?”²³

Mr. Rose's feeble assertion of the inapplicability of the few rules pertaining to the cider house is supposed to transfer to the viewer as commentary about moral and ethical rules in real life. That the transference is, at best, limp is the supreme fault of Irving's overly preachy novel.²⁴

Chapter eight is one of two crucial scenes in the film. Titled “She Died of Ignorance,” this sequence shows a young woman who had come to the orphanage after a botched abortion, presenting Larch with an

²¹ *The Cider House Rules*, p. 379; emphasis in original.

²² This scene is chapter twenty-four of the DVD.

²³ *The Cider House Rules*, p. 152, italics in original.

²⁴ This scene is chapter thirty-two of the DVD. The use of the many italicized terms suggests that Mr. Rose's words should be pronounced forcefully. However, the actor recites the words in a dejected, quiet tone. Perhaps this is not so much bad acting as evidence that the father is so demoralized after committing incest with his daughter and then having an abortion performed on her that he cannot even assert himself regarding a set of relatively innocuous rules.

opportunity to confront Homer about his opposition to abortion. Larch emphatically asks Homer what he would have done if the young woman came to him a few months earlier, and one must think deeply to recognize the inherent either/or fallacy of the question. Homer could have ignored the young woman's request for an abortion or could have performed one on her. However, a third option was possible: she could have given birth to the child, which exercise of her freedom of reproductive choice could have led to two other choices (either raising the child herself or getting married and having her husband help her in raising the child). Although the bulk of this sequence is didactic, the ending imagery is particularly so. The viewer sees Larch standing with a sunset behind him, whose rays seem to emanate from him, while Homer and another boy from the orphanage are digging the young woman's grave. Throughout the digging, Larch's badgering continues.

Chapter thirty-one is the second of the two crucial abortion episodes in the film; cinematically, the abortion episode in *The Cider House Rules* parallels that in *Alfie*. In this sequence Homer decides to abort Rose Rose's child created by an incestuous relationship with her father. It is remarkable that, in contrast to the abortion scene in *Alfie* (nearly eighteen minutes), this one takes all of three and a half, or a little over 2% of the entire film. Like *Alfie*'s opening image, the abortion in *Cider House Rules* shows the viewer a window with rain falling outside. The rain accentuates the darkness of night. There is little dialogue between characters, and the action is slow paced. There is weak or no music throughout the abortion scene, except at the end; like *Alfie*, even this emergence of the familiar theme is slow and soft. Close-ups are the dominant camera angle, although a couple of significant deviations occur. First, the camera is at eye level when Homer is laying out his surgical instruments, Rose Rose sitting in the background. Second, at the end of the sequence Mr. Rose is filmed from a distance; he has left the building where the abortion occurred and is moving spasmodically in the rain as he screams his anguish.

It is interesting, though, that Homer's actions appear sacerdotal in at least two respects—a quality that is evident in the novel more so than in the screenplay. Irving's intention (comparing abortion to a divine attribute) was made clear in the novel. Irving writes about Rose's abortion in such a way that the sacerdotal role that Homer plays is clear:

He chose the curette of the correct size. After the first one, thought Homer Wells, this might get easier. Because he knew now that he couldn't play God in the worst sense; if he could operate on Rose Rose, how could he refuse to help a stranger? How could he refuse anyone? Only a god makes that kind of decision. I'll just give them what they want, he thought. An orphan or an abortion.

Homer Wells breathed slowly and regularly; the steadiness of his hand surprised him. He did not even blink when he felt the curette make contact; he did not divert his eye from witnessing the miracle.²⁵

The divine/sacerdotal functions of abortion at the orphanage are stated explicitly by Homer when he writes to Larch, saying, "I *know* what you have to do—you have to play God."²⁶

Although wearing all-white surgical clothing is not as significant or extraordinary as it may seem at first, coupled with other items in the sequence, the cumulative effect is that Homer's character is assuming that of a priest or minister approaching an altar where divine power resides. Homer deliberately announces the name of each surgical instrument, *sotto voce*, as though he is performing some rite before the actual abortion, much like a priest would utter certain prayers before the act of consecration.

The second sacerdotal aspect of the abortion scene is that, once the abortion has begun, the rite that Homer is enacting requires that only he should be present. Homer had earlier admonished Mr. Rose that he could stay to witness the abortion as long as he made himself "of use"—the pet mantra of the Larch-Wells abortion axis. Thus, unlike a Mass or other religious service where the community is drawn into the ritual, Homer's action parallels the esoteric pagan rituals that could only be performed by qualified ministers.

Thus, the entire abortion sequence—solemn, somber, silent—seems like

²⁵ *The Cider House Rules*, p. 568.

²⁶ *The Cider House Rules*, p. 123, italics in original. The idea that abortion could serve a sacerdotal or divine function was explicitly formulated about five years after the novel was published by the anti-life author Ginette Paris, whose *The Sacrament of Abortion* [trans. Joanna Mott (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1992); original: *L'Enfant, l'Amour, la Mort* (Quebec: Editions Nuits Blanches, 1990)] considers abortion a sacred act (p. 8), "a kind of sacrifice" (p. 34), merely "*another way of choosing death over life*" (p. 51, italics in original), and, finally, "a sacrifice to Artemis" (p. 107).

a corruption of a Catholic Mass, but, then, that would be appropriate for an activity that kills human life.

A RIGHT-TO-LIFE CRITICISM OF THE FILMS

Critiquing what are called masterworks in the popular culture requires courage. For example, *The Cider House Rules* was hailed as an American “classic” and won a couple of Academy Awards. The DVD cover sickeningly states that the film “tells a compelling and heartwarming story about how far a young man must travel to find the place where he truly belongs!”—a marketing statement that not only avoids the more sordid fact that Irving’s novel is about abortion as much as it skirts the real issue of the film so that people buying DVDs would not get upset by the controversial issue it concerns and possibly boycott the company. The abortion subplot in *Alfie* is equally avoided. The closest that the film’s DVD cover comes to mentioning the abortion subplot occurs in these words: “For those who want more, there is beneath the surface a lingering tragedy, simply and poignantly told, about the taker and the taken.”

Pro-life academics, however, must courageously view the films for what they are, not so much stories about love between the characters, but about abortion. Fortunately, once we have learned the vocabulary of specific fields (in this case, film studies) we can review the items in the culture for their right-to-life content and determine whether they are lacking a balanced viewpoint.

Following this principle, although both can be classified as films worthy of pro-life study, in my estimation *Alfie* scores much higher than *Cider House Rules*. *Alfie* himself is a static character, but the persons with whom he interacts are dynamic. Gilda becomes a liberated woman and mother. Humphrey is the real hero of the production, rising to the occasion to help a single mother in her time of need. The happy resolution of Gilda’s untimely pregnancy is balanced by the disaster of Lily’s abortion, and the cinematic rendering of the abortion is honest to human emotion.

Characters in *The Cider House Rules* are just the opposite: Larch is a preachy, confrontational aging abortionist who cannot understand why a young man like Homer would not want to do abortions; Homer is a vapid youth whose interest in discovering the benefits of the rules by

which human life develops is cursory, if not flip. If given a choice, which characters in which film do you think our students would want to emulate?