

A Bit of Himself: British Male-authored Abortion Narratives from *Waste* to *Alfie* A Talk by Fran Bigman

Fran Bigman is a visiting researcher at Keio University. From 2015 to 2016, she was a Wellcome Trust Research Fellow in Medical Humanities at the University of Leeds. She holds a BA in History from Brown University and a MPhil in English from the University of Cambridge. In 2014, Fran received her PhD from the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge for a thesis that explores abortion in British literature and film from 1907 to 1967.

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Kyoto University

Yoshida-South Campus
Faculty of Integrated Human
Studies Bldg. Room 1B08

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When Gordon, the hero of George Orwell's novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), learns his girlfriend is pregnant, the news doesn't sink in at first. Then she mentions abortion, and "the words 'a baby' took on a new significance...They did not mean any longer a mere abstract disaster, they meant... a bit of himself, down there in her belly." Gordon then rejects abortion as "disgusting" and "blasphemy."

In this presentation, I will analyse how abortion is used as a moral wake-up call for the male protagonists of novels and plays written by British male authors, from one of the first literary representations of abortion, the 1907 drama *Waste* by Harley Granville-Barker to the radio, stage, novel, and film versions of Bill Naughton's *Alfie* (1962-66). Even as censorship relaxed between 1907 and 1927, when Granville-Barker rewrote his play, and between 1962 and 1966, as *Alfie* was adapted for different media, these narratives further vilified abortion, as I will show. While many anti-abortion activists claim that they are interested in protecting women, the existence of a specifically male opposition to abortion emerges in these works, as male characters speak about the foetus as a potential son. By appropriating the experience of abortion to serve as a turning

point for male characters and by imagining the endangered or aborted foetus as male, thus restricting sympathy to male channels, these narratives write women's experiences out of the picture.

My focus on men follows a recent move by historians to look more closely at male involvement in birth control and abortion. Critics who have examined abortion narratives in literature have overwhelmingly read them as empowering and feminist, neglecting or misinterpreting novels and plays that, in presenting negative messages about abortion, both reflect and contribute to anti-abortion sentiment.

No registration is required.

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