

A Classic Anti-Abortion Film

Released in 1916, the silent film *Where Are My Children?* still presents a powerfully persuasive anti-abortion message at the dawn of the 21st century.

by James Perloff

As Hollywood sinks deeper into depravity, Americans with traditional values find they must increasingly look to older movies for entertainment. One resource frequently overlooked is silent films. After the first "talkie" (1927), the public eventually began regarding silent movies as dull and outdated. However, many forgotten movies from that era are worth seeing, especially because they better reflect the Judeo-Christian morality that once predominated in America.

One such film is *Where Are My Children?*. Originally released in 1916, this movie was restored in 2000 by the Library of Congress, and was recently broadcast on cable television by Turner Classic Movies.

Where Are My Children? is a provocative film about abortion. Starring in the lead was Tyrone Power Sr., whose son, Tyrone Power Jr., is better known to today's audiences for his roles in such classics as *Mark of Zorro* and *Witness for the Prosecution*.

In *Where Are My Children?*, the elder Tyrone Power plays District Attorney Richard Walton, a man who adores children. He loves holding his sister's baby and visiting the children of his neighbor, who says: "We plan to have half a dozen of these little angels in time." Walton is saddened that he and his own wife have not had children. Unknown to the DA, his wife is secretly having abortions, and she belongs to an affluent social circle where this is common.

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Family man: Tyrone Power Sr., the star of the silent film *Where Are My Children?*, plays Richard Walton, a district attorney who loves children but hasn't had any of his own because, unbeknownst to him, his wife had been having abortions.

Bad Advice

When Mrs. Walton's best friend, Mrs. Carlino, becomes pregnant, heaven's gates are shown opening as the child's spirit descends. Mrs. Carlino, though, does not want a baby. When she says as much to Mrs. Walton, the DA's wife tells her: "If you are determined to evade motherhood, and are willing to take the risk, I would suggest you see Dr. Malfit." Mrs. Walton takes Mrs. Carlino to the office of Dr. Herman Malfit, smirkingly telling the abortionist: "Doctor, my friend desires to consult with you privately concerning a serious ailment." While the abortion is performed, Mrs. Walton callously glances through magazines in the waiting room. When the baby is aborted, the film shows the child's spirit returning to heaven, and notes: "One of the 'unwanted' ones returns, and a social butterfly is again ready for house parties."

As the film continues, Mrs. Walton's womanizing brother visits her home. After

the maid rebuffs his advances, he sets his sights on Lillian, the sweet young daughter of the Waltons' housekeeper. He seduces her, saying: "You are the loveliest thing I have ever seen." The film warns: "Practice teaches men of this class the bold methods that sweep inexperienced girls off their feet."

In the next scene labeled "the wages of sin," Lillian is pregnant, which she keeps a secret, and refuses offers of food from her perplexed mother. Lillian goes to her seducer — Mrs. Walton's brother — who slaps her aside upon learning of her pregnancy. He then visits his sister, intimating: "A friend of mine is in trouble."

Though upset, Mrs. Walton, with some prodding, gives him Dr. Malfit's name. But as the film notes: "This time the obliging Dr. Malfit bungles." After the abortion, Lillian stumbles from Malfit's office and is put in a taxi by Mrs. Walton's brother, who is relieved that his problem is "over." Once home, however, Lillian collapses, and is

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carried to bed by the surprised Mr. Walton. On her deathbed, the young woman confesses to her mother. When Mr. Walton learns the truth behind Lillian's death, he seizes his brother-in-law to beat him. He is, however, restrained by his wife — whose involvement he does not realize.

Walton swiftly brings the repugnant Dr. Malfit to trial. He is only interested in prosecuting Malfit — not the various women he has performed abortions on. Hoping to save his skin, Malfit writes Walton's wife: "Call your husband off this prosecution or I will draw you into the case." Frightened, she asks her husband: "Aren't you being a little hard on Dr. Malfit, Richard? He was not the only one at fault." Walton, however, is undeterred.

Ultimately the judge pronounces sentence on Malfit: 15 years at hard labor. Outraged, the abortionist throws his appointment book at the DA, shouting: "Before sitting in judgement on others, you should see to your own household!"

Examining the book, Walton is devastated to see his wife's name listed for services rendered. She has had three abortions — and many of her friends have had them also.

Confrontation

Appointment book in hand, Walton returns home, where his wife is hosting a fashionable party. He tells the women: "I have just discovered why so many of you have no children. I should bring you to trial for manslaughter, but I shall content myself with asking you to leave my house!"

Enraged and embarrassed, the guests leave. Mrs. Carlino protests Walton's remarks, but when confronted with the appointment book's evidence, she is mortified, and rebukes Mrs. Walton for ever having brought her to Malfit.

When the guests have all departed, Walton asks his wife: "Where are my children?"

He then tells her: "I — an officer of the law — must shield a murderess!" Overcome with guilt, she collapses.

We later see Walton pacing as the film tells us: "All night long, Richard Walton grieved for his lost children and his lost faith in the woman who should have been their mother." Mrs. Walton is next seen alone in a

church pew. The film explains: "Prayerfully now Mrs. Walton sought the blessing she had refused, but, having perverted Nature so often, she found herself physically unable to wear the diadem of motherhood." The gates of heaven are shown remaining firmly shut: no child's spirit descends.

Returning home, Mrs. Walton sadly watches her husband playing with neighborhood children. The film notes: "Throughout the years she must face the silent question — 'Where are my children?'"

In a powerful ending, we see Mr. and Mrs. Walton in their parlor. Visions of the children that might have been appear — playing on the floor, climbing onto their knees. The visions then fade away. We next see the Waltons transform into white-haired, elderly people. Again, visions of the lost children appear — now as adults, arriving to comfort their parents. But the visions again disappear. Here the film ends.

Birth Control and Eugenics

Where Are My Children? is perhaps the cinema's most significant condemnation of abortion. However, the film's early minutes regrettably contain material that many will find objectionable or at least questionable.

Lois Weber, who directed and co-wrote the script, was among Hollywood's most esteemed directors in her day, ranked beside Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith. During her late teens, Weber had spent two years as a street evangelist in Pittsburgh. She definitely had Christian and Victorian moral views, which the film expresses. Her exposure to city slums also impacted her.

Unfortunately, Weber was also influenced by literature of that era suggesting that birth control (meaning not abortion, but contraceptives) would prevent some of the suffering she had seen in slums. Weber's biographer, Anthony Slide, writes: "Her stance and that of many of her upbringing was pro-birth control and anti-abortion." In short, Weber, while ardently against abortion, did believe in contraception, and thought it could avert abortion. She was also attracted to eugenics literature.

Where Are My Children? begins by displaying heaven and remarks: "Behind the great portals of Eternity, the souls of little children waited to be born." So far, so good. But offbeat remarks follow, mourning "the great army of 'chance' children.



Truth revealed: Walton, upon learning that his wife had had three abortions, angrily asks her, "Where are my children?" then laments, "I — an officer of the law — must shield a murderess!"



Awful consequences: Alone in a church pew (above), Mrs. Walton prays that she may be able to have children. But, the film explains, "having perverted Nature so often, she found herself physically unable to wear the diadem of motherhood." In a moving ending, Mr. and Mrs. Walton are seen in their parlor (right) accompanied by ghostly visions of the children they would have had.

They went forth to earth in vast numbers. Then came back those sad, 'unwanted' souls, that were constantly sent back. They were marked morally or physically defective and bore the sign of the serpent. And then in the secret place of the Most High were those souls, fine and strong, that were sent forth only on prayer. They were marked with the approval of the Almighty." Though this language is religious, and open to various interpretations, it appears an attempt to blend Christian theology with *eugenics*.

Tyrone Power Sr. is introduced with these words: "Richard Walton, the District Attorney, was a great believer in eugenics." Seeing criminals, he tells an acquaintance: "These poor souls are ill-born. If the mystery of birth were understood, crime could be wiped out."

Subsequently, the film oddly states: "Walton's sister had contracted an eugenic marriage." The sister's baby is beautiful, and the movie seems to imply that a "eugenic" marriage — one between "superior" persons — will produce "better" babies.

Early in the movie, Walton also presides over the case of a birth control proponent, Dr. Homer. Homer does not endorse abortion, but advocates other birth control mea-



sures. As Homer explains his position, we are shown pictures of slum poverty that supposedly support his viewpoint. Dr. Homer is convicted, but the film portrays him sympathetically.

After Homer's trial, however, the remainder of the movie unconditionally condemns abortion, as previously described. Does District Attorney Walton still believe in eugenics at the film's powerful end? The movie doesn't say, but we are hard-pressed to believe he would.

The reaction of church leaders to this film, during its 1916 release, was generally quite favorable. However, some condemned it as immorally favoring birth control. A few believed that a book displayed by "Dr. Homer" was a thinly-veiled reference to a book published in 1915 by Mar-

garet Sanger, a leading American advocate of eugenics. In a few areas, the picture was banned. However, the Birth Control League also protested the movie for its stand against abortion.

Weber responded: "The Birth Control League would have all the emphasis on the first part. Well, say to them that when the National Board of Censorship gets through with a photoplay the beautiful balance which may have been in the original production is apt to be destroyed, and the whole thing wobbles over to one side or the other."

In short, Weber's movie honestly reflected her views — pro-contraception,

against abortion. As *Variety's* 1916 review summed up: "From a picture standpoint it is a good one; from the standpoint of an argument for or against birth control — it is both. It starts off seemingly as an argument in favor of birth control and suddenly switches to an argument against abortion."

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Where Are My Children? is not currently available in video stores. Should it become available, THE NEW AMERICAN recommends it, qualified by our cautionary notes. ■