

The World of *Vera Drake*

William Murchison

Know what? Lovers Lane *is* an odd name for a major thoroughfare.

It hadn't struck me so until the other day. Residing in Dallas all my adult life—a considerable span by now, I must confess—I was completely at ease with informational tidbits such as, “They’ve lived on Lovers about 10 years, I think,” or “Oh, you know where it is—intersection of Lovers and Greenville.” Easy. Logical. Factual. I believe maybe that’s it—factual. Lovers Lane—the provenance of the name is just as you suppose—is a fact of life: unquestionable, durable, unassailable. Until someone from out of town, as was the case in my recent hearing, says, “Lovers Lane? Gosh, what an odd name for a street.” Which, when you come down to it, it is, except that usage and familiarity long ago rendered it utterly un-odd, completely natural, the stuff of ordinary discourse.

I am asked, logically enough, what an east-west thoroughfare in Dallas, Texas, has to do with the right to life. And I reply: in the concrete sense, nothing; in the metaphorical sense, much more than we might suppose.

My topic is the normalization of abortion; or, if not the normalization, the routinization—the adoption of abortion into the great family of everyday pursuits, among them the intellectual appropriation of street names.

Could abortion, constitutionally permitted in this country for 34 years now, become so much a part of the landscape of life that it ceases to engage our thoughtful, not to mention our indignant, attention, in the public as in the private sphere? We prefer to believe not, wondering innocently what a society might choose to become indignant over if not over the medical destruction of life in the womb.

And yet . . . and yet you have to look from time to time at how these mental appropriations of fact and circumstance actually play out in the world. That which we laughingly call the culture currently suggests some data worth closer notice, in the form of a movie and a book. The movie is English director-writer Mike Leigh’s *Vera Drake*. The book is Alexander Sanger’s *Beyond Choice: Reproductive Freedom in the 21st Century*. Neither could be called a mega-event, even within the narrow context of the film and book worlds. Yet both correspond to each other in their hope of making abortion seem—you know, normal; everyday; just what people do, OK?

Not OK. Not at all. Which, as it happens, is my point.

I don’t suggest a conspiracy afoot—a series of words or gestures intended to bring about, through concerted effort, a particular reordering of societal circumstances. I see (in my mind of course) heads nodding at the same propositions, sparks flying from comparable pieces of steel. I see deep assumptions taking tangible form, reaching out genially to passing spirits.

It might be time to explain.

I went to see *Vera Drake* on a cold, dreary November Sunday afternoon (at a theater, if you must know, about a mile south of Lovers Lane). The theater was anything but crowded. What surprised me was the number of gray heads—same hair color as my own. Senior citizens out for a lark? Or for enlightenment?

Vera Drake abounds with enlightenment of a certain kind. I had seen the previews more than once (my wife and I attend a lot of movies) without, until I read the advance publicity, being absolutely certain what was up. *Vera Drake*, it transpired, is about abortion; specifically abortion as practiced in England more than half a century ago, in that gray postwar time before the complete transvaluation of Victorian values. Abortion, under the Offenses Against the Person Act of 1861, was a crime. But what has that to do with the gentle and dowdy Vera? From her respectable if tacky London flat, shared with husband, son, and daughter, Vera bustles forth to do endless good. We see her visiting shut-ins, checking on her mother, making copious pots of tea; being dear and lovable, in short. What else is she up to, however? I mean, besides making a few quid cleaning the homes of the rich?

“I help young girls out.”

Ah. Do go on. You help them when? “When they can’t manage.”

“Manage” . . . meaning? “I help them start their bleeding again.”

And why? “They need help.”

Vera does abortions. Not that she calls her interventions by that name. She thinks of her work as outreach to the distressed. The girls referred to her for help might be her own chicks, so tenderly does she cluck over them. “Take off your knickers,” she instructs them. Just a little discomfort ahead. Soon enough, “[Y]ou’ll be right as rain.”

From a wooden box Vera produces syringe and bulb, then goes gently, cheerfully, to work. Exit—in due course and off camera—another of His Majesty’s subjects. But the gentle smile on Vera’s face lets you, the moviegoer, know that a paradoxical kind of peace has been restored. On, as well as off, camera. There is order again. We are down a bit in population, but life goes on. A nice cup of tea will fix things in due course. Vera—I should not neglect mention of Imelda Staunton’s picture-perfect performance in the role—smiles that motherly smile of hers with abundant conviction as to the rightness of her two-decades-old ministry and ministrations.

Well, just a minute. It’s easy enough to smile, is it not, at the touch of a few gold guineas pressed into your hand by the object of your labors. It might be, but not in Vera’s case. You see, “I don’t take money.”

“Don’t take money”? When the woman responsible for steering clients to Vera gets her own palm liberally greased? Nothing for the son and daughter at home? Nothing to ease the labors of the upright husband employed at his brother’s garage? Nothing. And that makes for something. The temperature of the gentle smile rises until, almost by itself, the dreary room is warm.

In the room we witness mercy in the face of affliction. Not such affliction as we see, of course. But from one of the objects of mercy we hear the stakes blurted out in stark terms. “I can’t have it—I’d rather kill myself!”

“Well, I don’t think we can allow that to happen, can we?”

Of course not, Vera, bless you. No one would allow such a thing to happen. It wouldn’t be right . . .

We are not emotionally prepared, my fellow geezers and I, out there in the audience, when harsh reality pricks the dream. One of the girls Vera has undertaken to help has come near death. The state has asserted its interest in the matter. One day, when the Drake family are celebrating the engagement of the shy, meditative daughter to an obviously good bloke, the police turn up. Though they exercise good English discretion and propriety, the kind to which Alfred Hitchcock accustomed moviegoers, the disruption is like the overthrow of a china cabinet.

Sorry, sir, we’ll need to speak privately with your wife. The merry banter and celebration fall away. What is up? Our Vera, what could she possibly have done? Enough, it chances after suspense interminable to the gathered family members, that she is bundled into a waiting police car and driven to headquarters.

No anger, no outburst from her. Dignified resignation is all she has to show. There is not much at which to smile serenely. The blue-uniformed, brass-buttoned state has put the stopper in that impulse.

Soon enough, she is back home, bail having been procured. Yet the end of the idyll nears. The white-wigged, black-gowned state will have its reckoning. Two years, six months, in prison. The martyrdom of the fictional Vera has not been costly by the standards of Edmund Campion or Archbishop Cranmer, centuries earlier: slaughtered or burned to a crisp for religious offense to the Crown. Still, such a gentle little woman! With such a large heart! Her smile will not, perhaps, receive frequent exercise for a couple of years. But at this point the camera averts its eye; the story teller falls silent. We sit stonily in the presence of something larger than we might have expected as we laid down our \$7.50 at the box office.

Just what Mike Leigh intended, I imagine. (He dedicates the movie to his father and mother, a doctor and midwife respectively, without mentioning any commitment they might have had to the ideals he invokes.) No piece of fiery propaganda is *Vera Drake*, despite its attitude toward the destruction of unborn life. An invitation is what you might call it—an invitation to think of “helping young girls,” in Vera’s special manner, as normal and merciful and, when you get to thinking about it, just what decency compels. What’s a poor girl to do, after all, when she gets in the family way? True, Vera’s son, on learning of his mother’s unofficial occupation, exclaims in dismay: “Little babies!”—following with a grunted “Dirty.” But Prospective Son-in-Law sees matters differently: “If you can’t feed ’em, you can’t love ’em, can you?” No other character chooses to open up that assertion for inspection; therefore, buried in the audience’s subconscious, is the connection Leigh has intended, between love and the capacity to provide.

A sort of cinematic aside buries the point still deeper in our consciousnesses. Vera, through cleaning the homes of the rich, knows the rich and their advantages. For their daughters, what we might delicately call “options” exist. There is always the professional, if ethically challenged, doctor standing by to intervene. In London’s back streets, all there is is Vera, ready with her cup of tea, her syringe and bulb; just Vera, standing between suffering girl and despair; an angel of hope. What could be more in accordance with human necessity than the work she undertakes? What could be more natural; more right?

I cannot imagine Alexander Sanger’s having any quarrel with such a notion. The utility, the very ordinariness, of abortion is the point he presses on us in *Beyond Choice*. As Margaret Sanger’s articulate grandson sees things, the choice/no choice argument has ossified, losing resonance and the power to compel agreement. The majority of Americans, as polls indicate, are comfortable with the idea of some abortion—just not too much.

There is the feel and look of trench warfare here: a few hundred yards gained by frontal assault, only to be reclaimed by the adversary. No political bombardments seem to avail much. “Choice” as such—yes I can, no you shouldn’t—lacks the argumentative resonance of bygone days. Why, the young (according to a 2002 poll) are if anything more dubious about abortion than are their baby-boomer parents. Could it be, wonders Sanger, because “We haven’t presented abortion within a framework or a system of ideas that is coherent and makes moral sense”? Well, yes, that might be. What do we do about it, though? We “shift the focus from rights to reproduction.” Ah. That’s it, then. We “argue for reproductive freedom because it supports successful birth, family, and reproduction.” When we say “choice,” we’re really talking about something “essential to the survival and well-being of humanity.” How else do we reconcile the irreconcilables of choice/no choice than by changing the subject to the larger matter of life itself? “Taking control of reproduction is respectful of life.”

Er . . . how’s that again? Respecting life means taking it? Taking it, yes—for the sake of human survival. “Without this no other human goals are possible. A world without reproductive freedom is the animal

world,” one “where whatever nature says will happen will in fact happen.” (Translation: Neither human will nor divine authority is determinative in these matters; we make the rules to accommodate the accidents.)

Accordingly we need to put our trust in “reproductive strategies” as they unfold in individual women’s minds. The woman knows what all this is about. It’s about destiny and survival. “Humanity did not evolve and populate the planet indiscriminately or randomly. It did so by having both sex and children *strategically* (italics mine).” The result: “a dynamic in which healthy children were born and survived.”

For Margaret Sanger’s grandson, please, let’s have no artificiality in the ordering of the human arrangement. Birth control and abortion “are nothing more than strategies that humans use to increase their chances of reproductive success.”

Just the routine: just the ordinary: just what the race has done since Eden—namely, strategize; a thing no more startling, when you get used to it, than Lovers Lane as a major address in a major American city. Once an idea becomes unremarkable, almost unnoticeable, it ceases, by definition, to engage our attention. So Mike Leigh might wish with abortion, just as—no doubt about it—Margaret Sanger’s grandson wishes.

The sheer ordinariness, the downright everydayness, of abortion is a concept you might very well wish to propagate; that is, if you are desirous of annealing anger and smoothing down concerns over a practice our tradition describes as barbarous. Imagine trying to stir up the populace over that grand late 19th century idea, the free and unlimited coinage of silver at the ratio of 16 to 1. You could not expect much success at such an endeavor. Currency questions long ago faded into the wallpaper. We finger the coins in our pockets, careless of their composition. It doesn’t matter. Who cares? Yet Republicans and Democrats once dueled fiercely over the question: firing, reloading, firing, reloading . . .

Will abortion, not now but eventually, slip to the back of the pajamas drawer, smothered by more fashionable concerns? As I say, I sense no conspiracy to produce such a result: no whispered back-and-forths between Mike Leigh and Alexander Sanger, no coded messages or midnight conferences. Though it seems worth noting that Frances Kissling, of Catholics for a Free Choice, has bestowed her imprimatur on *Vera Drake*, urging that this “working class heroine who provided as safe an abortion as possible could teach the world’s religious leaders a lot about the meaning of compassion and justice—and the complexity of life.” Can we count on the incorporation of clips from *Vera Drake* into CFFC propaganda? Probably.

The sense in which the “normalization” of abortion matters to both sides in the controversy is that normalization precedes disappearance. Lovers Lane the street, that tie you’re wearing, the color of high noon—all so everyday as hardly to invite comment. Only the exceptional draws remark—a gathering storm, a bright red necktie against a green shirt, an American street named Osama bin Laden. So the case once was with abortion. Not just English law but the law of all civilized nations (so far as I am informed) denied the alleged right to exterminate life, whether with coathanger, pessary, or syringe and bulb. Why, yes, there would always be, as there always had been, those who chose to act on their own; but we knew them to be acting outside the sphere not just of good hygiene but of reverent judgment. Then came *Roe v. Wade*.

Now *Vera Drake*, and with it, according to Meghan Cox Gurdon in the *Wall Street Journal*, a cinematic ambience of abortion. *Vera* is far from alone, Gurdon observes. For company she has the Jude Law remake of “Alfie” and Ellen Barkin’s upcoming *Palindrome*. That’s on top of 1999’s “The Cider House Rules,” with Michael Caine—the original Alfie—as a physician “helping” young girls, and receiving, as partial reward, the Academy Award for best actor. “[T]he zeitgeist,” Gurdon writes, “is whispering ‘abortion.’”

And more than whispering. The same zeitgeist is demonstrating further the challenge involved in keeping the evil of abortion where it belongs—at the forefront of civilized concerns. It's no easy task, given artistic enthusiasm for showing us abortion as just one more product of the good works industry: unremarkable except as to our lateness in acknowledging its benefits and blessings. Why did we not see sooner that the abortionist, despite Vera Drake's rejection of the nomenclature, is here to help the helpless? Outlaw those delicate, Vera-like interventions, the zeitgeist softly confides, and what have you produced? More desperation, that's what; more suffering and loneliness, less love and compassion. How complicated can the matter be? Hideously complicated, as it happens—getting more so the longer our national perplexity over abortion remains a twilight struggle, with neither side able to claim victory.

In advance of the Academy Awards, buzz was loud and prolonged concerning Vera Drake and her perplexities. Reviewers were ga-ga (as they might well have been) over Imelda Staunton, as Vera, and appreciative of the movie as a whole, one writer calling it “an utterly compelling and concise drama that shows how even the most forthright, morally composed survivor can be torn down by the State.” *Vera* won the Venice Film Festival's award for best picture; Staunton won for best actress.

The real art in *Vera Drake* may be its muffling of moral clarities. Ordinary lady, usual dilemma, quiet response: nothing here to remind us of what really happens on those ordinary, usual, quiet occasions when off come the knickers and out comes the syringe.

The sheer ordinariness, the clear benevolence of these occasions! Mike Leigh would clearly love us to see matters thus: calmly, without perturbation save when the state makes a fuss, which happily (we are supposed to notice) it no longer does. Only the stiff and the discontented (we are meant to think) could possibly work themselves up over the Vera Drakes—so simple and kind, so compassionate and obliging; so obtuse in their simplicity, so deadly in their compassion.

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