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“You Killed Our Baby!”: Cristina Yang and the Breaking of the Abortion Taboo in *Grey’s Anatomy*

Elizabeth LEVY

In 2011, a rare event occurred on American television: Cristina Yang, one of the main characters of *Grey’s Anatomy*, a widely popular TV show, decided to have an abortion and went through with her decision. In light of the fact that the pro-life/pro-choice debate has been raging in the United States since 1973 and has been tightly informed by religious views, this paper attempts to determine how the abortion plotline was organized in that regard. It becomes clear that Cristina’s decision is never criticized on religious grounds and that Cristina is never the victim of any event that could be considered divine retribution. This does not mean, however, that she does not have to face the consequences of her actions. Moreover, a religious perspective on unwanted pregnancies is introduced later on in the show.

In September 2011, a very unusual—even if not unprecedented—event occurred on American television: one of the main characters of *Grey’s Anatomy*, a very popular prime time TV show aired on ABC, itself one of the most watched network channels in the country, decided to terminate her pregnancy and went through with it¹. To anybody interested in the relationship between religion and American TV shows, this can be considered as no less than a defining moment: by portraying Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), one of its leading characters, as a strong and independent woman who terminates her pregnancy, *Grey’s Anatomy* put an end to the gag rule that commonly frames abortion plotlines on American TV.

¹ A few TV shows had previously tackled the topic of abortion and done so with a great deal of caution. In *Six Feet Under*, Claire Fisher (Lauren Ambrose) finds out she is pregnant, decides to have an abortion and actually goes through with it (2.12). In later episodes of the show, she dreams that the child she could have had is in heaven and she marries a die-hard conservative. In most cases though, women who have abortions usually do not go through the experience during an episode but confess to having had one in a distant past. This is no doubt a device meant to make that decision more acceptable to the audience, who can believe that their favorite characters had that kind of behavior at a time when they did not know any better. In *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) confess to having terminated pregnancies as well (4.11). If Samantha does not dwell on the experience, Carrie obviously feels some form of guilt as she says she hopes to feel “normal” about her decision “any day now.” When Jordan (Christa Miller) also confesses to having had an abortion in *Scrubs* (6.2), she says she was nineteen at the time and she now has two children that were born during the series. Moreover, in the end, Jordan’s input (she states that deciding whether or not to end a pregnancy is not a “logical decision”) is one of the main factors that prompt J.D (Zach Braff) and his then girlfriend to keep the baby she is carrying.

Indeed, if American TV shows routinely tackle the topic of abortion, they most often do so following what seems to be a set of rules: abortion is most often alluded to and presented as an option, but in the end, female characters almost *never* resort to it. Instead, just like Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) in *Sex and the City*, Karen (Laura Wiggins) in *Shameless* or Karen (Natascha McElhone) and Marcy (Pamela Adlon) in *Californication*, they tend to decide that keeping the baby actually is their best option. Even in cases when characters would have good reasons to consider abortion, they do not: in *90210*, Adrianna (Jessica Lowndes)—a drug addict teenager who cannot even name her baby’s father—decides to have the baby and give it up for adoption instead. If some characters eventually *do* end up childless, this is often because they become the instrument of fate and end up losing the baby during an unfortunate incident such as a fall down the stairs or a car accident (Blair played by Leighton Meester in *Gossip Girl*). In *Girls*, Jessa (Jemima Kirke) simply has a miscarriage after not going to her appointment at the abortion clinic².

There is little doubt that the careful treatment of abortion in American TV shows is one of the many consequences of the pro-choice/pro-life debate that has been raging in the United States ever since the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision rendered anti-abortion laws unconstitutional throughout the country in 1973³. For the past forty years, Christian activist leaders such as James Dobson or Pat Robertson, prominent political figures such as Rick Santorum or Tom Coburn as well as Supreme Court justices such as Antonin Scalia have been denouncing America’s “moral decay” and lamenting the promotion of a “pro-gay” and “pro feminist” culture of laziness, drugs and casual sex through Hollywood. Studies have shown that strong religious views were often correlated with negative views on abortion⁴. Moreover, the disagreement of the pro-life and pro-choice camps on the matter of the beginning of life makes the finding of a “common ground” that much more difficult: since life is a gift from God that begins at conception for proponents of the “pro-life” camp, abortion is nothing less than cold-blooded murder. The issue of abortion is thus extremely sensitive as it is not simply a theoretical one: to those who consider themselves pro-life, it is literally a question of life and death.

² A number of blogs have carefully studied the most common treatments of abortion on American television. For more information, one can visit: <http://theweek.com/article/index/227153/how-tv-shows-deal-with-abortion-a-timeline>, <http://ecosalon.com/10-rules-for-depicting-abortion-in-movies/>, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/guest-post-how-to-do-an-abortion-plotline#!>, all consulted December 12th, 2013.

³ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S 113 (1973), <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=410&invol=113>, last consulted December 12th, 2013.

⁴ Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/22222/Religion-Politics-Inform-Americans-Views-Abortion.aspx>, last consulted December 12th, 2013.

As far as TV shows are concerned, viewers are thus likely to very negatively respond to an abortion plotline that would offend their core beliefs.

A number of studies have been devoted to *Grey's Anatomy* in the literature. Some have focused on the way the show has shaped viewers' opinions on medicine and doctors, on the impact of medical TV shows on viewers' awareness of specific medical issues, or on the treatment of ethics in the drama⁵. As far as Christian "moral values" are concerned, a good deal has also been written on gay relationships in the show⁶. However, if the way abortion was depicted in *Grey's Anatomy* seems to have fascinated pro-choice and pro-life bloggers as well as journalists, it does not seem to have prompted a great deal of academic research so far. This research is an attempt to start filling that void by trying to understand how abortion was depicted thanks to Cristina's plotline and what the consequences of such depiction were.

For a very long time, *Grey's Anatomy* was just another American TV show as far as the topic of abortion was concerned: it was almost never broached and the program resorted to the usual tricks in the book to never actually show one taking place. Cristina's abortion in season 8 clearly put an end to that state of affairs by dealing with the decision of a woman, who is both secure in employment and in

⁵ See for example:

- Brian L. Quick, "The Effects of Viewing Grey's Anatomy on Perceptions of Doctor and Patient's Satisfaction," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol. 53, Issue 1, 2009, p. 38-55; Elena Strauman & Bethany Crandell Goodier, "Not My Grandmother's Doctor Show: A Review of Grey's Anatomy, House and Nip Tuck," *Journal of Medical Humanities*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, June 2009, p. 127-131; Lauren Movius, Michael Cody, Grace Huang, Mandy Berkowitz & Susan Morgan, "Motivating Television Viewers to Become Organ Donors," *Cases in Public Health Communication & Marketing*, 2007 June. Available from: http://sphhs.gwu.edu/departments/pch/phcm/casesjournal/volume1/peer-reviewed/cases_1_o8.pdf, consulted December 13th 2013; Heather J. Hether, Grace C. Huang, Vicki Beck, Sheila T. Murphy & Thomas W. Valente, "Entertainment-Education in a Media-Saturated Environment: Examining the Impact of Single and Multiple Exposures to Breast Cancer Storylines on Two Popular Medical Dramas," *Journal Of Health Communication: International Perspectives*, Volume 13, Issue 8, 2008, p. 808-823; Elliot B. Tapper, "Doctors on Display: The Evolution of Television's Doctors," *Proc (Bayl Univ Med Cent)*, Vol. 23, Issue 4, Oct. 2010, p. 393-399; Yinjiao Ye & Kristina E. Ward, "The Depiction of Illness and Related Matters in Top-Ranked Primetime Network Medical Dramas in the United States: A Content Analysis," *Journal of Health Communication*, Vol. 15, Issue 5, 2010, p. 555-570; Gladys B. White, "Capturing the Ethics Education Value of Television Medical Dramas," *The American Journal of Bioethics*, Volume 8, Issue 12, 2008, p. 13-14; Matthew J. Czarny, Ruth R. Faden & Jeremy Sugarman, "Bioethics and Professionalism in Popular Television Medical Dramas," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol.36, Issue 4, 2010, p. 203-206

⁶ See for example: CW Bailey, "Coming out as Homophobic: Isaiah Washington and the Grey's Anatomy scandal," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 8(1), p. 1-21; Kuorikoski, N. (2010). "Anatomy of a Lesbian Relationship and Its Demise: The First Lesbian Relationship of the Medical Drama Grey's Anatomy," *Queers in American Popular Culture*, 2, 47; Kessler, K. (2011). "They Should Suffer Like the Rest of Us: Queer Equality in Narrative Mediocrity," *Cinema Journal*, 50(2), p. 139-144.

marriage, to end an unwanted pregnancy both in an unapologetic and very prudent way. Lastly, it seems rather clear that Cristina's decision has had ramifications within the show and has possibly had an impact on other plotlines.

Grey's Anatomy: Just Another American TV Show?

Grey's Anatomy is currently into its tenth season. It is a medical drama that focuses on the lives of surgical interns and residents as they become experienced doctors while trying to have personal lives. The show centers on the main character Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo) and her relationship with neurosurgeon Derek Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey). Cristina Yang is Meredith's Jewish and Asian best friend and she seems to fit the Asian "model minority" stereotype⁷. Indeed, although raised in Beverly Hills, she overcame dyslexia and graduated top of her class at Stanford University. She is by far the most gifted and promising surgeon in the hospital. She is driven, determined and intelligent. Such exceptional character traits are also linked to less formidable ones: Cristina often comes across as cold, aggressive and tactless. Although the show is a medical drama, it manages to avoid showing a woman going through with her decision to end a pregnancy until season 8.

The God Complex

Just like a great number of American TV shows, *Grey's Anatomy* is not a very religious one. It is made obvious right from the beginning that being doctors, most characters are not strong believers and even sometimes have a God complex as they think/hope that they have some sort of power over who gets to live or die. Most characters are superstitious to a certain extent as they have specific rituals before entering an operating room or favorite objects they need to have with them while operating, but they rarely talk about going to church or seem to have a lot of religious faith. Even when they talk about religion, they do so with a great deal of distance, as exemplified by Izzie's (Katherine Heigl) answer: "Because that's what Jesus would FREAKIN do!" to Alex's (Justin Chambers) question: "Why are you helping me after what I did?" (2.12). If Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington) argues that he would not be able to do his job if he did not have faith, there is also little doubt that he is in fact more "spiritual" than he is "religious"

⁷ For more information on that stereotype, see for example: Paul Wong, Chienping Faith Lai, Richard Nagasawa & Tieming Lin. "Asian Americans as a Model Minority: Self-Perception and Perceptions by Other Racial Groups." *Sociological Perspectives*. Vol. 41. No.1. p. 95-118. Available online: http://cgs.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/media/Wong_AsianAmericanModelMinority.pdf, last consulted January, 17th 2014.

and that his views could be considered as a poor substitute for real religious values by a deeply religious American: through the course of the three seasons in which he appears, the audience sees him engaging in pre-marital sex, lying to protect his own reputation and leaving a woman at the altar.

The “Permissive” Culture

In fact, *Grey’s Anatomy* could be considered as largely typical of the “anything goes” or “permissive” culture Christian activists and politicians hold responsible for the moral decay of the American nation⁸.

It almost seems that through the course of its ten seasons, *Grey’s Anatomy* methodically breaks with most religious taboos one by one. Adultery is a recurring theme. The first season revolves around the growing love story of Derek Shepherd and Meredith Grey but in the season finale, Meredith discovers that Derek is, in fact, married. Season 2 is centered around a love triangle as Derek Shepherd tries to decide whether he wants to give his relationship with Meredith a chance or try to rebuild his relationship with his estranged wife who cheated on him with his best friend. Later on in the show, Meredith finds out that the hospital’s chief surgeon was romantically involved with her own mother although *he* was married. George (T.R. Knight), another intern, married to Callie, cheats on his wife with one of his friends in season four. Little by little, homosexuality also became a major theme of the show. Callie (Sara Ramirez) turns out to be a lesbian and marries a woman named Arizona (Jessica Capshaw). They end up having a child with Mark Sloane (Eric Dane), Callie’s best male friend, and the three of them raise the baby until Mark’s death at the beginning of season 9.

If the general plots of *Grey’s Anatomy* seem to meticulously debunk all key aspects of what is dubbed the “traditional family,” it is also very much *unapologetic* about it. Words uttered by Doctor Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson), “You did a terrible thing, that doesn’t mean you are a terrible person” (8.18), seem to be the unofficial motto of the hospital. To a strongly religious person, such flexibility and *laissez-faire* in moral matters is no more than secular humanism and would be, in fact, just plain unacceptable.

⁸ These terms are often found in activist Christian’s literature. See for example the results of a “permissive” search on James Dobson’s website: <http://drjamesdobson.org/search-results?indexCatalogue=default&searchQuery=%22permissive%22&wordsMode=0>, on the Christian Coalition’s website: <http://www.cc.org/search/node/permissive>, and on Concerned Women for America’s website: <http://www.cwfa.org/?s=permissive>, all consulted December 12th, 2013.

The Traditional Plots on Abortion

Although one would have a hard time debunking Christian claims that *Grey's Anatomy* is the epitome of moral relativism on American TV, the show remained fairly conservative on matters of abortion for its first eight years. In fact, the two main occurrences of abortion before season 8 fit the general patterns of avoidance common to most American TV programs.

In one episode (4.13), Doctor Izzie Stevens is faced with a pregnant patient who wants to have an abortion. Izzie finds out that her patient is in fact HIV positive and wants the abortion to take place because she does not want to give birth to an HIV positive child. Izzie eventually convinces her patient that medicine has made great progress and that there is now a 99% chance that the baby will not be HIV positive at birth. Upon hearing this great piece of news, the patient sheds tears of relief and decides to keep her baby.

The main plot line dealing with abortion takes place in the first season of the show. Cristina finds out that she is pregnant with the child of her "sort of" ex-boyfriend Preston Burke: she decides not to tell him and makes an appointment with an abortion provider. When she talks to Meredith about it, she argues that she is much too young and too talented a surgeon to have a child. But just as the abortion seems like a done deal, Cristina loses consciousness while she is operating on a patient. It turns out that she was having an extra uterine pregnancy miscarriage. Therefore, even though she had taken all the necessary steps to go through with the procedure, her pregnancy was terminated by some kind of twist of fate and not by the decision she made⁹.

All in all, Cristina's pregnancy and loss of the baby take up three episodes of the first season. The only element that seemed to break with this general pattern of abortion plotlines on American TV was Cristina's resolve: contrary to most fictitious characters dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, she does not seem to falter even for a second. At no point does she seem to second guess herself and, although she clearly wishes this had not happened to her, she does not seem to consider the abortion procedure she is about to undergo as anything more than a formality.

A Groundbreaking Plotline: or When Cristina Goes through with the Abortion

This initial resolve probably explains the huge step taken seven years later, when history repeats itself and Cristina finds out she is

⁹ Shonda Rhimes, the creator of the show, came back on the making of that plotline in an interview: http://www.vulture.com/2011/09/shonda_rhimes_talks_about_grey.html, last accessed December 13th, 2013.

pregnant again. This time, however, she does get an abortion. Based on some reactions of viewers on the internet, it is quite clear that a number of people were not expecting this outcome¹⁰. This shocking decision is pictured both in an unashamed and a vigilant way in the show.

A Shocking Decision

Cristina's resolve not to have a child is probably not that much of a surprise to the audience. Even though she has meaningful relationships with people like Meredith Grey, she clearly has problems with intimacy. At the end of season 3, she is left at the altar by Preston Burke, who has become aware that even though she loves him, she does not want to get married. The fact that she "thinks" she can do it is not enough for him (3.25). This surprising turn of events (as most viewers probably thought that Cristina, not Burke, would get cold feet) both underlined Cristina's cold side and strengthened it by making her even more distrustful of others and herself. Concerning maternal instinct *per se*, viewers could infer that Cristina probably would experience issues with motherhood since her relationship with her own mother is deeply flawed. Cristina routinely complains that although her mother means well, she is deeply annoying to her. When she is about to get married to Preston (3.35), Cristina's mother first expresses pride to then hug her and add: "I always feared you were too emotionally stunted to settle down." (Plate 1)

Plate 1: *Grey's Anatomy*, 3.25

¹⁰ See for example: <http://tv.yahoo.com/news/four-reasons-cristina-yang-wont-abortion-greys-anatomy-194300711.html>, <http://abortionnews.info/article/Kevin-McKidd-Says-Grey-s-Anatomy--Has-Written-Cristina-Into-a-Box----and-He-s----/>, last consulted December 13th, 2013.

This awkward hug, as expressed by Cristina's side glance, has the double effect of underlining Cristina's difficulties in life, but also of highlighting her possible issues with motherhood: communication between herself and her mother seems impossible, it is a constant letdown.

This does not mean, however, that her decision was less of a shock. Cristina's decision to have an abortion is all the more distressing that her circumstances have changed since season 1. Indeed, she no longer is at the beginning of her intern years and has less to prove at work. No longer is she too young either: her best friend Meredith is now a mother herself, and so are her friends Callie and Arizona. Most importantly, her relationship with Preston Burke was shaky in season 1 as she barely knew him, there was no commitment and they had recently separated. In season 8, on the contrary, she is married to Owen (Kevin McKidd), the baby's father. Owen, himself *wants* a child. Considering the fact that she is very much in love with him and that she seems to have grown as an individual, there was always a chance that she would change her mind about children or that she would decide to have one if she ever found herself unexpectedly pregnant. But her resolve is from the very beginning unshakable, which is both understandable and very shocking: indeed, she is financially and emotionally stable and has no good reason not to have a child except for the fact that she does not *want* to. Her argument not to keep the baby is two-fold. She says that she cares about her job more than about having a family and adds that she quite simply does not want to be a mother: "I don't want one. I don't hate children, I respect children, I think they should have parents who want them" (7.22). She later adds that there is no compromise possible on the matter of motherhood: "This isn't pizza *vs* Thai, you can't give a little with a baby. I AM SAYING NO." (7.22). She briefly tackles the topic of the beginning of life but clearly does so in a derogatory way as she tells her husband: "Are you getting all lif-ey on me? (...) You tell me when life begins, I can't wait to hear this one." (7.22)

Perpetuating the Gag-Rule in Order to Break it

Shonda Rhimes, the creator of the show, and herself a *Planned Parenthood* board member, was asked quite a lot of questions on this story line¹¹. She conceded that the screenwriters argued for several months over the course to take:

¹¹ Sources: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/greys-anatomys-shonda-rhimes-cristina-owen-280434>, http://www.vulture.com/2011/09/shonda_rhimes_talks_about_grey.html, <http://www.sandraohnews.com/2011/07/shonda-rhimes-on-cristinas-pregnancy.html>, last consulted December 13th, 2013

For Cristina to suddenly [change her mind and become a mother] — or, you know, there was a way to do it. We argued about it all summer long, actually. There was a way to do it, but the portrayal of motherhood that would have followed would have been so painful to watch that I don't think any of us wanted to sustain¹².

She underlined in numerous interviews that she did not ask for anybody's permission when they decided to go through with the abortion¹³. There is no denying the fact, however, that this was all done with a great deal of caution. In fact, if *Grey's Anatomy* breaks the taboo of abortion, it does so by making silence and lack of communication center-pieces of the Cristina-Owen plotlines: the main proof that something major has happened is that nobody talks about it. Indeed, the actual scene of the abortion takes place at the end of the first episode of season eight. After numerous arguments, Owen decides to be with Cristina during the procedure. Before it begins, Cristina's doctor asks her if she is absolutely sure that she wants an abortion. She does not reply vocally but shuts her eyes and nods her head. She then motions to take the hand of Owen, who up until the last second seems to look hopeful that she will change her mind, and then looks somewhat disappointed by her decision but also accepting and supportive. Although that is all the audience gets to see, there is little doubt that Cristina goes through with the procedure.

The consequences of Cristina's decision will take a long time to appear clearly, but they will, nevertheless, become gigantic when they do. Although it is rapidly made clear that Cristina and Owen no longer know how to interact and communicate with one another after the abortion, they are going to completely avoid talking about it for ten episodes. The only time Cristina's decision is alluded to between episodes 2 and 12 is in the following exchange:

MEREDITH. You have to talk about it because clearly you can't talk about anything. You two are like bad roommates.

CRISTINA. How? How do I bring it up? Does he even want me to bring it up? And what is there to talk about? Because it's done... I can't undo it... It's done.

MEREDITH. Yeah, but it's not.

The word *abortion* is not mentioned once, it is just referred to by the pronoun "it." The abortion has become the elephant in the room. This atmosphere of secrecy also makes it quite clear that this decision will have long lasting consequences on Cristina and Owen's relationship.

¹² Source: http://www.vulture.com/2011/09/shonda_rhimes_talks_about_grey.html, last consulted December 13th, 2013

¹³ *Ibid.*

Breaking the Silence: the Near Absence of Religious Perspective on Cristina's Decision

The depth of Cristina and Owen's marital problems is unveiled at the end of the twelfth episode of season 8. It is worth noting, however, that Cristina will never be condemned on religious grounds. At the end of a complicated and emotional episode, Owen and Cristina have a really mean argument which starts off as unrelated to abortion and gradually becomes pervaded by the issue:

OWEN. You do what works for you. You don't care. [...]

CRISTINA. It was one surgery.

OWEN. It was NOT one surgery. Do you hear me? This was every choice we made in the last... This was not the life I had envisioned for myself, okay? This was NOT one surgery.

CRISTINA. It all comes back to this?

OWEN. Yeah. Crazy, right? That I would ever bring it up again.

CRISTINA. Yes, okay, yes, YES, okay. It was a horrible situation, but it's over. It is too much to ask that we just try and forget it?

OWEN (shouting). *You killed our baby!* You don't ever forget that.

Once again the word "abortion" is not uttered. But the taboo is reduced to pieces as Owen speaks from his heart and shouts "You killed our baby!" It is typically the kind of accusation that a pro-life and religious person would make, as it directly equates having an abortion with committing murder. However the fact that Owen is the one saying that sentence tends to strip the accusation of its religious overtone. Because he was the baby's father, and because he wanted to keep that baby, his words do not have the same impact such an accusation would have had from someone more neutral: Owen probably is pro-choice himself, but he feels that *this* abortion was unfair and resulted in killing *his* baby¹⁴. Thus, his reaction is that of a wounded man, not that of a strong abortion opponent: although he is voicing the concerns of religious people, he is not doing so as a religious person.

It is important to note that this argument takes place during a party and that every single one of the couple's coworkers gets to hear the conversation. Hence, this makes Cristina's decision fall into the realm of public knowledge and has the added effect of shaming and humiliating her. By hearing Owen's cry: "You killed our baby!," the

¹⁴ The fact that Owen is pro-choice is never clearly stated as such but is rather obvious to the audience. Cristina's sarcastic question "Are you getting all lif-ey on me?" (8.1-2) at the beginning of the season seems to imply that she knows he is a pro-choice person at heart.

other characters of the show are given to hear the perspective of a hurt, would-be father and are thus prompted to think that since Owen was not fully on board with the abortion plan, Cristina did, in fact, *kill* their baby. Surprisingly enough, none of the people present that night will ever comment on what happened. In fact, aside from the struggles Cristina will have to face to save her marriage, she does not have to answer to any accusation or remarks whatsoever: her abortion, though made *public*, remains a *private* issue.

Consequences of the Abortion: Reintroducing the Christian Perspective?

Even though Cristina will never be punished on religious grounds, this does not mean that a religious perspective on abortion is not introduced within the show at a later point.

An Earthly Punishment

Compared to other characters, Cristina does not seem to face any form of divine retribution. Indeed, the tragic ending of season 5, which shows George O'Malley dying after being hit by a bus and Izzie being resuscitated by her fellow surgeons after dying because of brain tumors, could be seen as divine punishment for the fact that they had an affair in season 4 while George was still married to Callie (4.7). A final scene in the last episode of season 5 shows George and Izzie, who are in fact flat-lining, taking together a metaphorical elevator and thus seems to imply that their fates are entwined, which supports the theory that they are victims of a form of divine wrath. Although Cristina will experience some form of punishment, it will not appear to have been orchestrated by divine instances. Indeed, the rest of season 8 is devoted to her marital problems with Owen, who eventually cheats on her, which leads them to getting a divorce. During season 9, they resume their relationship, but Cristina then breaks up with him as she understands that he wants a child, and that he will be frustrated if they stay together. In fact, her abortion does not come cheap, and the price she has to pay is her marriage. She thus experiences both heartbreak and social stigma, but God himself does not seem to punish her and she is not condemned on religious grounds.

Presenting the Different Views of the World

Shonda Rhimes often underlines that her ultimate goal is to create TV shows that are as varied as life itself and present the variety of

different points of views that people can have on a number of issues¹⁵. One can argue that the religious dimension of the abortion decision is reintroduced within the show through the character of April Kepner (Sarah Drew), and that this was in part done to provide the audience with an alternative vision of unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

April Kepner's character takes a drastically Christian turn at the end of season 8. At this point, Cristina and Owen's relationship is at its lowest: they do not even talk to one another anymore. Now, not only do the viewers get to see the actual consequences of Cristina's decision, but, thanks to April's character, they will also be offered an alternative worldview.

April Kepner is a somewhat "new" character, as she arrives at the hospital at the beginning of season six. For a long time, viewers know very little about her, except for the fact that she is annoying and that very few people like her. In the fourth episode of season 7, April admits to being a 28-year-old virgin, simply stating that she has been waiting for the right person and that men do not usually like her. She closes the subject by saying "I am a virgin, yes. But it's not something that I talk about and we all have things we don't talk about." (7.4). At that point, she does not make the slightest allusion to being a Christian.

In the eighth episode of season 7, April almost loses her virginity to Alex Karev. He asks her if she wants to stop and she replies that she does not. Alex and April end up not having sex because she does remind him that this is going to be her first time and asks him to go slower. At this point, he screams at her that he will not hold her "virgin hand" through it because she is a grown woman and should act accordingly. He then exits the room, leaving April in shock. Almost two years later, she ends up losing her virginity to one of her long term friends and co-workers, Jackson Avery (Jesse Williams): it is a spur of the moment decision, as the two of them have not been dating (8.21). The next day, she tells Avery that she regrets what she has done: "I was a virgin because I love Jesus. And now Jesus hates me" (8.21). This is the first time that April clearly states that she was a virgin because of religious reasons.

Although it has been established throughout the show that her relationship with Avery is based on mutual affection and respect, which was not the case with Alex, the way she ends up losing her virginity clearly casts a new light on her first experience. With the religious framework that is introduced at the end of season 8, the audience necessarily casts fresh eyes on her earlier readiness to have sex with Alex Karev. Did she love Jesus then? Why was that never mentioned? It raises questions about the screenwriters' creative choices and the consistency of April's character. It is unclear whether or not the

¹⁵ Source: <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/entertainment/post/2011/09/greys-anatomy-abortion-reaction-quiet/1#.UqzKzuJjUQo>, last consulted December 13th, 2013.

screenwriters had intended for her to be a religious character from the start: did they strategically decide to delay that revelation until after the loss of her virginity or had they not thought of the possibility of her being a religious character until that point?

According to some Christian bloggers, April's religiosity is not very believable¹⁶. Moreover, someone who is as religious as April appears to be once she has admitted to being a Christian not only would have a hard time concealing her faith for so long, but would also proudly wear it upon her sleeve from the beginning. Thus, it seems that her religiosity was at some point added to the general plot or at least that it had not been actively prepared since the very arrival of April in the show. This addition to the plot could be linked to Cristina's abortion and the need to provide a counter-example.

Presenting an Alternative to Abortion

April's religiosity serves several purposes. The most obvious purpose is that it represents an obstacle to the pursuing of her relationship with Avery and thus some "Will they? Won't they?" cliffhangers for the audience. After the initial loss of her virginity, April decides to re-virginize, which as she says "involves a lot of prayer" so she can "accept God's forgiveness and get a do-over"(9.3). However, she then again gives in to temptation and has intercourse with Avery. The religious coloration of Jackson and April's love plot makes it more exciting because it adds a sinful dimension to it.

However, April's religious beliefs also allow for April and Jackson to become the exact opposite of Cristina and Owen. April has a pregnancy scare at a point when the state of Avery and April's relationship is still uncertain (9.7). Even though Avery has declared that he has feelings for April, their relationship is still new and fairly complicated. When April tells Avery that she might be pregnant, Avery thinks very little before telling her that if she is, in fact, pregnant, he will marry her, they will have kids, and they will be insanely happy: "We will get married, have an awesome kid, be awesome parents, I'm in." This whole exchange seems to be the exact counterpart to the conversations Cristina and Owen had at the end of season 7 and at the beginning of season 8, when Cristina told her husband that she wanted an abortion and he begged her to reconsider. Here, April agrees to Avery's proposal, only to find out that she is not pregnant. It is quite clear that this scene has the double effect of both clarifying Avery's feelings for April as well as presenting a viable alternative to Cristina and Owen's relationship and decision within the show. Abortion was Cristina's decision, and it was valid. But April would have kept the baby

¹⁶ Sources: <http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/doinglifetogether/2012/04/greys-anatomy-gets-christianity-wrong-again.html>, last consulted December 13th, 2013.

because her religious beliefs simply did not allow her to do anything else, and this would have been valid as well.

What Does the Abortion Plotline in *Grey's Anatomy* Tell us about the State of Abortion and Religion in America?

As far as the audience of the show was concerned, results were mixed. If Shonda Rhimes and a number of magazines argue that Cristina's decision did not prompt much reaction, there is, however, evidence to the contrary on the internet, since a "Cristina yang + abortion" search prompts more than 10 000 hits. Social networking sites such as Facebook also make it clear that some people decided to stop watching the show altogether because of the abortion plotline¹⁷.

In 2013, Sandra Oh, who plays Cristina Yang, announced that she would leave the show at the end of season 10. Her decision was widely covered and gave critics an opportunity to revisit the issue of the relevance of Cristina Yang's character within the American television landscape. Cristina is a unique TV show female character as she is one of the brightest, most independent and most gifted, the downside being that she often seems ruthless and cold-hearted. It is quite clear that her decision to have an abortion and to actually go through with it qualify as milestones in American TV history and that her decision is both shocking and understandable as it is difficult to picture her as a nurturing and effusive person. In a paradoxical way, Cristina unapologetically put an end to the abortion taboo on American TV show but also tended to convey the message that abortion is a decision made by ruthless women, which is not necessarily very encouraging for everyday women faced with such a decision. In any case, though not unprecedented, the decision to have her go ahead with an abortion was both unexpected and very bold, and it was only the second time in American TV show history that a financially secure character had an abortion¹⁸. There is no doubt that depending on one's views, *Grey's Anatomy* either spreads a message of inclusiveness, acceptance and freedom of choice or of unacceptable selfishness and permissiveness.

Cristina's abortion took place in 2011, and yet, two years later, her decision still has consequences. As far as *Grey's Anatomy* is concerned, Cristina and Owen still have not overcome their differences and it seems more and more likely that they will not. Moreover, at this point it seems that Owen will be able to have a healthy relationship with

¹⁷ Sources: <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/entertainment/post/2011/09/greys-anatomy-abortion-reaction-quiet/1#.UlhuXhBdwfo>, <http://www.jillstanek.com/2012/01/greys-anatomy-the-abortion-that-haunts/>, last consulted October 2013.

¹⁸ The only other case was in the TV show *Maude*, in 1972.

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-11-13/features/9204130017_1_mothers-as-donna-reed-messy-family-life-maude-findlay, last consulted December 13th, 2013.

another woman, while Cristina will remain alone. There is also evidence that the breaking of the taboo of abortion may have inspired other shows to do the same. To give only one example, the new Netflix show *Orange is the New Black*, which deals with the everyday lives of incarcerated American women, features an episode in which one of the main characters has her 5th abortion, feels humiliated by a nurse and so kills her before becoming a hero to pro-life activists.

Even though it may seem that abortion is becoming more and more common on American TV, this does not necessarily mean that abortion is becoming more acceptable within American society: it could also only be a symptom of the way TV series seem to be constantly looking to tackle shocking topics and a consequence of the fact that abortion is deemed a divisive enough issue to allow for such shock to take place, thus prompting the audience to watch.

The author

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