

Intimations of Romance Pedagogy from Recollections of Early Childhood

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It's the summer of 1969, and my father is singing a love song.

I am five, living in the white, two-story Dean's House at the edge of the Bard College campus. A mint patch scents the back yard where my mother is weeding in a blue Berkeley sweatshirt; just past the yard is the nursery school that I have just grown out of. A ninety-minute drive away, Max Yasgur's farm braces for the Woodstock festival, but my father's console stereo does not play rock and roll. The family record collection consists of souvenirs of the folk revival, the soundtracks of *Camelot* and *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, and a few LPs of lush pop hits like the songs of Burt Bacharach and Hal David.

It's one of those Bacharach / David numbers that my father breaks into now.

"What's it all about, Alfie?" he smiles, relishing the pause.

Is it just for the moment we live?

What's it all about, when you sort it out, Alfie?

Are we meant to take more than we give,

Or are we meant to be kind?

Who Alfie was, I never wondered—nor have I, all these years later, seen the film that gives the song its name. ("A quite nasty Michael Caine comedy," Ann Powers calls it, "about a lothario who lays waste to the women of Swinging London" [426].) As I tell my students, the song may be inspired by the movie, but it does not depend on our knowing anything about Alfie as an addressee, and to make that contextual move may be an evasion of the song's address to us. "Hearing the singer pose the big questions that haven't yet occurred to Alfie forces the listener in effect to become Alfie for a few minutes," Serene Dominic explains, and for that time, "to contemplate issues of kindness, cruelty and higher beliefs" (161). Certainly that was my childhood response: my brother and I were used to our father posing us questions about politics or ethics as we drove home from Hebrew school, or off to the

bowling alley, or simply around, on a Sunday drive in his musty Karmann Ghia. In any case, it's a savvy, pedagogical lyric—one reason it feels so natural, perhaps, for me to teach it.

Every year, I feature "Alfie" in a class on "Love: Songs and Stories." From term to term, it's either an English 101 class or a World Lit version in our Honors program, but no matter the context, it's an introduction to the art and pleasure of close reading. I had my first lessons in these before I learned to read at all. My father pointed out wordplay and clever language wherever he found it, from headlines and billboards and advertisements to the songs he'd sing. Showtunes were a mother lode of wit and grown-up knowledge: thank you, Lerner and Lowe, for my chance to learn what it meant to dish up Sir Lancelot "*en-brochette*" and whose face it was that launched a thousand ships. When my father sang "Alfie," the quirk of an eyebrow told me to listen closely, and I do the same as I ask my students to consider the second verse:

And if only fools are kind, Alfie,
Then I guess it is wise to be cruel.
And if life belongs only to the strong, Alfie,
What will you lend on an old golden rule?

Most of my students, alas, come out of high school trained to ask and answer only bland, reductive questions, like "What is the tone of this poem?" (as if any text stuck with just one). I ask them, instead, to notice things like the shapeliness of those if / then constructions, the self-deprecating "I guess" that is the singer's first self-reference (do we really believe it?), and the sudden affront of "to be cruel." (My memory always revises that to a kindly "it is wise to be a fool," but the actual line goes for shock, not paradox.) Follow-up questions arise: e.g., do we all know what the "golden rule" is, or what it means to "lend on" something, whether credit or collateral? Some do, some don't, but all of my students quickly realize that the character singing this song *must* know these things: a useful clue about who we'd need to imagine ourselves to be, as we pivot from taking ourselves to be the Alfie-addressee to thinking of ourselves as the person singing, and the song as a character study.

The characters who sing and speak in lyrics and lyric poems "change their moods and minds," I tell my students. That's a working assumption, not a gospel truth, but listening to "Alfie" you can hear those changes in action. *Where* they happen is marked by changes in the music, but *how* they happen varies from performance to performance. Describing the original "Alfie," by British singer Cilla Black, musicologist Allan F. Moore tracks the changes this way:

Black's persona is at first rather cowed by this Alfie, a man who holds it 'wise to be cruel', a position that corresponds to the way she pronounces his name, with the stress always on the first syllable, as if she were pleading with him to come to an accommodation. However, after a bridge that threatens to challenge the harmonic world of the opening, her enquiries become an assertion: 'I believe in love'. A chromatic bass line moves us into what is formally a new area – what started as the third verse veers off somewhere new – an area where she insists that 'without true love we just exist, Alfie', stressing for the first time the last syllable of his name. (250-51)

The move here is foundational to close reading: a shift in the form of the song (the placement of stress on a syllable, a change in the setting, etc.) corresponds to a shift in moods, ideas, language use (say, from questions to assertions). Make a different decision about the form, whether in terms of the instrumentation, the tempo, or the vocal performance style, and the content will shift in response. Joss Stone's gospel-inflected "Alfie" suggests we take its religious references literally, from the "golden rule" in verse two to the later mention of "heaven above." Patricia Barber's jazz-trio version takes things more lightly. When she sings "I believe in a heaven above, Alfie," the pensive ballad slips into a bossa nova groove, as though belief in love were simply more *fun* than disbelief, a blessed assurance that's secular, rather than sacred. (Poised Dionne Warwick was my father's favorite. She was never cowed.)

When teaching the popular culture of love, it can be hard to keep students focused on close reading. It's not that they don't *want* to treat a song like "Alfie" as a character study or a little contraption, a machine made out of notes and words, but they're most excited to read it as a piece of cultural commentary. I know the feeling: the end of "Alfie" was my introduction to the idea that love was a *sine qua non* of the good life. "As sure as I believe there's a heaven above, Alfie," the song concludes,

I know there's something much more,
Something even non-believers can believe in.

I believe in love, Alfie.
Without true love we just exist, Alfie.
Until you find the love you've missed, you're nothing, Alfie.

When you walk, let your heart lead the way
And you'll find love any day, Alfie.

There's a lot to be done with these lines from contraption and character perspectives: the little crescendo of address in that second tercet (the first time we've heard three Alfies in a row, each with a slightly different melody, each paired with the noun "love"); the way the singer's tentative questions and "I guess" return as grand, comparative statements ("As sure as I *believe* X, Alfie, I *know* Y") and as articles of faith. But oh, the conversations that these lines invite us to join in! There's one about romantic love as a secular or substitute religion, so that "Alfie" proves a perfect set-up for teaching Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." There's another, more pressing, about how romantic love functions as a hegemonic social norm, enforced with casual, brutal force in that penultimate stanza. (Heard at the wrong time, Dominic notes, that bit about how without love "you're nothing, Alfie" can be "devastating to one's psyche" [161].) A time-capsule from the cusp of the 1960s sexual revolution, "Alfie" invites us to talk about sex panics, generational fears, and the ways that popular culture can both capture and transcend its cultural moment.

As my students happily argue whether the "love" extolled at the end needs to be romantic love, or whether we can take it more broadly, I think about my father. He was one of those non-believers that the lyric mentions, at least religiously speaking, but songs like "Alfie," "September Song," and "It Never Entered My Mind" were the watchwords of an erotic faith he subscribed to and taught me to treasure. I think he'd be happy that I'm teaching them, and I suspect he'd recognize the ways.

Works Cited

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