

# Phantom Thread

## I Can Stand Endlessly

The embarrassing confession must be made that at first, it was unclear to this writer why this film would deserve a second thought. Within hours, however, recollections from art, cinema and literary history produced the most intense *déjà vu*. Over the next several weeks, the film came to resonate with many such prototypes and archetypes, revealing many of its most profound aspects residing beneath superficial humor and triviality.

The essay on *Like Water for Chocolate* discusses the nature of the love potion in the various versions of the story of Tristan and Isolde. For Gottfried von Strassburg, the same concoction can ambivalently function as either a poison or an aphrodisiac. In Paul Thomas Anderson's film, Alma feeds Reynolds a toxin that both sickens him and ultimately facilitates a mutually satisfying relationship. Reynolds complains that "it hurts all over." Explaining the troubadour tradition of love, Joseph Campbell observes that Gottfried's lovers initially cannot decide if they are experiencing love or seasickness. This aspect of love, Campbell continues, is the sickness that doctors cannot cure. As Campbell puts it, "Unless you've got it in the gut and can hardly bear it, it hasn't happened." Wagner's Tristan unknowingly accepts a love potion that he expects will be lethal. Even if Reynolds trusts that he will survive Alma's mushrooms, he asks for the doctor "just in case." Importantly, Alma's motives are reconciliatory. By contrast, the mushrooms in William Oldroyd's *Lady Macbeth* are used in the service of murder and adultery. When the mushrooms allow Reynold to envision his mother, the phantom goes unseen by Alma, as does the ghost of Mama Elena by Chenchu in *Like Water for Chocolate*. Reynolds admits to having his mother in mind a great deal lately, predisposing him to react to the mushrooms as he does. And Cyril has used the phrase "make her a ghost" when discussing Alma. Helping to disguise Alma's intentions, Jonny Greenwood provides a red-herring dirge leading into the second mushroom incident (with its ominously larger dose than before), though she always speaks of Reynolds in the present tense in the episodic framing device. The plot starts to parallel the alleged exchange between Lady Nancy Astor and Winston Churchill in which she said, "Winston, if you were my husband, I'd poison your tea," to which he replied, "Nancy, if I were your husband I'd drink it." (Rachel Weisz portrays an ancestor of Winston Churchill in *The Favourite* of Yorgos Lanthimos, a film playfully said by some to be a prequel to *Phantom Thread*.) Ultimate resolution takes the form of a collaborative version of Munchausen syndrome by proxy. It was this correlation with the Tristan story that first inspired this writer to reconsider this film in detail. Scrutiny was abundantly rewarded, demonstrating yet again that you can sew almost anything into a film: Secrets, things that only a few people will know are there.

Hints of Alma's self-assurance are sprinkled throughout the film. The "hungry boy" note that she hands to Reynolds at their first meeting is written in advance of his dinner invitation, recalling Rosina's prewritten letter in *The Barber of Seville*. (Alma all but cues the invitation itself with her "And now?") Her note is written on paper that has the preprinted number 22, which, under the right conditions, represents a sure bet when playing roulette at Rick's in *Casablanca*. (She similarly prompts him at another meal later by flirtatiously saying, "Have you

had enough to eat?" It is as if she is metaphorically asking, "Have you tried 22 tonight?" Retrospectively, asking Reynolds if he would like coffee or tea could accord with the title of Donald Bain's 1967 novel *Coffee, Tea or Me?*) On their first dinner date, she starts to open the car door for herself before letting him do it. Later, she not only opens her own car door, but offers to drive. (As when the title character of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* relinquishes control by letting his horse's reins go slack, Reynolds acquiesces. And by this time, she has already behaved as if she "road a horse.") She warns him that he would lose a staring contest, of which they will have several. (Generically, the staring contests are "pregnant" pauses, for which the perambulator scene is the payoff.) Alma may look vulnerable while being measured in her underwear. But she is also not unlike Condwiramurs (literally the guide of love) in Wolfram's *Parzival*, "dressed for war" in her transparent nightgown. (In a way, the undressing of Alma begins all the way back when Reynolds removes her lipstick, while simultaneously checking her embouchure.) When she says, "Whatever you do, do it carefully," it first seems to be a self-defensive request for solicitude. Retrospectively, it can also be taken as a warning to Reynolds to protect himself, anticipating Cyril's "Don't pick a fight with me." (It is also essentially the same message sent to Princess Mona when Alma says, "I live here.") "No one can stand as long as I can," Alma says, with *stand* being interpretable in the sense of *tolerate* (and possibly eternally, as addressed below). Rather than being "fashionable and chic," Reynolds is an aesthetic conservative, and would thus be said to be a follower of "the right-hand path." He implicitly admits this in the "taste" scene by using the word "right" five times in quick succession. (In this sequence, he says, "It's right because it's right." This writer read, but could not confirm, a claim that Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Thing* contains the line: "It's better because it's better.") And his house is dominated by a suitably right-handed staircase. Followers of the left-hand path, such as Alma, are the ones who are "looking for trouble." She does not let Cyril dissuade her from making dinner for Reynolds, and then pays him back for his earlier "stop" with one of her own. Cyril takes tea to Reynolds in his room and shuts the door, leaving Alma outside. Later, Alma similarly shuts the same door on Cyril. Reynolds and Alma similarly trade door-slamming dining room exits. After agreeing to marry Reynolds, she makes a reciprocal proposal. Despite having "no breasts," Alma is nonetheless capable of tit for tat. (Nevertheless, note that the proposal scene begins with the wedding gown for the Belgian princess in view. When Reynolds proposes, Alma waits until the dress is out of frame before accepting. "That dress doesn't belong here," Alma has already said, referring to Barbara's. Alma can now be confident that the princess, via metonymy, is "out of the picture.") With the talk of Rubio selling visas during the war (possibly like Ugarte in *Casablanca*), Alma is already uncomfortable about Reynolds being associated with scandal, and it is she who inspires Reynolds to take back his dress from Barbara. (Someone tweeted that Alma, probably because of her reaction at the press conference, is "obviously" a Jewish refugee. It is obvious that she could be, but she need not be.) Alma ends up doing it as Reynolds is literally "left holding the bag." Instead of agitated anxiety, she displays (almost flaunts) an unconcerned serenity as he toys with her during the slow and deliberate process of starting his omelet. (He was fairly warned against a staring contest. Note however the vaguely threatening way he points his fork at Alma. This could even be a diminutive allusion to infernal pitchforks and a warning about damnation.) Displaying the opposite side of her character, she recalls Wagner's Kundry when she says, "Let me serve you." (She then recalls Parsifal, Wagner's "guileless fool," by saying that her behavior is like that of a "fool.") Alma opens the film speaking of what Reynolds "desires most in return." Her greatest desire is to have him return her love, and she will not give up until she gets reciprocity. Alma is met with silence from Reynolds

the first time she says to him, "I love you," but she persists. The second time, he responds but not in kind, yet Alma continues her investment. The reversal comes when Reynolds is inspired to propose and says it first, as he does near the end as he is becoming sick again. Alma's perseverance echoes examples in Arthurian romances beyond those already mentioned. The loyalty of a rejected woman saves her relationship in *Érec* by Chrétien de Troyes. And in his *Lancelot*, patience is what is required to survive the trial of the Perilous Bed. As when Wolfram's Orgeluse marries Gawain, Alma becomes the first wife of a man with a history of "many beautiful women."

When choosing a jam, Reynolds rejects strawberry, a fruit that can represent humility and modesty. Alma suggests raspberry, having already blushed so that her skin had almost matched her raspberry uniform. It is as if she is already influencing his choices regarding color. When planning his first dress for her, he sets aside a green swatch "for another time" and opts for a hue similar to that of her waitress uniform, as if wanting to preserve the memory of that first meeting when she had declared herself as already being (literally) on his wavelength. (This is after he tells her that her green-eyed mother should always be kept with her.) Their initial affinity may be reflected in the similarly colored socks that Reynolds dons in an early sequence. (Also note the color of his car.) When Countess Henrietta Harding (whom Reynolds likes) tries on her new dress (reportedly designed by Daniel Day-Lewis himself), compare its darker portion to the curtains behind her. He dresses her in "his" colors, which hover in the vicinity of orchid, fuchsia and plum. When Princess Mona arrives in plum, it is all the more reason for Alma to see her as a rival. Though Alma wears green as Reynolds begins telling her about his rescued lace, the dress that he makes with it yanks her back to the other side of color spectrum. When Alma is favorably disposed toward Reynolds and has the option (first date, surprise dinner, mountain hike), she often dresses herself in amorous red. (Reynolds facilitates this by having Alma model the red #20 dress in the fashion show.) Taken together with the film's title, this recalls the ball of red thread given by Ariadne to Theseus that allows him to find his way out of the labyrinth. Reynolds will similarly benefit from Alma's guidance. Disguising her true intentions, Alma ominously wears contrary green when preparing the omelet.

Comically, Reynolds recalls the sensitivity of John Abbott's Frederick Fairlie in Peter Godfrey's 1948 *The Woman in White*, and sometimes evokes M. Gustave in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* in the way they both cater to their female clientele and in their slightly surprising profanity. Reynolds expresses the same "f\*\*\*ing" disdain for *chic* as M. Gustave does for Lutz. When Reynolds is warned of a possible invitation from Barbara Rose, he responds with a question that recalls M. Gustave's "How is that supposed to make me feel?" At the end of the asparagus debacle, Reynolds verges on assailing Alma with the kind of xenophobic rant inflicted on Zero by M. Gustave. (Lady Baltimore goes a bit further along those lines.) Reynolds and Alma honeymoon in an alpine setting that recalls the Gabelmeister's Peak sequence in that earlier film. (It could equally well recall the timelessness of the "eternal snow" in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.) Ralph Fiennes territory is also approached when Reynolds once or twice seems to channel Count Almásy in *The English Patient*, a film that contains a phrase appropriate to *Phantom Thread*: "The patient and Hardy." (One such Almásy moment is when he says, "my . . . sour heart," which may be the counterpart of Oscar Peterson's "My Foolish Heart" heard in association with Henrietta.) Also, after Cyril is informed about Reynolds falling ill, Margaret Schlegel from *Howards Ends* needs to drop in and say, "You are being remarkably obtuse. Are you doing it on purpose?" Keeping another Emma Thompson role in mind, there are echoes of

*Much Ado About Nothing* when, in the exchange about Alma's taste, Reynolds must "end with a jade's trick," as well as in the little joke about the distinction between marrying people to each other and being married to another person, and also when a self-described "confirmed bachelor" marries. (When Reynolds claims to be "incurable" in this respect, Alma may take it as a challenge.) And keeping with *Howards Ends*, Tibby in that film is like Reynolds in that both are said to have difficulty recovering from a bad breakfast. Tibby also offers Leonard "China tea," which could apply to the "Lapsang" ordered by Reynolds. Reynolds poses questions about porridge and cream to "Julie," which is also the name of Tibby's aunt.

To be married is to be "settled in life." Before he is married, Reynolds speaks of an "unsettled feeling." He calls the feeling as "just butterflies." Perhaps his muses could be described as Madame Butterflies: mere disposable lovers to be discarded at will. Alma says that he must "settle down" and finally speaks of a future in which everything is "settled." (The reader will recall that the idea of "settling" is also to be found in the essay on *Certain Women*.) She hopes he is not strong for her, and then sees to it that he is not. During the scene in which her measurements are taken, the analog/digital distinction is not lost on Alma, who smiles while wearing garments or analogs thereof, but wears a slightly pained expression as she is being reduced to a series of numbers. (The myth of Osiris, to be revisited below, furnishes another reason for apprehension. Osiris has *his* measurements taken as part of a plot to murder him.) When Reynolds refers to Cyril as, "My old so-and-so," it can easily be interpreted as "sew-and-sew." Extending the pun, Reynolds could be said to be his mother's "young sew-and-sweat-and-sew."

Alma having "a little belly" will become congruent with the symbolism displayed in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, housed at The National Gallery about 2 kilometers south of the Fitzroy Square location of "the House of Woodcock." That painting, to be referenced again below, also includes a dog, a traditional symbol of fidelity. When Reynolds first brings Alma to his country house she is greeted by dogs, and a book on that topic is later seen on a kitchen shelf. He may participate in this symbolism himself when he remembers "barking" at Dr. Hardy. On a radio program, reference is made to a "little terrier of a man." In accord with the imperative given ("Look at the book in the kitchen."), it is noted that along with the book about dogs (and one on birds' eggs and of course the one on mushrooms), there is one about cacti. This brings to mind the word *sabra* applied to native Israelis, referring to a fruit with rough, prickly skin concealing a soft, sweet interior. This description could ultimately apply to all three of the main characters. Reynolds asks an assistant named Amber to adjust a dress that has trim the color of which could be called amber. When Biddy first enters her workspace, she seems to take care when stepping over the dolly track. When Reynolds tells Alma not to move too much immediately after they have spent the night together, it could almost be taken in a sexual context, as was a similar statement in *Out of Africa*. Cyril and Alma exchange smiles once Alma gets with the program of "walking on eggshells" at breakfast. At various times Alma says that she thinks Reynolds is only acting strong and that she knows that he is not so tough, attributing to him a sort of cowardice that might be metaphorically reflected in her description of a mushroom that is white on top and yellow underneath. Reynolds reserves the right to be fussy but scolds Alma for it. By stumbling, Alma makes excess dining room noise in her very first shot. (Fortunately, her tray is empty at this point, unlike the poor fellow who trips early in Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*.) Her odd manner of eating is seen during her first dinner date with Reynolds. He is not put off by these things initially. His later annoyance with them is thus an

acquired distaste. By contrast, Alma chastises Reynolds for playing a game during her surprise meal, but at the end, when claiming to see the future, she speaks approvingly of "playing games."

Also, amusingly, at the mention of the Chelsea Arts Club Ball by Dr. Hardy, the idea is delicately underscored, appropriately, by *A Ball* from the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Hector Berlioz, the movement that depicts a scenario similar to what Reynolds will experience as the old year gives way to the new. This is a bit subtler than the musical Wagner joke in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. (Though not used in the film, a "phantom thread" is also said to run through Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, which thus might have provided another apt musical reference.) The film also parallels the Berlioz work in other ways. The symphony is about an artist who poisons himself with opium. Reynolds consumes his final mushroom meal voluntary. The first movement is titled "Reveries-Passions." Reynolds sees a vision of his mother and has a great "love" for his work. This movement ends with the protagonist experiencing the consolation of religion. The film's trailer suggests a deleted scene with Reynolds sitting in a church. The symphony's third movement is titled "Scene in the country." Cyril suggests that Reynolds "go to the country." The fourth movement is titled "March to the scaffold." Reynolds asks, "Are you here to kill me?" The final movement involves funerary imagery. Reynolds might think he is "going to die" before Alma assures him otherwise, as she also says that he "might wish" that he would. The work's originally scoring included parts for ophicleides, which is Greek for "serpent with keys." This (very indirectly) connects with Cyril's "Frog with a lid" comment (see below).

Sometimes there seems to be diegetic and nondiegetic music occurring simultaneously, as in the moments during which Reynolds decides to retrieve the dress from Barbara Rose and later when he arrives at the New Year celebration. Jonny Greenwood also provides a growling bass effect that leads into an episode of gastrointestinal distress. (A similar unearthly effect is used to start the film before quickly switching into Nelson Riddle mode, Anderson having suggested Riddle to Greenwood as a possible inspiration.) The soundtrack also features the music of both Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy, each of whom, in turn, was in love with the same woman: Emma Bardac. At one point, Dr. Hardy is subtly suggested as a potential rival for Alma's affections. After the Debussy quartet is heard, Greenwood uses similar pizzicato figures in his own music for the Barbara Rose episode. And his use of the cimbalom vaguely recalls *The Third Man*. When Reynolds begins his omelet, time would seem to stop in one shot, were it not for the metronomic piano. Another subtle musical moment occurs when Cyril asks, "What do you want to do about Johanna?" Instead of waiting for the music ("My Foolish Heart") to end before starting the dialogue, they overlap, allowing the final musical cadence to help punctuate the text. (In a YouTube video titled "Jonny Greenwood nailed the score for Phantom Thread," Brian Krock finds, among other things, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata is hiding in plain sight.)

The western equivalent of the sacred lotus is the rose. Alma gives off the scent of rose water. The surname "Rose" is congruent with Alma's prototypical "raspberry" color, but Barbara's dress is of a complementary color. A rose also has thorns that can act as a reminder of fall from grace, such as Barbara's. The dress for Mrs. Vaughan will have a color like Barbara's and an insert shot shows a flower on the belt, possibly a rose. Soon after this shot, Reynolds speaks of Alma casting a "shadow," facilitating the psychological view that Alma had been projecting her Jungian shadow onto Barbara. Yellow flowers (amber roses?) are seen on the table in the first breakfast scene and on the table onto which Barbara collapses, and one is worn by Barbara's companion Tippy. "Rose" can homophonically be taken as the past tense of *rise*, as from the dead, making "Barbara Rose" interpretable as a declarative sentence, even if an ironic one. To the sarcastically inclined, Barbara's passing out could even recall the Dormition, while

her undressing and the carrying of her dress by Reynolds (almost literal travesty) could recall Saint Bartholomew being flayed and then carrying his skin. (The dress is again his because Reynolds reclaims it after Alma observes, "It's your work.") While on the subject of saints, the film's pins could be a very distorted echo of Saint Sebastian.

Reynolds foreshadows meeting Alma when he playfully says to Henrietta, "Who's this beautiful stranger?" He says that his unsettled feeling is based on "nothing I can put my finger on." On his first date with Alma, he uses a napkin so that he does not directly put his finger on Alma's lips, though he does manage to put his finger in the custard. (And in addition to the other allusive aspect cited below, the digital probing of a void in a wedding dress could said to be putting one's finger on nothing.) In the scene where he meets Alma, someone in the background says something about teaching English, which indirectly applies to Alma because it is apparently not her first language. Reynolds is pleased that Alma is able to "remember" his breakfast order after Johanna disappoints him by not remembering what he had said about breakfast. Alma's "hungry boy" note that has the preprinted number 22 also has the preprinted words "date" and "initials," perfectly appropriate as part of the arrangements for their initial date. Also on the note is the word "COUVERTS," which refers to cover charges in English, cutlery in Dutch (such as the fork Reynolds points at Alma while he eats his omelet), and cloudiness in French (Cyril tells Reynolds that she want his cloud on her head). During the taking of Alma's measurements, Reynolds offers a glimpse of the upcoming New Year's Eve countdown when saying, "Ten. Nine." He foreshadows the proposal scene when he says to Alma on her first night in his house, "I'll wake you." Then he foreshadows the taking back of Barbara's dress when he says to Nigel, "You'd dig her up and sell the dress again," after it is said of a fan that she wants to be buried in a dress made by Reynolds, which is something that could have happened to his mother for all we know. (This also recalls the exhumation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's wife Elizabeth in order to recover and sell the poems that he had buried with her.) The bearing of the dead-to-the-world Barbara from the party is itself a grotesque parody of traditional decent-from-the-cross/deposition-of-Christ imagery. (Similarly, the poking of a finger through a hole in the damaged wedding dress recalls images of doubting Thomas (John 20:27), even before the dress is resurrected. At Alma's surprise dinner, it is just after the mention of this dress that Reynolds mutters, "Christ." And for good Christian measure, recall that Reynolds and Alma "had fish for dinner" and that there are pictures of fish on the wall in Alma's first scene. Tenuously related to this are the mushrooms that "have gills.") Alma and Reynolds kiss in front of a window labeled "ALES & STOUTS." She will come to find him more agreeable when he ails than when he is stout. At the start of Alma's surprise dinner, Reynolds answers a question by saying, "I do." Though these words will not be heard in his own wedding ceremony, they suggest wedding vows. Given the context of this scene, they seem as ironic as they do in *Certain Women* and yet they still foreshadow his own wedding. (This irony is immediately preceded by a scene where Alma's initially elevated position on the staircase ironically recalls the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.) He also applies salt to his asparagus quite liberally. Tom Chetwynd observes that salt can symbolize the wisdom that results from bitter experience. Hans Biedermann reports that Pliny the Elder recommends that salt accompany "certain antidotes for poison." (And of course asparagus is susceptible to the same phallic associations as "some sausages.") Reynolds collapses soon after Cyril says that he would be the one to end up on the floor. During a pause in Alma's wedding vows, listen for Cyril's reaction to the literal translation of the Luxembourgish expression for a toad: "Frog with a lid?!" During the outdoor breakfast just after his wedding, Reynolds puffs his cheeks as Barbara had during her fitting. Immediately after Lady Baltimore

hints at some chemistry between Alma and Dr. Hardy, Reynolds plays backgammon with Alma and tells her that it is not the time to start cheating. She then signals her fidelity by saying, "I'm not cheating. I don't need to cheat." (Incidentally, do the names Hardy and Harding need to be so close? It is conceded that trying to connect *Mona* and *moaning* would be a bit of a stretch.) Reynolds is annoyed by Alma's "well and truly shaken" dice even though they are an echo of his own behavior with a salt shaker. Turnover among his muses has been hinted at by Johanna and Cyril. Now, even after he is married, Reynolds obliquely recalls this by dismissing Alma by saying, "Next!" She then hints at the nature of relationships with him by referring to his next "opponent." But there may also be some portent in the talk of Alma "currently losing" and seeing things "in a different light" if she were "victorious." Immediately after Lady Baltimore says that she does not want to be racist, a radio program is heard with references to a "colored man." As Alma leaves to go dancing on her own, the radio voice says, "If you don't look out for yourself, . . . ." Soon after Alma leaves to go dancing a radio voice is heard speaking of dancing shoes. The radio voice also uses the word "uniform," recalling Alma as a waitress when her uniform was the same color as the dress that she now wears as she leaves the house. Before dragging Alma away from the party, Reynolds thrusts his chin at her, as if following Cyril's "Chin up" suggestion. (Alma adopts this posture when saying, "Every piece of me.") Cyril suggests that Reynolds accept Barbara's invitation if he can "stomach it." He voluntarily accepts Alma's invitation to "settle down a little" because being unable to stomach her omelet will actually be part of the deal.

There are conspicuous echoes of Alfred Hitchcock (perhaps beginning with the name Reynolds Woodcock), especially of his films *Rebecca* and *Suspicion*. The ironic difference from *Psycho* is that although Reynolds peeps at Alma during the fashion show, she seems to be aware of it and does her undressing when on his side of the peephole. And Cal, unlike Norman Bates, has help when carrying his mother. (Talking to Alma about her mother, Reynolds metaphorically says, "Always carry her with you." Cal learns the hard way just how difficult it would be to take him literally. Using a lock of hair, Reynolds succeeds less strenuously via synecdoche.) Recalling one of Hitchcock's favorites, the cast includes a character named Tippy. In successive scenes, Alma is juxtaposed first with the vision of the mother who haunts Reynolds and then with the wedding dress of the princess who potentially threatens Alma. At the end of both scenes, it could be said of each phantom that "*The Lady Vanishes*." Also, Hitchcock's wife was named Alma.

As for Stanley Kubrick references, *Barry Lyndon* is sometimes cited as an influence, possibly reflected in such things as Lady Baltimore's candlelit dinner. When Alma and Reynolds are driving on their first date, the scenery to the rear of the car is strongly illuminated, as it is in a similar shot in *A Clockwork Orange*.

The film also recalls the story of Pygmalion. Alma perhaps senses this, even describing the princess as being "like a sculpture." (Alma had already watched Mona being measured with a statue in the background.) And again recalling the story of Parzival, Reynolds tells Alma that his jacket contains a relic of his mother, while clothing provided by Parzival's mother represents an immature maternal link to be severed. It should also be acknowledged that critic Mark Kermode has noted in this film echoes of various fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Bluebeard and Dracula.

Reynolds may not think the customer is always right (even if Cyril is), but he can be prudently mild and flattering when necessary. His history with Mona has involves some of the Catholic sacraments. (After listing them, as noted above, he profanely exclaims, "Christ" under his breath, after which Alma immediately says, "No.") When he subjects her to a couture

catechism, one senses that she gives the "right" answers. Also, Dr. Hardy could just as easily have been Lady Baltimore's nephew, but the trouble was taken to make him her "godson." Tenuously, heartache caused by "the expectations and assumptions of others" sounds vaguely like an outsider's critique of Christianity with reference to the wait for a Messiah and to the rising of the Virgin Mary to heaven.

At times in this film, the audience can and literally does hear a pin drop. Reynolds tells Cyril to "shut up" and later asks her for "silence." While some directors may seek to make an audience laugh or cry, Anderson demonstrates his ability to quiet an audience maximally. As Alma starts speaking once Reynolds has begun chewing his omelet, the theatrical experience of this writer has consistently been one of sepulchral hush. (This writer, recalling *The Lobster* of Yorgos Lanthimos, allowed for the possibility that the film would end even before Reynolds began chewing.) As with James Joyce's complaint about the kinetic nature of improper art (that which is either pornographic or didactic), Reynolds deplores "too much movement." The physical stasis realized in this scene could be an expression of an aesthetic stasis to which the film may aspire. (Speaking of Joyce, it was in the Thornton Wilder play *The Skin of Our Teeth* that Joseph Campbell found hundreds of correspondences to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In *Phantom Thread*, a radio voice uses the phrase "the skin of my teeth," and the word *wake* is as susceptible to punning as in Joyce's title.)

The senses are variously highlighted. Not bound by physiology, Reynolds does not merely recall his mother's scent, but has "the strongest sense" about her spiritual proximity. Dr. Hardy's "perfectly normal eyes" will be addressed below. (Reynolds is certainly not using "perfectly normal eyes" when he sees his mother.) There is an exchange centered around "taste," which here may be allowed as a pun. The metaphorically alkaline "very bitter" cold is opposed by acidic references to "lemon juice" and a "sour heart." Reynolds cannot hear his mother's voice. (Might she be related to "*surda Thalia*," the subterranean Muse of nocturnal silence?) Then, in a concentrated way as Reynolds confers with Cyril during Mrs. Vaughan's fitting, he says that rejection hurts his "feelings," Cyril does not want to "hear" his complaint and he does not like the way it "smells." The New Year's Eve party scene begins with picture and sound adopting opposing perspectives. The camera is already on the inside as Reynolds approaches the door, but the sound becomes louder and brighter (less muffled) when he opens it, at it would for him. (Incidentally, in the opinion of this writer, Alma is visible in this initial master shot.)

Hunger is a theme, with "hungry" being the last word spoken in the film, spoken by "the hungry boy" whom Alma makes "extremely hungry." (Unlike Otis B. Driftwood in *A Night at the Opera*, Reynolds orders only one egg as part of his "hungry boy" meal. But Groucho Marx may as well have been satirizing Reynolds when placing that enormous shipboard room service order.) Alma supplements this trend with her remark that Reynolds seems "thirsty." Reynolds allows himself several alcoholic beverages but also refuses several others, and seems to joke about needing extra liquid courage when told of Barbara's impending wedding. (While Dracula says, "I never drink . . . wine," Reynolds may not strictly adhere to such a policy. Also, his reflection is seen in a mirror.) When served his omelet, Reynolds declines alcohol, but tacitly accepts Alma's "Water," whose cleansing, purifying nature is consistent with the theme of purgation discussed below. Water is also symbolically associated with the womb and rebirth, in harmony with both the description of Reynolds as "a baby" and with Alma's expectation of multiple future lives. The baptismal function of water is echoed when Reynolds visits a Shell filling station, the scallop shell being associated with baptism, and thus featuring in the design of California missions and the signs marking the pilgrimage route of El Camino de Santiago de



Compostela. (An earlier example of service station symbolism may be found in the final shot of Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*, with its thematically apt and strategically placed "Gulf" sign.) Near the end, Alma pours water for herself in a way that recalls Joseph Campbell describing the Ganges (and rivers generally) as symbolizing divine grace flowing perpetually and inexhaustibly from a transcendent source into the realm of nature.

Shakespeare's Claudius kills Hamlet's father and marries Hamlet's mother, thus achieving Hamlet's unconscious Oedipal desires. It is said that because Hamlet thus sees himself in his uncle, this is one reason he hesitates to kill him. A similar sympathy may partly account for why no collateral verbal abuse befalls Cal Rose. Reynolds may be perfectly capable of focusing his anger appropriately, but note that he makes dresses for both his mother and for Barbara Rose on the occasion of their remarriage. He claims not to know the ultimate fate of his mother's dress. After Barbara's is reclaimed, Cal may eventually be able to say the same. Also (and very indirectly), Cal is linked to his mother by way of James Dean, who seems to be another of the ghosts haunting this story. Cal is the name of Dean's character in *East of Eden*. Dean's character in *Giant* (Jett Rink) performs a drunken face-plant at a large gathering in his honor, antecedent to Barbara's parallel conduct. Daniel Day-Lewis claimed that Reynolds would be his final film role, as Jett Rink was Dean's. (Regarding previous Day-Lewis roles, when Reynolds draws a hat at the first breakfast, one could almost imagine that he is starting the signature "A. Lincoln.") One is also reminded of the diagram drawn by his Daniel Plainview near the beginning of *There Will Be Blood*.) Reynolds and Dean seem to share a penchant for fast driving. Also, Dean had a girlfriend named Barbara Glenn. (Given that Barbara Rose marries a Dominican named Rubio, the more immediate model for her would seem to be Barbara Hutton, who married Dominican diplomat Porfirio Rubirosa in 1953.) A less cryptic vestige of the director's nationality is seen in the Americana on display during the New Year's Eve festivities.

Certain matters of perspective may be significant. At the end of the fireside chat on their first date, Reynolds stands and assumes a position of dominance over Alma, then metaphorically puts her on a pedestal during the fitting session. He later watches her at the New Year's Eve party from a lofty vantage point. Part of Alma's "surprise" is that she stands above him on the stairs, which may add to his discomfort. (As in *Like Water for Chocolate*, it also recalls the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene.)

Leisurely pacing and static repose are used when beneficial. But the director also clearly recognizes when the thunder of such scenes should not be stolen. Paul Thomas Anderson repeatedly demonstrates that he knows how to recognize speed traps, hence the interpolation of the shot of scissors being used just before the one of Alma discovering the "never cursed" message. Within one particular shot, after Alma pours water in the omelet scene, yet another staring contest begins but is properly short because the world-class staring is being saved for subsequent shots, especially the one that follows Reynolds first taking some omelet into his mouth (one of this writer's favorite shots of this century).

During Henrietta's arrival, she is seen approaching the threshold after the doorbell is heard, which one website considers a "goof." She is a countess and has already been seen not opening her own car door. Thus, it is to be assumed that the chauffeur rings the bell and withdraws before she reaches the door.

It has been noted that Reynolds, in keeping with his conservatism, repeats the word "right." He repeats himself often, both verbally and nonverbally. (Though not unique in this, he seems more obvious about it.) Twice he calls for "Mr. Hansford," which IMDb gives as the actors name. (Several other names are apparently retained from real life, including Ingrid and

Amber.) "Let me do it," and "Go!" are repeated during the fashion show. During the surprise dinner scene alone, he repeats many sentences, some more than once, including: "What is this?" "Where is Cyril?" and "That's right." In a nonverbal example, the design of the dress for Henrietta seems to be echoed in one modeled by Alma during the fashion show. (This latter dress, together with its accompanying tiara, thus symbolically connects Alma to the film's various aristocrats and nobles.) Alma's breakfast disturbance is "hard to ignore." Nor can some of the things nagging at Reynolds "be ignored." He hints at other things that he has repeated when he speaks of "mistakes I've made, and made again." Cyril looks directly into the camera at the end of Johanna's scene and again just before opening the door for Henrietta. She also repeats her message about the deadline for Mona's dress to multiple groups of staff members. Cyril ensures a door is closed in preparation for Henrietta's arrival, and Alma puts special effort into a similar action before telling Cyril about the surprise dinner. Alma's most significant reiteration may come after Reynolds begins chewing his omelet. "I want you . . . flat on your back," she ominously tells him. But when she repeats words heard earlier ("tender, open"), the situation begins to feel less menacing. During Barbara's press conference, which Reynolds literally cannot face, "sincerity" is heard three times, making it "hard to ignore" and obliging one to reflect upon it. Sincerity constitutes the remedy in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, in which the occupants of the Grail castle do not engage in the inauthenticity that constitutes the wasteland problem, but Parzival fails when he acts in accordance with what Reynolds calls "the expectations and assumptions of others," which do indeed "cause heartache." On the other hand, Maurice Ravel calls sincerity the greatest defect in art. According to Ravel, "A true artist cannot be sincere," and, like Cyril, "a conscious artist is always right."

Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* and *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* illustrate two of the art history observations made in this essay. Let it be noted that Reynolds delivers the film's last line while entrusting his head to Alma's care in a way that contrasts starkly with Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.

Finally, the discussions of goddess numerology in these essays (such as the one for *Whale Rider*) explain why the Bristol 405 is the ideal car for a man surrounded by women and obsessed with his mother ( $4+0+5=9$ ). (As an amusing matter of provenance, the reader is invited to witness this same car with the same license plate driven by Peter Sarsgaard's David in Lone Scherfig's *An Education*.) Princess Mona arrives in a car displaying the number 999 on the license plate, which, aside from being an inversion of the satanic number 666, is redundantly, emphatically the number of the goddess. (The car behind hers bears the number 765.  $7+6+5=18$ ,  $1+8=9$ .) Alma may regard her as a potent rival because she senses such a quality in her. (Mona and Reynolds even share similar alphabetic parts of their respective license plates: WXF and WDF.) The deadline for finishing Mona's dress is 9 a.m., the same that Dr. Hardy specifies for his next visit.

As with certain other films (and as lamented elsewhere in these essays), inattentive commentators sometimes supplement the title of this film with a superfluous definite article. Looking beyond film itself, the official U.S. trailer available at the time of the film's premier contains about a dozen shots that are not to be found in the film, at least in the version theatrically exhibited at the start of 2018. The trailer contains a potentially helpful explanation about Reynolds feeling cursed that he will never be loved. On another practical note, theatrical exhibition inevitably involves compromise. Of the nine theaters in which this writer viewed this film, the Regency South Coast Village had both the best audio (providing the best speech intelligibility) and the dimmest image. In the Blu-ray and DVD menus, the film's first chapter is

titled "Logos / House of Woodcock." *Logos* can refer either to rhetorical appeal to reason or to the divine word that links the spiritual and material realms. This would seem to invite and justify some of the more esoteric musings in this essay.

Rather obviously, Alma's name means "soul." As to what can be made of this, Goethe's eternal feminine and Jung's anima are clearly applicable. Reynolds and Alma both speak of having "no idea," emphasizing spirit over logic. On their first date, however, they say things such as "What do you think?" "I think so" and "I'm sure about that." Reynolds is "confident" regarding Alma's potential attitude toward backgammon, but he later says, as one would when beyond the bounds of logic, "I have no confidence." On a related note, ontology is said to consist of the question "What is there?" and the answer that Alma gives to Reynolds regarding his game: "Everything!" Reynolds feels as if he has been seeking Alma for a "long time." Rather than being a long time, eternity is a dimension disengaged from time. Reynolds seems predisposed to appreciate this when he unwittingly expresses the concept by saying to Johanna, "I simply don't have time." (See also, for example, Revelation 10:6.) As if surprised to find a representative of eternity in his secular environment, he asks, "What on earth are you doing?" As the film ends, Alma's diaphanous attire recalls Joseph Campbell's assertion that mythological symbols are "transparent to transcendence" and refer past the obscuring veil of *maya*, which is also the name of the filmmaker's partner. Reynolds earns his middle name (Jeremiah) with all his lamenting and complaining. As for Cyril's name, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem writes of the Holy Spirit, "The Spirit comes gently and makes himself known by his fragrance. . . . Rays of light and knowledge stream before him as the Spirit approaches." Cyril is first seen opening shutters and turning on lights. Then, after Reynolds speaks of sensing their mother's spirit, Cyril comments on fragrances associated with Alma. In his *Mystagogic Catecheses*, Saint Cyril discusses baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. Reynolds speaks of clothing he has made for Mona's participation in these sacraments.

Though not with such explicit iconography as in Steven Spielberg's *Always*, Reynolds and Alma respectively embody the eastern principles of male lunar temporality and female solar eternity. Alma bursts noisily onto the scene like the *bindu* of divine energy that creates nature by bursting into the field of time and space. Alma claims that she will be with Reynolds not only in this life but in the next one and the one after. This could suggest reincarnation, and allow an opportunity to contemplate, in passing, other eastern philosophical concepts with which the film resonates. The name *sutra*, meaning "thread," is given to certain Hindu scriptures. The goal of Kundalini yoga is to awaken a female serpent that is coiled, as thread on a spool. The metaphor employed many times in these essays when discussing the foresightful, taboo-breaking aspect of the female principle is recalled by Alma's literal sacrifice of eggs to make an omelet. The eastern psychological view is that the inert male power becomes active and dominant only after being activated by the dynamic female principle, which the male initially resists, it being "too much movement." (Joseph Campbell cites Sri Ramakrishna as saying that *Brahman* represents divine energy at rest, while *maya* is that energy in its dynamic, active form.) In many ways Alma prompts and goads and challenges Reynolds. (Alma knowingly prepares his asparagus with butter counter to his preference, and knowing that he "detests too much butter," she uses plenty of it for his omelet. And in India, butter has a sacramental status similar to that of water in Catholicism. Also, Roman police records tell of the 1604 incident in which Caravaggio assaulted a waiter who, instead of complying with Caravaggio's request to specify which of the artichokes that he had been served were prepared with oil and which with butter, had told Caravaggio to

determine that for himself by smelling them.) After undressing Barbara, Alma first says, "I . . . " before thinking better of it and switching to a plural statement about it being "no business of ours." It is as if she is avoiding the egoism or "I-ness" expressed in the Sanskrit term *ahamkara*, which Joseph Campbell translates as "making the noise 'I.'" Campbell tells of a Shinto priest who explained his religion by saying, "We don't have theology. We dance." "We need to go dancing," Alma says to Reynolds, as Kali does with Shiva, the two representing the left-hand and right-hand paths, respectively. Kali is both a protector and a liberator from the prison of time and space. (And when they do go dancing in the epilogue, Reynolds does indeed "slow down his steps.") Reynolds suggests "a fire," which the dancing Shiva uses to symbolize the burning away of temporality. The eastern view, according to Joseph Campbell, is that people "stuck on themselves" are relegated to hell between incarnations, and that to get to heaven one must "open." Campbell also draws a parallel between purgatory and reincarnation. The radio line "What will kill you then will kill you now" may be yet another hint about multiple lives. The idea of "the only wedding dress that was ever made" accords with the recurring instantiation of a Platonic ideal. In discussing Kundalini yoga, Campbell explains that the lowest state of spiritual development is represented in the west by dragons, which hoard women and money not knowing what to do with either. People operating on this level can produce only conservative, non-radiant art. Campbell calls them "creeps," homophonically making Vicky Kriepps, behind the persona of Alma, someone whom the conservative Reynolds might unconsciously consider a proper match. Reynolds is known for a certain flexibility of personality. He calls Dr. Hardy "shifty-eyed," but it is the shape-shifting Reynolds who can be either cruel to Alma or saccharine when dealing with Mona. But his negative side need not be abandoned altogether. Henrietta and Alma both ask, "Yes?" During his proposal, Reynolds, displaying his negative default attitude, asks, "No?" The goal of Kundalini yoga is not to extinguish such negative energy but to sublimate and redirect it inward to conquer one's own flaws, turning degrading vice into illuminating virtue. As disagreeable as Reynolds can be, monsters can facilitate sublime experiences and, like even the angel of death, ultimately be perceived as beautiful. And a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality is a reminder that deities can have both peaceful and wrathful aspects. From a Buddhist perspective, Alma's tenacity of purpose reflects the wisdom of Amoghasiddhi. And her views on the afterlife indicate that she does not fear death, as if under the influence of Yamantaka. Reynolds addresses Alma in a restaurant while supporting his head with his right hands. She later similarly addresses him, both thus giving just the slightest hint of the lion posture of the Buddha. Alma engineers for Reynolds "a surprise," which the sudden Buddhist experience of *Satori* can be. Some versions of the death of the Buddha have him dying after eating mushrooms. (Dovetailing with this is a line of poetry heard in Sara Colangelo's *The Kindergarten Teacher*: "In poison, mushrooms camouflage deliverance.")

Beyond her role as muse for him, she could function as something of a fairy godmother (*in loco parentis*), if not the reincarnation of his biological mother (see the essay on *Whale Rider*). Reynolds tells his sister of his feeling that their mother is "reaching out towards us." Then, after his first sighting of Alma, he has a moment of reflection in which he may already be perceiving the proximity of his mother's spirit in the person of Alma. Reynolds tells his sister of being aware of their mother's scent, soon after which Cyril scrutinizes the odors associated with Alma at their first meeting. (Anyone seeking a gay subtext here is directed to the comments regarding *The Wings of the Dove* above and to the fact that Cyril smells not the fish that Alma had for dinner but only the lemon associated with it. Also, lemon can be symbolically associated with fidelity and protection from curses. And sexuality would be a weaker explanation for why

Cyril never married. It could alternatively be argued that in this same scene Reynolds and Alma distinguish themselves from Cyril by each saying, "Straight.") "Are you here? Are you always here?" Reynolds asks the vision of his mother. In an important way, she always can be, if not as a ghost then by way of Alma, to whom Reynolds has already said, "There you are." (Cyril has been involved in this function at least partially. Reynolds asks Alma, "Where is Cyril?" and refers to Cyril when he asks, "Is she here?" at the restaurant.) After he says to the ghost, "I can't hear your voice," Alma enters and speaks (and Reynolds has yet another moment of reflection). It is not that his mother is ventriloquizing through Alma, but it is Alma's voice that is available here and now. The day after Reynolds vomits and sees his mother, he proposes to Alma, as is he has experienced a purgation that relieves him of an Oedipal fixation that may have been an impediment to marriage. Cyril may unconsciously anticipate and approve of the transfer of their mother's role as his spirit guide to Alma when she says that if Reynolds is "going to make her a ghost" that he should "go ahead and do it." (Cyril also writes the *A* and *I* in the name *Alma* such that the word almost looks like a contraction of *Momma*.) Alma begins the film by saying, "Reynolds has made my dreams come true." Alma reciprocates when Reynolds dreams of his mother and Alma then, in this mystical sense, becomes the physical realization of that dream. Hinting at this possibility, Mona's "dream" about her wedding dress elicits a very empirical response from Reynolds: "Naturally."

As discussed in the essay on *The Crying Game*, Parzival and Condwiramurs marry psychically and spiritually, without the aid of clergy. As if Alma has similarly experienced some sort of nonecclesiastical, *Gandharva* marriage when she first meets Dr. Hardy, he fittingly addresses her as "Mrs. Woodcock." (The attendant symbolism, further explained momentarily, allows this to be taken as a *fait accompli* rather than foreshadowing.) Then, as Alma passes by the vision of the mother, it is as if the torch is being passed (or more to the point, as if the wedding dress is being passed from one bride to another). As discussed elsewhere in these essays (think of Exodus 3:5 and of Erwin Panofsky's interpretation of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* as depicting a wedding conducted without a priest), there is a ceremonial propriety to Alma being shoeless during all of this. (Alma is actually seen shoeless several times during fittings, and when she says, "Whatever you do, do it carefully," Reynolds appears to be holding her shoes. Amber also participates by removing her shoes during the photo shoot.) Reynolds retains his socks when he is put to bed, but Alma makes a point of removing his shoes, the need for which he notes. (Interpreting the *Arnolfini Portrait*, Jan Baptist Bedaux invokes a tradition of a bride removing her husband's shoes.) More superficially, Alma removes her shoes for the purpose of noise abatement, even before Reynolds requests silence. The van Eyck painting also shows its couple joining hands in a bedroom (not necessarily a bedroom in the modern sense, but at least a room that includes a bed). And according to Jean-Philippe Postel, the female figure in the painting can be regarded as the ghost of a dead woman. The film's fruit on a window sill, mirrors and candles and form a looser connection to the painting. In particular, the painting shows a circular mirror, and in his first scene, Reynolds has a circular mirror in the dressing area linking his bedroom and bathroom. By the way, recalling the earlier reference to Caravaggio's entombment painting, scenes of Christ's Passion surround the mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait*. The painting depicts a merchant who traded in precious fabric in Belgium, while Reynolds makes clothes for a princess from that country. And when he first tells Alma of the lace that he rescued from Belgium, she wears green, as does the woman in the painting. The potentially negative aspect of Alma wearing green when preparing the omelet has been noted. Referring again to Gottfried's story, Tristan is healed by the same woman who prepares both the poison and the love potion, and who is the

mother of his beloved. The mothers of both Reynolds and Alma may be functioning through Alma.

Reynolds tells of the superstition surrounding wedding dresses, which seems to be confirmed when he says that his sister never married. Alma acquires immunity from this curse (partly) because she, of all the women who work on Princess Mona's dress, is the one who finds the metaphorical Easter Egg (or baby in the Three Kings cake). She is the chosen one who can pull the sword from the stone. Given the "bad fortune" that can be associated with wedding dresses, it is good that Alma wishes Mona "good fortune" for her wedding because Mona may need it if Alma does not return the secret message to the hem. In the trailer, Cyril says that her brother "can feel cursed, that love is doomed for him." Perhaps he is able to "break a curse" because the talismanic power of his "never cursed" message (a sort of "Get Out of Jail Free" card) is redirected from the princess to Alma and finally back to himself. (Cyril facilitates this process when she says to Alma, "Follow me.")

Along with curses and ghosts, another recurrent theme is sweat, possibly as another symbol of purgation to go along with vomiting, with Reynolds sweating during the production of the wedding dresses for both his mother and the princess. Also, Alma says, "I'm not crying," but Reynolds speaks of crying in his sleep. He also announces that he will "have a bath." It is through this purgatory that he will ultimately deserve Alma. During the fashion show, Reynolds is preoccupied with his models being "ready." At the center of the film is an exchange that could emphasize the spiritual over the biological and also be an acknowledgement that Reynolds is not yet ready. Cyril notes, "It's not his birthday," to which Alma replies, "I know."

The word "down" is often spoken during the time that Reynolds is poisoned and sees his mother. (Alma is ordered downstairs, it is asked if Reynolds can keep anything down, etc.) He may be experiencing something like an underworld journey (*Kathodos*) to the land of the dead. He, like his fever, "has gone down." This is, of course, a standard part of the mythical initiation process for heroes, who are often, like Reynolds, the son of a widow. For her part, Alma, in her role as muse, may be well ahead of him. Early on, he tells her, "You're perfect," soon after which she speaks of Reynolds providing conditions in which, "I become perfect." The fall of Reynolds, like The Fall of Adam, initiates a "down" period but can also be viewed as a *felix culpa*. It provides the opportunity for the self-solemnized spiritual marriage of Reynolds and Alma, and for Alma's discovery of the "never cursed" message, which is in turn like an announcement of a state of grace analogous to that enjoyed by the Virgin Mary by virtue of her immaculate conception. His recovery from his fall (*Anodos*) inspires him to make his proposal of official, legal, contractual marriage. He seems to have had a realization of his true destiny, which is often learned by heroes during an underworld journey. Reynolds is sent on his journey by Alma, just as Circe prepares Odysseus for his. It is also from Circe that Odysseus learns that the proper attitude of the masculine in relation to the feminine is not one of conquest and possession. Describing their meeting, Joseph Campbell says, "Now he has met up with a woman whom he can't just push around."

Even aside from her fireside narration, Alma is said to have a "glow," Dr. Hardy's enjoyment of which is another red herring (at least with respect to adultery). But he should particularly appreciate her aura, as he is the perceptive one who senses her participation in a spiritual marriage that precedes any civil or religion one, contradicting Lady Baltimore's assessment that he has "perfectly normal eyes." (Or it could be that he is normal in that he sets what should be the standard and everyone else is blind to the true nature of Alma's relationship.) Thus Alma actually needs no immunity from superstition because in this special sense she is

already married by the time she touches the wedding dress. Lady Baltimore is inadvertently correct that Alma's glow results from her "first marriage" that precedes the civil, "contracting" ceremony. Because this ceremony is, in spiritual terms, merely a matter of "binding," bureaucratic paperwork and a redundant afterthought, it is also proper that Alma's wedding dress is much less formal than Mona's. Besides, the spectral essence of her dead mother-in-law's dress may have been transferred to Alma, who may be thought of as invisibly clad in it.

Cyril warns Reynolds that he "certainly won't come out alive," but Alma assures him (perhaps hinting at immortality), "You're not going to die," though it must be said that Cyril is adequately solicitous when Reynolds first falls ill. The idea of wishing to die and then not doing so again recalls Wagner's Kundry and all such characters who seek death as a solution to their problems. "A house that doesn't change is a dead house," observes Reynolds. (Joseph Campbell says that mythologically, for the man, marriage and death are equivalent, citing the begetting of Horus by the dead Osiris.) Because he himself has insufficiently changed, "an air of quiet death in this house" persists. (Twice linking his house with the idea of death, Reynolds recalls Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*.) In spite of already being married in two senses, Reynolds will still "need to settle down a little." Once the necessary change occurs (*mutatis mutandis*), death, as Alma explains, becomes irrelevant. Just as the raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection of Christ, the concept of resurrection that was earlier applied to the wedding dress could also be applied to Alma, who begins the proposal scene not so much veiled like a bride as shrouded like a corpse. Thus her awakening also provides an obvious opportunity for punning on the word *wake*, especially after seeing the women assemble their temporary workstations as if setting up a bier or catafalque. Reynolds speculates that his mother's wedding dress may have fallen to pieces, prompting a meditation on dissolution. Associated with his own fall (and recalling the myth of Osiris), Mona's dress is taken to pieces and reassembled. ("Let me collect myself," Reynolds has said, just as the pieces of Osiris are collected and reunited.) Alma speaks of herself in (literally) analytical terms when she says, "Every piece of me." The idea of Osiris (along with the references to eggs, the new year, and Reynolds as "a baby" and a hungry "boy") also harmonizes with the archetypal *puer aeternus*, who, like Peter Pan, never grows up. In this capacity, Dr. Hardy, the "young" "boy doctor," may be seen as a rival by Reynolds as Mona may be by Alma, in addition to Hardy simply being closer to Alma in age. In an online video titled "On Becoming an Adult," Joseph Campbell (mentioning Wagner is passing) discusses the psychological result of unexpectedly surviving a ritual, saying, "You think you're dead and bing! You've broken past it. You've got a new, expanded life. What has died has been the infantile ego." It may be hoped that Reynolds may experience such maturation. But if not, Alma has proven to be capable of managing, even smiling when likening him to "a baby."

Much can be made to seem quite esoteric at the end of the film. "Nothing for me," says Reynolds, which might suggest oblivion or Nirvana, and again recalls the intention of Wagner's Tristan to commit suicide. The Buddha is literally the one who awoke. If Reynolds were not to wake up, says Alma, then "no matter," suggesting the immaterial soul. Not waking could also simply refer to a lack of enlightenment. Even an unenlightened Reynolds might still enjoy practical success. Though he could be a detestable person, Richard Wagner recognized the influence that the eternal feminine had on his art. Perhaps Reynolds is similarly assured by his muse that inspiration may not abandon the loathsome as long as they make good use of it for the benefit of posterity.

"Just stand normally," instructs Reynolds early on, to which Alma replies, "I stand normally." But normal, finite patience would not transcend time, such that Cyril would

eventually be able to say of Alma as she does of Johanna that "the time has come." By the end, time ceases to be an impediment, with Alma even saying that she will protect his dresses from it. She also says that "nothing is normal or natural," which can be taken to mean that everything is instead metaphysical, such that the nothingness of eternity can be experienced through nature.

After Johanna asks, in metaphorically spatial terms, "Where have you gone, Reynolds?" portions of his response hint at his compatibility with Alma as a dimensionless, immaterial, atemporal spirit when he says, "I can't take up space" and "I simply don't have time." In response to Reynolds at a low point in their relationship, Alma pauses before naming the problem, thus isolating and emphasizing a word that denotes a concept only applicable within the realm of space: "Distance!" Reynolds then reminds us that events occur only in the realm of time by asking Alma, "When did this happen?" She tells him that she had wanted "time with you," sounding like a transcendent being wishing to visit nature with him as her companion. But when he then possessively speaks of "my time," she claims not to know what she is doing "here in your time," as if uncomfortable with the very idea of temporality. Reynolds claims not to need Alma, who may be functioning as a personification of eternity, against whom "you will lose" any contest based on temporal endurance. This is indeed "not about asparagus." And, in the interrogative part of the argument, even the metaphysical category of causality is suggested.

Eternity constantly struggles against the practical qualifications and limitations imposed by time. Learning that Cyril has left, Reynolds asks, "What time did she leave?" Dr. Hardy speaks of "the time of your life" and "a fine time." But the staircase at the heart of the London house can function as a symbolic world axis (*axis mundi*) where heaven and earth intersect. Indeed, the two frames of reference are eventually reconciled. At the end, Reynolds observes that "now we're here," which does not preclude the experience of eternity, which is unrelated to time and space. Thus, in the metaphysical sense, his days may indeed be "unlimited," just as he had thought they were. This qualitative distinction makes irrelevant the quantitative issue of whether or not they have each other "all the time." Either way, if the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof is just staying on it as long as she can, then Alma's victory is hers for the taking. One feels confident in her assertion that she can "stand" Reynolds and stand *with* him "endlessly," through both time and eternity. (James Womack deserves credit for the iconographic observation that this film's title graphic includes an infinity symbol.) Reciprocally, his last gesture is to go from kneeling to standing, and the two face each other in what may be yet another "staring contest." And with Alma "victorious," Reynolds will see things "in a different light" every bit as much as she will.

From the proper viewpoint, the enigmatic can eventually give way to lucidity. Plutarch attributes to the goddess Isis the quote: "I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my veil." "The soul within" physical forms remain hidden, writes Helena Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*. The fashion show scene begins with a protective scarf being lifted to reveal Alma (soul). "I think this is clear," says Alma to Dr. Hardy. Reynolds says to the vision of his mother, "It's as simple as that." Epitomizing the notion of abecedarian simplicity, Reynolds has hanging on his bedroom wall a small chart (possibly a sampler) illustrating the alphabet, in front of which Alma passes just after the vision of his mother disappears. (Think also of Alma's backgammon counting sequence: "Eins, zwei, drei.") In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, "The riddle does not exist." (An exception might be made for Nelson Riddle.) In the film's final image, as if expressing this, Alma offers a shrug. Ultimately, one may also rest on her assurance that loving Reynolds "makes life" (and perhaps the story as a whole) "no great mystery."



Many befuddled fools have claimed that the practical lesson of this story is that a woman needs to poison a man in order to get him to propose to her. She does, if the man and woman in question are specific fictional characters with authorially specified narrative functions. If such fools can only infer literal universal applicability and cannot manage to interpret the situation metaphorically even when the requirement is to slay a dragon, then their attempts at courtship in real life will be frustrating for them, though perhaps amusing for the rest of us.