

Winner of The Navigator's Best Writing Award

A New Approach to Pro-Choice Advocacy: An Analysis of Pro-Choice Rhetoric in *Call the Midwife*

Lillian Floyd

Introduction

Discourse surrounding the topic of abortion is extremely divisive in western society. This has been especially true in the past few months in the United States due to the recent Dobbs Decision, the overturning of the famous Roe v. Wade Supreme Court case. Pro-life groups, those against abortion, are taking this victory as an opportunity to outlaw abortion in individual states. Pro-choice groups, those for the option of abortion, are fighting to implement the Roe v. Wade style protections in individual states. Both groups engage in activism via advertisements, rallies, petitions, and legislation. Though these might be the most thought-of avenues for groups to advocate for social issues, there are other methods of advocacy that might be even more effective.

Popular television is one such method. Gretchen Sisson, Nathan Walter, Stephanie Herold, and John J. Brooks, communication researchers involved in the Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH) Group, define this type of advocacy as entertainment-education. Popular television, especially prime-time television, is meant to provide the general public with entertainment that they can use to unwind at the end of the day. Yet, it can also inform viewers about important issues and attempt to sway their views. Television is thought to be especially influential “due to its capacity to transmit a vast amount of information about social norms, behavior patterns, and lifestyles to geographically dispersed areas” (Sisson et al. 15). By using television programs to spread their message, advocacy groups, such as pro-choice and pro-life supporters, can reach a higher level of impact with a larger and more varied audience. In this essay, I will be analyzing the pro-choice rhetoric that screenwriter Heidi Thomas uses in her *Call the Midwife* television series in order to sway her audience on the controversial topic of abortion rights. The 2019 season eight story arc about abortion continues the standard pro-choice strategy of employing the pathos appeal of women’s personal stories and circumstances but adds an element of religious ethos in order to develop a new and more effective approach to pro-choice rhetoric.

Background

Call the Midwife is a currently airing television series that has run since 2012. Based on Jennifer Worth’s memoirs, the show began following Nurse Jenny Lee who had just arrived in the East end of Poplar, London. She is a new midwife recruit for the Order of Saint Raymond Nonnatus, an Anglican order of nuns devoted to nursing the surrounding community. A major part of that nursing duty is providing prenatal care, delivering babies, and helping mothers adjust to their newborn babies; in other words, it is all about being midwives. Since the beginning with Nurse Lee, there have been many changes in casting over the decade that this show has been on the air. However, no matter the selection of nurses and nuns on the cast, the show is all about

midwifery in Poplar and “providing the poorest women with the best possible care” (“About the Show”). Over all those years, Heidi Thomas has been the screenwriter for the program. One of her main goals with the show is to grapple with real issues that modern women face, despite the historic setting. She says, “There are so many television programmes that begin with a woman’s body being found, or a child going missing and we don’t deal with women as objects of violence, we deal with women as survivors of violence. I think it is important that we don’t shy away from that” (Thomas “Q&A”). She showcases modern issues through a historic lens to make them more approachable for her audience. Due to this, the show focuses on diving deep into women’s issues, including abortion.

In 2019, season eight of the show aired with an especially prevalent overarching theme of abortion. The show had dealt with abortion before, but this was the first time that it became a major story plot. Though these episodes aired before the Dobbs Decision, there are possible contemporary influences of a volatile right-leaning political climate in the United States that caused a rise in concern over abortion rights in many Western countries, including the United Kingdom. In the arc, women keep cropping up with infections that sometimes lead to the removal of their uterus without their permission or even death. However, in episode seven, it is revealed that many of the women in Poplar have been going to the same woman, Elsie Dyer, who performs abortions in an unsanitary room above her pub. Elsie was trying to help the desperate women that turned up at her doorstep, but she never realized that they were getting sick afterwards. She had no medical training and did not understand the dangers of infection. She was doing her best with the limited resources she had.

This story arc is not the first or last time that the show tackles the issue of abortion, but it is the most in depth and lasting depiction. Though *Call the Midwife* is created by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), it regularly airs in the United States on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station with a three-month delay and is included in the United States Netflix selection. Due to this, the television show has a large American audience and in-turn, a large impact on American viewers. Through the show, Thomas can make millions of viewers aware of the issues women and healthcare workers face when there are no legal protections for abortion. She can actively change their views on abortion by working to shift their identification.

Following Pro-Choice Tradition

Pro-choice advocacy groups have developed a norm of using women’s personal stories and circumstances as a rhetorical tool to argue for abortion rights. Though they used to solely focus on medical facts, it was discovered that “people process information from stories differently than didactic, nonnarrative, information” (Sisson et al. 14). By sharing a story with an audience, advocates are able to reach them in a deeper way and change their views. It is easy for people to dismiss a list of facts, but much harder to dismiss a woman sharing a story about her experiences. By using stories, pro-choice groups are able to use pathos to appeal to the emotions of their audience. This is true even if the characters in a story are fictional like in *Call the Midwife*. By the time the show introduced this plot, audiences had eight years to grow attached to each and every character. They became family and emotions run high

when it comes to family. When a woman shows up at Nonnatus House in episode one of season eight, barely able to stand after a backstreet abortion gone wrong, the audience is heavily invested not only in the reactions of the nurses, but the wellbeing of the young woman in need. Viewers are aware of the high stakes of having a police sergeant downstairs having tea while the nurses and nuns aid a woman with post-abortion complications. They know that in 1964, abortion was illegal in England and women were often arrested after ending up in the hospital due to complications. Through that established emotional connection to the characters, the viewers are approaching the show with an open mind. Their focus is on the characters as people and how they connect to those characters rather than the situations in which those characters find themselves.

That emotional connection is then aided by the passionate acting of the cast on *Call the Midwife* and the intentional cinematography. The abortion storylines are full of dramatic facial expressions, tense music, and crying. As seen in the images below, strong emotions and high stakes are regularly depicted in the show.



(Ryan; Edwards)

In the first image, the woman who just got a backstreet abortion and her sister are leaning on each other and crying as the nurse tries to figure out what to do. They are in it together as women, leading the story to focus on them and their human connections. The shot is relatively empty apart from the three women, forcing the audience to really look at the characters and pay attention to their emotions. Additionally, the camera is placed on the ground so the audience is on the same level as the women on the screen. The simple set and camera angle creates a sense of focus and comradery that encourages the audience to feel connected to the woman who just received an abortion. It puts the viewer in the shoes of another supportive person,

sitting on the floor to comfort and take care of the woman. This encourages feelings of care and nurturing towards the woman. Additionally, it gives the viewer a chance to identify with her because she can suddenly imagine herself in the same position and think about how she would feel.

In the second image, a woman who was not so lucky to receive help from Nonnatus House is slowly dying from an infection she developed after an unsanitary backstreet abortion. Again, the framing places the focus on the woman in question. The viewer can see a bit of her husband behind her, but the focus is on her. This forces attention on her frailty and paleness as she battles a nasty infection. Similar to the first image, the audience members are on the same level as the woman. This makes them feel as though they are one with her. In both scenes, the emotional aspect of the stories is the feature characteristic. By encouraging the audience to identify with the women who get abortions and the struggles they go through in order to do so, Heidi Thomas is able to elicit an emotional reaction from her audience and begin to change their minds about abortion rights.

The narratives shared in *Call the Midwife* are even more effective due to the variety of reasons women choose abortion. When analyzing the trends in pro-choice narratives, Paige Settles and Jessica Furgerson, communication researchers, found that most paint abortion as “an unfortunate circumstance; never as a viable choice for a woman simply considering her options,” resulting in the pro-choice movement “not prioritizing narratives in which a woman simply isn’t ready to have children, or cannot bear the thought of having another one” (32). Most pro-choice narratives focus on the extreme cases of a woman being raped or her body not being strong enough to physically go through the trauma of delivery. However, *Call the Midwife* is set in the low-income area of the East end of London during the mid to late twentieth century. Because of this setting, most of their abortion representations come about due to women not being able to financially afford or handle another addition to their many pre-existing children. This is true in the case of Jeannie Tennent, who already had several children and felt that she could not handle another. Additionally, a young woman named Magda steals medication from the doctor in order to give herself a medically induced abortion because she feels that she is too young to have a baby. Similarly, Cath Hindman obtains a backstreet abortion because she does not feel ready for a baby. These women became pregnant through consensual sex and do not face the possibility of death if they continue their pregnancy and deliver the baby. However, they each have a need for an abortion and feel confident enough to make that choice. By focusing on the stories of these women, *Call the Midwife* draws attention to the average needs for abortion. There are not always dramatic life-threatening circumstances surrounding abortion needs; rather, the show focuses on the women and what is best for them as people. This provides additional emotional appeals and areas for identification for people who have ever faced the stress of not having enough money to take care of their family or have been stretched too thin by the expectations of life. The show leaves room for viewers to identify with the characters on an emotional, gender, or socioeconomic class level. Women, their needs, and their experiences are placed in the spotlight in order to beg audiences to think about the people behind the narratives as though they were in the characters’ shoes.

A New Rhetorical Spin

While sharing the truths of many women's personal stories can be highly rhetorically effective in appealing to the emotions of the audience and encouraging them to identify with the characters, it is not always enough to sway people's beliefs and views surrounding controversial topics. When studying the reaction that audiences had to abortion storylines in *Grey's Anatomy*, Sisson et al. found that viewers in states with laws already supporting abortion rights were more likely to increase their support of the pro-choice movement after seeing the show (19). This means that it is more difficult for pro-choice groups to sway people living in areas in which abortion is illegal. Changing the beliefs and ideology of the public is already a large task, but it becomes even more difficult when the rhetor is proposing a change that goes against pre-existing laws. It is one thing to ask people to change their minds and another to ask them to change the law. These sorts of debates can be very daunting for people, causing most average people, no matter what their personal opinions on the matter may be, to "avoid these settings with great distaste" (Crawley et al. 227). Discourse surrounding controversial topics can become intense. While they may have an emotional connection to a television episode about abortion, they need more to draw them out enough for the show to actually persuade them.

To address this need, Heidi Thomas adds religious ethos to the pathos of women's stories. Traditionally, most pro-choice and pro-life groups employ similar rhetorical strategies of relying on medical facts (though the "facts" produced by both groups are often conflicting) and narratives about women. However, pro-life rhetoric has always differed from pro-choice rhetoric because it involves discussion of morals and religion (Crawley et al. 229). They borrow authority from their god in order to persuade people that they are speaking the truth. In contrast, pro-choice advocacy groups have largely steered clear of any discussion of morals, much less religion. They typically attempt to remain fact-based in their discussion of abortion. However, as the pro-life movement has been gaining favor in the United States recently, it might be time for pro-choice groups to take a page out of their opposer's book. In order to do this, Thomas explores pro-choice ideology through a religious lens in the show.

As one might guess when told that *Call the Midwife* centers around an order of nuns devoted to nursing, the show naturally involves religion. Though not all the characters share the same faith and those who do often practice it in very different ways, the major belief system represented is Christianity. During the abortion story arc, the act of aborting a pregnancy is still illegal in the United Kingdom and the topic of reproductive health rights is rather new. Contraceptives are just beginning to become available to the average woman and there are heated debates about the legalization of abortion. As modern young women who have seen the horrors of backstreet abortions gone wrong, most of the nurses wholeheartedly agree with the pro-choice movement of legal abortion. Nurse Trixie Franklin even risks her job and public image in order to write a column in a national newspaper and speak out at local government meetings and court hearings in favor of pro-choice. However, the issue is more complicated for the nuns.

Many branches of Christianity, including the Anglican church depicted in the show, oppose abortion and generally align themselves with the pro-life side of the

abortion debate. Yet, the nuns of Nonnatus House have seen those same horrors of backstreet abortions that the other midwives have seen. Due to this, many of the nuns struggle to reconcile the conflict between what they know to be true in their religious lives and what they know to be true in their nursing careers. Depicting that struggle does a great deal for the religious credibility of *Call the Midwife*.

This is especially true when it comes to Sister Julianne. As the Sister-in-Charge at Nonnatus House, she is the religious leader, director of nursing duties, and moral compass for all the nuns and nurses. Her internal struggle with figuring out her feelings about abortion is heavily showcased in the season eight abortion arc. She prays about it and discusses her thoughts with her Mother Superior as she works through her feelings. However, she comes to the final conclusion that “the word ‘midwife’ means ‘with woman.’ A woman in that situation needs somebody by her side. Whatever mistakes or choices brought her to our door” (Thomas *Call the Midwife*). If God called on her to be a midwife, then he must have meant for her to stay true to a midwife’s duty. Yes, she is there to deliver babies, but her duty is more than that. She is there to support the women who need her, including those who are not ready to add a new baby to their lives. Her focus is on the woman in front of her, not an unborn child. By showing Sister Julianne’s struggle and conclusion to the audience, Thomas is able to depict how one might keep hold of their religion while still supporting the pro-choice movement. Many viewers have the preconceived idea of nuns always being against abortion. This plotline shifts the way that the audience sees nuns and their beliefs. It shows that the pro-life train of thought is not the only moral stance; rather, pro-choice can be grounded in morals as well. Like pro-life groups have done in the past, Thomas borrows authority from God in order to show people that he prioritizes women. And since God is above the law as the ultimate authority in Christianity, no one can argue. With her religious ethos as Sister-in-Charge, Sister Julianne can lead by example for any religious viewers of the television show. Christian audiences can identify with her, leading them to be more open to following in her footsteps.

Objections to the Style of Rhetoric

Despite the effective spin of using religious ethos to enhance the pathos of women’s stories, there are scholars who might argue that the depiction of abortions gone wrong in *Call the Midwife* is a detriment to the success of the show’s rhetoric. Cordelia Freeman, a researcher focusing on the cross-roads between abortion issues and geography, says that focusing on negative medical abortions can “create unnecessary and unfounded fear and anxiety for those considering an abortion” (604). She and other scholars of the same opinion may be concerned that *Call the Midwife* is only serving to make women fear the procedure. The show addresses this in later storylines. In episode two of season ten, Nurse Trixie Franklin is lent to a wealthy private delivery home called Saint Emily’s Clinic. At this institution, it is very common for the doctor to use his power to secretly provide wealthy women with safe abortions. He performs the procedure and simply mislabels it in the paperwork to keep law enforcement in the dark. No harm ever comes to these women and the procedure is regarded as very simple and quick. This points out how

abortion is easier for wealthy women, whether or not it is legal. Because *Call the Midwife* typically focuses on the poorer areas of London in which women are overworked and struggling to put food on the table, it makes sense that the typical abortions seen in the show would be dangerous backstreet abortions. While the danger and struggles are not a reality for all women, they are a reality for women in poor settings such as Poplar, London in the 1960s. Audiences can translate these situations to our modern-day society, as the same class barriers still exist when it comes to abortion access.

Conclusion

Heidi Thomas's *Call the Midwife* is a beloved historical drama that is not afraid to tackle large controversial topics. Debates about the legalization of abortion are often very passionate and heated. Despite this, *Call the Midwife* faces that discourse head-on with no fear. By continuing rhetorical strategies traditionally used by pro-choice groups and borrowing and adapting a strategy from pro-life groups, Thomas is able to create an effective argument in order to sway her audience. Viewers of the show are pulled in by the intense emotions and human connection. Once that pathos is established, Thomas gains the audience's trust with the religious ethos of the nuns. By employing a more effective rhetorical strategy, *Call the Midwife* is able to improve the reach and influence of the pro-choice movement. No matter a person's view on controversial topics, this is an important phenomenon to take note of because any group arguing for any pattern of change has the ability to increase their influence through television. Watching television, whether live or via streaming services, is a very popular pastime in our modern society. Millions of viewers tune in to watch their favorite shows. This means that television already has the reach. In order to influence people's views, the showrunners just need to employ effective rhetorical strategies like Heidi Thomas does in order to take advantage of that influence.

Works Cited

- "About the Show." *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/call-the-midwife/about-the-show>. Accessed 8 November 2022.
- Crawley, Sara L., Rebecca K. Willman, Leisa Clark, & Clare Walsh. "Making Women the Subjects of the Abortion Debate: A Class Exercise that Moves Beyond 'Pro-Choice' and 'Pro-Life.'" *Feminist Teacher*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 227-240.
- Edwards, Chris. "Call The Midwife Devastates Viewers with Illegal Abortion Storyline." *Digital Spy*, 3 Feb. 2019, <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/a26125351/call-the-midwife-devastates-illegal-abortion-storyline/>
- Freeman, Cordelia. "Feeling Better: Representing Abortion in 'Feminist' Television." *Culture, Health, & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2022, pp. 597-611.
- Ryan, Elizabeth. "Call The Midwife Viewers Left 'Heartbroken' by Abortion

Storyline." *Entertainment Daily*, 14 Jan. 2019,
<https://www.entertainmentdaily.co.uk/tv/call-the-midwife-viewers-heartbroken/>

Settles, Paige & Jessica Furgerson. "The Acceptable Abortion: Thematic Consistencies of Prominent Narratives Within the U.S. Abortion Debate." *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2015, pp. 16-39.

Sisson, Gretchen, Nathan Walter, Stephanie Herold, & John J. Brooks. "Prime-time Abortion on *Grey's Anatomy*: What Do US Viewers Learn From Fictional Portrayals of Abortion on Television." *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, vol. 53, 2021, pp. 13-22.

Thomas, Heidi, creator. *Call The Midwife*. Neal Street Productions, 2012-2022.

Thomas, Heidi. "Q&A with Heidi Thomas Creator, Writer, & Executive Producer of Call the Midwife." *PBS*, <https://www.pbs.org/call-the-midwife/q-a-with-heidi-thomas>. Accessed 8 November 2022.