

# From Big Shot to Parent: *Penny Serenade*'s Depiction of Moral Transformation

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Towards the end of George Stevens' 1941 melodrama, *Penny Serenade*, Roger Adams (Cary Grant), a small-town newspaper publisher, is faced with the possibility that he and his wife, Julie Gardiner (Irene Dunne), will not be able to adopt Trina (Baby Biffle), the one-year-old baby whom they foster parented during a year's probationary period. *The Rosalia Courier*, the paper Roger owns, has been forced to close because he can't pay the bills for newsprint. The resulting loss of income disqualifies them from becoming adoptive parents. At a hearing to decide whether to allow them to adopt Trina, the judge (Wallis Clark) tells Roger that he has no option but to deny their petition because the law requires that adoptive parents have sufficient financial resources to provide for their adopted children.

Despite the judge's claim that he has no option but to deny their petition, Roger pleads for mercy, claiming that since he and his wife are really fit parents, it would be an error to deny their petition. What's remarkable about Roger's speech, however, and what drew my attention to it, is his assertion that having been a father has dramatically changed him. In particular, he claims that the experience of caring for the young child has fundamentally altered his character.

You don't know how badly my wife wanted a child. It wasn't so important to me. I-I don't know. I suppose most men are like this, but children never meant a great deal to me. Oh, I liked them all right, I suppose, but... What I'm trying to say, your honor, is the first time I saw her, she looked so little and helpless. I didn't know babies were so little. And then when she took ahold of my finger and held it, she just sort of walked into my heart and she's there to stay. I didn't know I could feel like that. I'd always been, well, kind of careless and irresponsible. I wanted to be a big shot. I couldn't work for anybody. I had to be my own boss. That sort of thing.... I'm not a big shot now. I'll do anything. I'll work for anybody. I'll beg. I'll borrow. I'll... Please judge....

The stark nature of Roger's comparison of his pre- and post-Trina approaches to life is quite remarkable. It's clear that he thinks his previous assumptions about living, which he characterizes as motivated by his desire to be a *big shot*, was morally deficient. At least from the perspective engendered by being young Trina's foster father, Roger sees himself as having been "careless and irresponsible." Falling in love with Trina has had a morally salutary effect on Roger, who now, he says, will do anything to be able to continue to parent Trina, though he stops short of saying he'll steal, only admitting to be willing to beg or borrow.

*Penny Serenade* is an exemplary cinematic presentation of the vicissitudes of moral life. Particularly noteworthy is the clarity with which the film depicts a man's moral transformation because of his experience foster parenting a baby. The focus on the change of a man's assumption about the appropriate ideal to strive for in living his life illustrates quite distinctly how a film's content can embody an important ethical experience had by one or more of its characters. Because that alteration in Roger's stance towards life is the result of caring for an adoptive child, the film breaks new ethical grounds.

## Singing One's Life

Before turning to the film's presentation of a man's moral transformation, I want to consider a very interesting formal feature of *Penny Serenade*: its use of popular song as a narrative device.

Aside from the film's first and final sequences—which both feature the song that is heard repeatedly throughout the film, “You Were Meant for Me”—each of the film's sequences is introduced by means of a song. The songs all come from a boxed set of records that Applejack (Edgar Buchanan), a sort of guardian angel for the couple as well as the manager of Roger Adam's paper, discovers ironically bearing the label “The Story of a Happy Marriage” with the date of 1932, presumably the film's present. The label is ironic because we soon learn that Julie is preparing to leave Roger.

In each of these seven internal sequences of the film (i.e. the ones other than the two framing sequences that take place exclusively in the film's present of 1932), as Julie plays a record, a flashback emerges in which Julie relives a significant episode from the evolution of her relationship with Roger. The flashback is initiated by an iris out from a shot of the spinning record taken from directly above the turntable with the emerging scene from Julie's memory revealed by the expanding iris. We can label these seven sequences Meeting, Courtship and Marriage, Japan and its Aftermath, Finding Trina, Adopting Trina, Trina's Christmas, and Trina's Death.

Such a predominant use of flashbacks to tell a story is unusual in narrative film. In the same year that *Penny Serenade* was released, *Citizen Kane* employed a similar technique in its investigation of the meaning of “Rosebud,” Charles Kane's last word. The difference is that *Penny Serenade* links the flashbacks to songs that Julie is listening to in the film's present, so that the songs are what trigger her memories and these memories are the flashbacks' content. Since there is no indication that Julie's memories are faulty, we take them to show us the actual course of her relationship with Roger.

The film's use of music, more specifically popular songs, is quite innovative and significant. Through this technique, the film highlights a link between our memories of our lives and the songs that we listened at the time. These memories are activated by the songs, which function as prompts to remembering. In this respect, the film is not unlike Proust's famous evocation of his childhood home in Combray in his masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time*. Marcel's recollection is initiated by tasting a madeleine dipped in tea. In the film, it is music that provides the link to one's past, not the taste and smell of a delicious food. It suggests that music can be as evocative of the past as a pastry was for Marcel.

In its final sequence, *Penny Serenade* explicitly thematizes this understanding of the role of music in provoking memory. As Julie plays “You Were Meant for Me” on the phonograph once more, Applejack remarks, “These fool songs kind of take you back,” establishing the film's self-consciousness about its presentation of popular songs as allowing our past to become present to us through memory. The idea is that the songs stimulate our memories so that the past wells up in us almost as if it were fully present, something that the film easily renders with its presentation of the past on the screen without any apparent mediation. The importance of these songs for Julie and Roger's relationship is narratively emphasized when, as she makes the final preparations for her departure, Julie says she can't actually divide up her and Roger's record collection as she has with their other possessions, for they all belong to both of them.

This use of a popular song is skillfully rendered in the film's first framing scene. As Applejack begins to play “You Were Meant for Me,” Julie enters and tells him to take the record off. She explains that she is leaving Roger because “We don't need each other anymore. When that happens to two people, there's nothing left.” She asks Applejack to get her a train ticket and then, giving us a hint of what has caused her to make this decision, she looks at what is clearly a nursery door and closes it, as if quite literally closing the door on her motherhood as well as her marriage. Later, we discover that Trina has died and that the devastation this has wrought on Roger in particular is responsible for Julie's decision to leave him. After flipping through the album of records whose sleeves are labeled with the important events in her and Roger's relationship, she puts on the record she had asked Applejack not to play. As the song begins again, it keeps repeating because of a scratch, causing Julie to move the needle. This initiates the complex iris shot that begins the film's Meeting Sequence in which we see Julie first meeting Roger.

The locale for this sequence is a record store, where the same song is playing on speakers both inside and outside of the store. The film emphasizes the identity of this song by having the record be broken in the same place because of the scratch. The identity of the place in the song where the scratch is establishes that it is the very same record we have been hearing in the opening frame, emphasizing its significance in the development of the couple's relationship. In a shot taken from the store's interior through its plate glass window, we see Roger listening to the song. He notices Julie and enters the store in order to meet her. Not put off by the attention of a different clerk, Roger eventually gets Julie to play a record for him in the private listening area that was common in stores at that time and he enters bearing a stack of records, indicating that he intends to spend a great deal of time with Julie.

### Adoption as the Source of Moral Enlightenment

As I have said, the focus of *Penny Serenade's* portrayal of moral experience is on Roger's transformation from big shot to father. By presenting an adoption as the cause of his moral evolution, the film breaks important new ground. Even today, adoption remains a somewhat taboo subject, especially in film, but it certainly was that in 1941. Prior to *Penny Serenade*, there were only a handful of films that involved adoption, though none of them treated it as a complex moral and social issue. *The Innocence of Lizette* (1916) is the story of a young woman who is adopted by a rich man and who subsequently wants to adopt a child she finds on her doorstep. Two early comedies feature adopted children, Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) and *Small Talk* (1929), the first sound Our Gang comedy. *Rockabye* (1932) features a showgirl who loses her chance to adopt a baby because of her unsavory relations with a criminal and the subject of adoption is only introduced as a device to propel the film's main action. Finally, *Tarzan Finds a Son* (1939) show Tarzan and Jane "adopt" an infant who is the only survivor of a plane crash but the subject of adoption only becomes an issue when the boy's unscrupulous relatives arrive in Africa and attempt to take him from Tarzan, who is acknowledged as his father now.<sup>1</sup> *Penny Serenade* differs from these earlier cinematic depictions in providing a realistic representation of how adoption took place in American society at the time and highlighting the difficulties facing a couple attempting to become adoptive parents.<sup>2</sup> The film broaches the issue of adoption after Julie has lost her baby and is no longer able to have children, presumably because of a hysterectomy though the word is never mentioned in the film. Julie had joined Roger in Tokyo where he had gone to further his career. Throughout the Japan and its Aftermath Sequence, tensions between Roger and Julie arise from Roger's somewhat profligate spending habits, the result of what Roger later characterizes as his carelessness and irresponsibility. This becomes clear through Roger's response to Julie's telling him that she is pregnant. He immediately begins to plan a trip around the world, whereas she is concerned that they protect their nest egg so that they have sufficient means to provide for their child. Their differing approaches to parenthood result in a great deal of tension between them and are unresolved when an earthquake suddenly strikes, causing Julie to miscarry. In the hospital in San Francisco to which she is taken to recover, she learns that she can't have children.

So, the only way for Roger and Julie to become parents is to adopt a child. But even though each of them desires to do so, they are unable to broach the subject with the other. This is an indication of how sensitive a topic adoption was in the US in the late 1930's, for there was such a taboo around the topic of adoption that neither Roger nor Julie are able to raise the subject despite their evident mutual desire to become adoptive parents.

As usual, Applegate provides the necessary mediation between the two partners in the Finding Trina Sequence. We see him raise the issue with Julie when he comes across her in the nursery in their apartment in Rosalia where they have gone so that Roger can finally be his own boss and run *The Courier Press*, thereby assuming his desired role of big shot. Although Julie is enthusiastic

about adopting a child, she is reluctant to raise the issue with Roger until Applejack tells her that Roger feels the same way she does, although he gets her to promise she won't reveal what he told her about Roger. When Roger comes upstairs from the press, Julie disregards her promise to Applejack and immediately broaches the subject of adoption, and she and Roger decide to do so without any hesitation.

The film goes on to portray the vicissitudes of the adoption process, albeit without pressing the issue with any stridency. What's striking, nonetheless, is the humiliation the couple has to endure in order to adopt a child. (At the time, only heterosexual couples were considered appropriate adopters and this is never questioned by the film in any way.) Even though the decision to adopt a child is a deeply personal one, the state believes it should have the power to make sure that those who adopt a child are both willing and able to do so. For this reason, prospective adopters have to undergo a series of tests and inspections from an adoption agency in order to be allowed to adopt a child, and it is these that the film shows resulting in the humiliation of the prospective parents.

Because the agency overseeing the adoption legally has to certify that the couple has the ability and means to care for a child, it is required to inspect various quite private aspects of a couple's life. Even when the person doing the certification is sympathetic and humane, as Miss Oliver (Beulah Bondi) is in the film—though she initially appears rigid and judgmental, perhaps reflecting Julie and Roger's view of her, she is later shown to be kind and considerate, even going out of her way to allow Roger and Julie to have a child more quickly than the norm—she still must subject the couple to various humiliating experiences before she can allow them to adopt.

When Roger and Julie first appear before Miss Oliver in order to request an adoption, the central conflict in their marriage has already been portrayed: Roger's rash behavior as a big shot clashes with Julie's more mature and cautious attitude towards life and parenting. This conflict manifests itself in two ways. First, Roger says that they want to adopt a boy and Julie that she doesn't care about the child's gender. The film will use Roger's preference for a boy to indicate how being a caretaker will change him, but initially it just shows that Roger has a masculinist bias that favors a boy baby. Despite this disagreement, the two of them share a stereotypical, racist picture of what the child they adopt should look like, for they share a desire for "a two-year old with blonde curly hair and a dimple." That the baby has to be Caucasian goes without saying.

The real tension between the two of them is indicated by Roger's response to a question about their income. Roger tells Miss Oliver that he makes about \$100 a week, a clear exaggeration by this struggling newspaper publisher. Later, Julie asks him, "Why do you have to be a big shot," introducing the term for Roger's mode of conduct that he will come to accept as an accurate characterization of his morally flawed approach to life. Here, it's clear that Roger has lied because he thinks there is no way for the adoption agency to discover his true income and he believes that exaggerating his wealth will make it more likely that they will be able to adopt a child, for the agency will be impressed that such a "big shot" wants to adopt a child.

Timing is the next vicissitude the young couple has to endure. Although they want to bring a child home immediately, that's not how things go in the adoption business. There is a line of people waiting to adopt children, they learn, and, in any case, they have to be approved. As part of that process, they have to endure a surprise visit from Miss Oliver who will see if they have suitable accommodations for raising a young child.

This visit clearly shames Julie. It occurs while she and Roger are in the midst of cleaning house, making it difficult for anyone to traverse the apartment. Julie is actually doing the Charleston—another indication of the importance of music to the young couple—when Miss Oliver arrives. But the visit goes well and Miss Oliver is particularly impressed by the lovely nursery they have for the child they plan to adopt. At the end of her visit, Miss Oliver surprises them by telling them they she has a five-week old girl that they can adopt because she thinks that they will be the

perfect couple for the girl. “She’s like no other child,” she tells them, using words that parents often say about their own children.

The age and gender of the child are two factors that continue to present problems, especially for Roger, and at first he doesn’t agree to taking the baby. When they subsequently visit the agency and see her, Julie is transfixed, though Roger still is somewhat reluctant because he retains his desire to adopt a boy. He is won over by Trina when she grabs his finger, and the couple leaves the agency with her, even though they are not prepared for the speed with which they have wound up with an infant to care for.

The following sequence in which they bring Trina home and begin caring for her is the most humorous one in the film, though it also has a serious undercurrent, for it begins the film’s presentation of parenting as a source for the transformation of Roger’s assumptions about how to conduct his life. Both he and Julie are equally unprepared to take care of a five-week old child and the antics they resort to in response to the challenges of doing so are quite amusing. In fact, once again it is Applejack’s intervention that saves the day when he gives Trina a bath, for the couple are quite inept at this as well as other simple tasks of caring for a baby. Although the agency has pursued due diligence about the couple’s home and financial situation before allowing the couple to become Trina’s caretakers, they are less assiduous in making sure that the couple is actually ready to undertake the caretaking necessary for raising an infant. So, the film humorously depicts the nervous parents as they make all sorts of noise in the attempt to be quiet lest they wake the sleeping baby. And, as we know to expect in such scenes, Trina doesn’t wake up because of any of these various noisy events, but does eventually wake up when all is quiet—and screams loudly.

Towards the end of the Finding Trina Sequence, an important event occurs, although its significance is not clear at the time. Julie has no clue what to do to quiet the screaming infant whom she picks up. Roger stands around offering his advice and urging Julie on. Frustrated by her inability to quieten her daughter—Julie is shown to have no “maternal instinct” despite her desire to be a mother—and by Roger’s well-intentioned hectoring, she simply thrusts Trina into his arms. Not knowing exactly what he is doing, Roger rocks the baby back and forth, accidentally putting it to sleep. In evident pride at his “accomplishment,” he tells Julie, “Just wanted her Daddy.”

This humorous and seemingly inconsequential scene actually depicts Roger beginning to discover the satisfactions of being a parent (as well as its anxieties). Even a “simple task” like getting a baby to sleep is fraught with difficulties and can be successfully accomplished only if one is patiently attuned to the child. Julie’s worries about her ability to parent make it impossible for her to easily succeed at it. But Roger finds that he is able to meet the challenge of fathering because his love for his daughter allows him to attend to her needs and to do what is required, even if his efforts succeed only through good luck that he has trouble acknowledging. This gives rise to a real sense of accomplishment on his part for being able to be a good father to his young daughter. This is significant because Roger has, for the first time, identified himself as a father and takes pride in his role as one. This indicates an important potential transformation in his identity that his ongoing fathering of Trina will actually cement.

*Penny Serenade’s* depiction of the process of adoption, then, is remarkable, especially for the time. Although the film does not make a pointed critique of society’s regulation of adoption, it does show that an already difficult decision is made even more challenging by the structure society imposes upon it. This is because the very private decision to become parents of someone else’s child is made into a humiliating public process through the state’s decision to ensure that prospective adopters have the appropriate qualifications.

Of course, the humiliations the couple has to endure to become caretakers of a young child are just one side of the film’s presentation of adoption. Even more significant is its depiction of the ethical transformation that being an adoptive parent brings in its wake, a process the film has just begun to document.

### Transformations in the Moral Life

Both of the *Penny Serenade's* protagonists undergo transformations in the things that they most value. These alterations in the characters' approaches to life, what things they most value, that constitutes the film's central expression of its sense of what is at stake in living a moral life.

Julie's transformation is less complex, treated more quickly, and does not stem from being a parent but rather her discovery that she won't be able to have a biological child. In the hospital after the earthquake caused her miscarriage but before the two have decided to adopt, Julie has undergone an experience that has significant consequences for her understanding of what is important in life. As Roger tries to convince her to move to Rosalia so that he can realize his dream of owning a small-town newspaper, Julie remains distraught at not being able to have a child. The film registers this fact by showing her attention to be focused on even a hint of a child she sees from her hospital bed. Sitting at the foot of her bed, Roger makes the case to move: "If I make a go of the paper, I'll be able to get you anything you want. I'll be able to get you furniture, a car, clothes, everything." To which Julie responds, "You know, it's strange, Roger, but I can't seem to get myself to care about those things now. They don't seem important any more. The one thing I really wanted, I'm never going to have."

Julie's statement sheds retrospective light upon why Roger appealed to her as well as illuminating how the loss of her ability to have a child impacts on her sense of what's important in life, the fundamental ethical issue explored by *Penny Serenade*. Initially, it was Roger's ability to make the grand gesture that made him attractive to her. We first witnessed this tendency in the Meeting Sequence I've already discussed briefly. That scene began with a shot from within the record store where Julie worked that showed Roger walking by as "You Were Meant for Me" was heard playing on the store's record player, repeat and all. Attracted to Julie, Roger engages in various subterfuges in order to get to meet her and spend time with her. Perhaps the most outrageous is his buying 27 records from her even though he does not own a record player, a fact he discloses as he asks her if she can play a record for him at her home. We clearly see that Roger is capable of impulsively grand gestures and that this is the source of his charm, a charm that is reinforced by his being played by Cary Grant and the persona that he created in Hollywood films. Throughout their courtship and the early stages of their relationship, Roger maintains this manner of acting by ignoring practicalities and making grand gestures.

Although Julie enjoyed Roger's impulsiveness when they were dating, as she becomes pregnant, Roger's extravagance and failure to think cautiously about money become more worrying to her. She is troubled by his renting an expensive house for them in Japan that required him to take out loans and, later, his deciding to take a trip around the world rather than plan carefully for the child they expect. The seeds are being sown for the critical assessment of Roger's character that we see in the film and that Roger himself eventually comes to acknowledge.

But it's really the experience of losing a baby and having a hysterectomy that propel Julie's transformation. Instead of wanting the extravagant things Roger buys for her, Julie no longer cares about them. Her desires have changed, as she realizes that there is or was only one thing that she wanted, and that was to have a child. She no longer falls under the spell of her big shot husband, wishing that he would become more responsible, less impulsive, be the sort of person fit for parenting.

Already in its depiction of Julie's transformation, *Penny Serenade* indicates the seriousness with which it takes the question of what truly matters in life. It shows how a significant experience—here, the loss of the ability to have a child—can transform a person's sense of what is really worthwhile, valuable, important. In so doing, the film shows how our experience has an important ethical dimension, for deciding or recognizing what really matters is one of the fundamental ethical tasks for human beings and the film has begun to show how one's experiences have this ethical dimension to them.

### From Big Shot to Parent

*Penny Serenade's* claim to be an examination of the moral life rests squarely, though, on its depiction of Roger Adam's transformation from big shot to parent, exactly the transformation that Julie hoped for and that embodies the film's evaluation of Roger's moral development. Part of the reason for this is that the film also embodies a critique of other 1930's films' celebration of the masculinity embodied by the big shot and, more specifically, in the celebration of the persona of Cary Grant.

To see this, we need to consider the film's presentation of the moral world of the big shot in more detail. What I have emphasized so far is the impulsiveness characteristic of Roger that was initially attractive to Julie but later became a source of concern for her. To round out the film's characterization of the big shot's view of life, we need to look more closely at the big shot's valuation of work and its relation to his family life.

The film's Courtship and Marriage Sequence establishes that the world of a big-shot involves a privileging of work over family life. The relevant scene takes place on New Year's Eve. Roger is late for a party Julie is throwing, so that the issue of the wisdom of her loving a newspaper reporter emerges. The most trenchant concern is voiced by Applejack. "I hate to see a nice girl like you get mixed up with a newspaperman," he tells her. He is worried that Julie won't find true happiness if she is married to a man whose first "wife" is his newspaper. Because the paper always comes first for someone like Roger, Julie's happiness will always take a backseat to the demands of Roger's work. Only when Julie dissimulates by telling Applejack that she "never thought about getting married"—shortly before accepting Roger's unexpected marriage proposal—that Applejack is satisfied that her involvement with Roger is not a mistake. As we witness the course of their relationship, we realize that Applejack's concern was completely justified.

The film here uses the figure of the newspaperman as a shorthand way of encapsulating the problematic world of the big shot. In so doing, the film adopts a staple of 30's films, for many films made at that time featured reporters who were represented as occupying a masculine world of work from which women were generally excluded. They work long hours and are hard-drinking, rough-talking guys whose lives revolve around their work. In these films, their approach to life is valorized as an appropriate way to conduct oneself.

One example of such a film is Howard Hawkes' delightful comedy, *His Girl Friday*. Made the year before *Penny Serenade*, it also stars Cary Grant, who again plays the publisher of a newspaper, Walter Burns. But this time his goal is to keep his ex-wife Hildy (Rosalind Russell) from the mistake of marrying an insurance salesman and moving upstate to have babies. The film presents the drama and excitement of the masculine work-world of the reporter as a better life than the dreariness with which it characterizes the domestic life to which Hildy aspires and that her prospective husband, Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy), embodies in his character. The film thereby endorses the very value scheme that *Penny Serenade* will criticize.

Interestingly, Stanley Cavell discusses *His Girl Friday* as one of the remarriage comedies of the 1930's. Cavell was one of the first philosophers of film to focus on the ways in which films depict their characters' ethical experience and he takes that to be the central mark of their philosophical significance. He uses the term "moral perfectionism" to characterize the way in which films like *His Girl Friday* portray the transformations that characters undergo from living socially sanctioned lives to embracing a life lived in accordance with their own ideals, goals, and aspirations. Unfortunately, he also endorses such films' depiction of women as needing the agency of men in order to attain a more adequate stance towards life.<sup>3</sup> Just as *Penny Serenade* contests *His Girl Friday* on just this ground, I also reject Cavell's endorsement of this sexist trope. Like *Penny Serenade*, I believe that men can benefit from moral transformations at least as much as women.

Initially, though, *Penny Serenade* depicts Roger as just as dominated by masculinist norms as Walter Burns. This comes out clearly in the next scene from the New Year's Eve party. Julie is surprised when Roger does eventually arrive, but the news he has for her is bittersweet: He has

been offered the sort of post he has dreamed of, one that will allow him, he tells her, to be “more or less my own boss,” thereby moving him closer to the hoped-for world of a big shot. The catch is that he has to go to Tokyo. While Roger is clearly determined to pursue this opportunity, he doesn’t want it to cost him his relationship with Julie. He makes her the following offer that reeks of his impulsiveness: That they get married that very evening; that he leave for Tokyo to take his post; but that she come and join him in three months, once he has gotten things set-up for her and has established himself in his job.

I take this scene to present the most important characteristic of the masculinist world of a big shot: prioritizing of the demands of the work-world above those of family life. This ranking is illustrated by Roger’s deciding that his romance with Julie will have to take a backseat to the demands of his career. Although he tries to find a way to reconcile the demands of his two worlds, the reconciliation requires Julie’s willingness to subordinate her desires to his, to allow Roger’s career to set the terms on which their relationship can be conducted. After all, a big shot cannot work for someone else, for to do so is to take orders, something that a big shot won’t abide. Being one’s own boss allows one to have greater control over one’s work-life, but it also entails a vulnerability that the film will soon portray.

An immediate question is why a man would place the requirements of his work, his job, over the interests of his personal life. After all, we usually think of our personal life as the arena in which we get to do those things that we truly value. But this is not how life appears to a big shot—actual or only potential—for work plays an important role in the constitution of such a man’s identity. A man like Roger, an aspiring big shot, takes his work as more than simply a source of income. For him, success in his work is central to establishing the masculine identity of a big shot that is his goal. Thus, we can even see why Roger’s need to see himself as a big shot explains his willingness to give his work priority over his relationship with Julie: If he does not succeed in becoming a big shot, he doesn’t feel that he will be a worthy partner for her. Roger’s work-world affects his personal life because his feelings of self-worth (or lack thereof) stem primarily from his success in the former.

The Japan and its Aftermath Sequence that takes place three months later as Julie arrives in Tokyo connects the two aspects of Roger’s character: his aspiration to be a big shot and his impulsiveness. When Julie tells him that she is pregnant, Roger unilaterally quits his job and uses the small inheritance he has just received to buy expensive tickets for an around the world trip. He dismisses Julie’s worries about what they’ll do when they arrive back in the States, for he has confidence that he’ll be able to find a small-town newspaper to run, thereby realizing his dream of being his own boss and firmly establishing him as a big shot.

Here, we see that the flip side of the big shot’s need to be his own boss is the impulsiveness of his actions. The bold man of action like Roger need not share the concerns of a person like Julie who appears to be more timid and less self-assured. From this perspective, women are seen as too concerned with domestic issues, too worried that things won’t work out. The exaggerated self-assurance of the big shot allows him to act boldly, in Nietzschean fashion, counting on things working out.

We have now seen how *Penny Serenade* sets up the ethical demand that Roger come to acknowledge the flaws in his character. If he is to be a suitable husband to Julie as well as an acceptable father to a child, Roger will have to reject the values for which he has lived: being a big shot whose attractiveness depends upon his impulsivity. In contrast to *His Girl Friday*, which valorizes those very features of the childless Walter Burns’ character, *Penny Serenade* shows that being a parent has a transformative effect on Roger that entails a rejection of his previous values.

*Penny Serenade* includes a shorthand version of Roger’s transformation in the following way: We saw that when Roger and Julie discuss adopting a child, he is adamant that he’ll only be happy if they adopt a boy. When we see him playing with his adoptive daughter Trina six years later, however, he responds to Julie’s teasing question about his preference for a boy by denying

it: “You wanted a boy,” he asserts. “I didn’t want a boy.” This bit of self-delusion highlights the change that has occurred in Roger: As the adopted father of this baby girl, he unselfconsciously denies his previous self and its preferences.

But what about being a father to a baby girl has changed Roger’s sense of himself? In the speech I quoted to begin this chapter, Roger attributes his alteration to the depth of his feelings for his adoptive daughter. As he tells the judge, the intensity of the feelings he has for Trina are something for which he was not prepared. They are so strong that they have changed him, made him into a human being with fundamentally different values than those he previously had. He now criticizes his own obsession with being a big shot, stressing less his failure to have achieved that goal than his realization that the aspiration to be one was misguided. Because he loves his daughter so intensely, what really matters to him is being a good father to her, doing all that is necessary for that to happen, regardless of what sort of work he might have to take on in order to do so. He has become a responsible member of his family, shedding the unreliability inherent in his former big shot persona.

Now it certainly is true that an important component to being a parent, part of what make all the work of parenting worthwhile, is the depth and steadiness of feelings of love that one experiences through one’s love for one’s child. Roger claims, and this resonates with my own experience, there is no other human relationship that has this quality. While the child is young, their helplessness and their vulnerability make it possible to have a loving experience that is not mixed with the sorts of ambiguities and ambivalences that characterize most of our other mature loving relationships. It is this deep love that takes Roger by surprise and that produces his new, more mature self.

This is itself an important ethical experience that forms part of the moral center of this film: that taking caring of a vulnerable human being, a child, can be a source of such profound feelings of love for another human being. These feelings create a sense of responsibility for that person’s happiness that is totally foreign to a big shot’s world (except as the province of a woman such as Julie). Even more remarkable is the fact that the object of Roger’s love is not his biological child. *Penny Serenade* rejects the notion that a parent’s feeling of love for their child requires that child to be their biological progeny, thereby valorizing adoption as a fully legitimate form of parenting.

There is more to Roger’s transformation, however, than the fact that he now accepts responsibilities he once scorned, for he also has acquired a different understanding of the importance of work in his life. Whereas earlier Roger had placed work before his relationship with Julie—at one point she quips “The newspaper always comes first around here” when her request that the bathtub be fixed had to take a back seat to a repair of the press’ linotype machine—he now clearly sees his work as having value only in so far as it provides for his family’s well-being.

That work has only an instrumental value in a father’s world marks an important distinction of that world from the big shot’s world we explored earlier, and it results from the demands of being a responsible parent. In the big shot’s world, work was a way for a man to construct his identity. The goal was to see oneself as someone who was better than others because he didn’t have to listen to the demands of a boss. This is why, for example, Roger wanted to work for himself: If he could work when *he* chose and do what *he* thought was important, then he could think of himself as better than the myriad others who were slaves to the demands of their bosses. This also explains Roger’s desire to be a newspaper publisher in a small town, for this work setting allows him to be in charge of all the processes of production and thus to see himself as the big shot he aspires to be.

I use the phrase, “a father’s world,” to contrast the basic attitudes and interpretations that govern Roger’s experience as a result of having adopted Trina. It is not meant to essentialize fathers’ experience of the world, for there certainly are myriad fathers who do not occupy what I characterize as a father’s world. Rather, it is my way of conceptualizing the film’s presentation of Roger as undergoing a fundamental moral transformation through the experience of being Trina’s father, emphasizing that he now accepts a different set of moral values than he used to.

In this sense, then, we can say that a father's identity has very different sources and very different characteristics than a big shot's. At the most obvious level, a father's identity comes not from his relationship to his work, but from his relationship to his child(ren) and partner, so that the realm of life that provides its meaning is reversed. Instead of seeking to succeed at work so that he can maintain an identity as better than others, a father like Roger works primarily to make it possible for his family to live. His sense of accomplishment comes less from his success in the work-world than from his parenting, his success at raising a child. The sense of self that emerges from this activity, even if highly successful, is radically different from that of a big shot, for a good father does not feel good because he sees himself as superior to others but because of the pleasure he receives from parenting and the knowledge that he is doing it well.

Thus, at a first level, *Penny Serenade* criticizes the form of masculinity that a film like *His Girl Friday* celebrates: making one's work, one's career, more important, more central to one's life, than one's personal relations, one's family. The threat of losing Trina because of his lack of income forces Roger to articulate the inversion of values that has resulted from him being a father, to see that he values being a father above succeeding at his work. Indeed, his sense of accomplishment for being a good father can even provide solace for his inability to achieve the level of success as a publisher that he had hoped to achieve.

It is in this sense that *Penny Serenade* functions as a response to *His Girl Friday*. In that film, Hildy, a female newspaperman, so to speak, comes to realize that she really belongs in the newspaper business rather than the domestic world of the home. In that film's terms, this is because the work-world of the paper represents an exciting adventure that Hildy enjoys being on with her ex-husband, Walter, the newspaper's publisher. From that point of view, raising kids seems inexorably dull, an option only chosen because of the impact of a residual sense of the feminine.

*Penny Serenade* criticizes this perspective as masculinist. Only a man who is ignorant of the nature of a father's world could so easily dismiss it as having little, if anything, to offer. By showing Roger Adam's transformation from aspiring big shot to satisfied father, *Penny Serenade* asks that we see parenting as a source of deep joy that can profoundly change a man's world.

From this point of view, *Penny Serenade* asks us to look more deeply at a man's experience than many narrative films. Although it is often claimed—unjustifiably in my view—that all films are told from a male point of view, there are clear limits to the types of masculinity such films usually hold out as admirable. (Generally, it is comedies that portray “weak” men as superior to “strong” ones.) *Penny Serenade* is unique in its presentation of a man's realization that the norm of masculinity that he had accepted in his life—that of being a big shot—is inadequate and that an alternative, less socially valorized norm of masculinity—that of being a father—is more adequate as an expression of his life and experiences.

### **A Parent's Vulnerability**

Once Roger has secured the adoption of Trina, it might seem perverse for *Penny Serenade* to take her from him and his wife. Nonetheless, this is exactly what the film does. The Trina's Death Sequence, the film's final flashback initiated by a spinning record, begins with Miss Olive (Beulah Bondi) reading a letter from Julie that explains that Trina suddenly fell ill and died. Trina's death is such a blow to Roger in particular, that he is unable to bear anything that reminds him of her, be it his home or, even, his wife. It is Roger's withdrawal from this world that threatens his marriage and explains Julie's decision to leave him.

Despite the somewhat contrived nature of this element in *Penny Serenade's* plot, it makes an important point.<sup>4</sup> So far, the film has presented the world of a father as superior to the world of a big shot in virtue of the emotional connections that a father has towards his child(ren). The film now undertakes the presentation of one of the dangers of inhabiting such a world: it makes one's happiness dependent upon the well-being of others.

The idea that men (or, at least, men subject to masculinist assumptions) are uncomfortable with the idea that they and their happiness are dependent upon others is one that I have explored in my work on the unlikely couple film (Wartenberg, 1999). In films like *Pygmalion* and *It Happened One Night*, we are introduced to male characters who have difficulty in accepting the equality of their partners lest it force them to acknowledge their own dependence on them. (This is a theme also explored by Stanley Cavell in *Cities of Words* and other writings.)

*Penny Serenade* asks us to extend our awareness of the anxieties of our finitude to our relationships to our children. Because a father's life can be so fundamentally enriched and altered by the love he feels for his child, his own happiness depends on the well-being of that child. While this is the source of Roger's realization that his job is no longer important to him as a source of his own self-image, but merely as the means by which he can (try to) ensure the well-being of his daughter, his sense of self suffers another diminution because he is unable to prevent bad things—death, in this case—from befalling her.

There is thus a two-fold threat to the self that the film depicts as the result of identifying oneself as a father. First, one has to accept the idea that one's job will not be the central aspect of one's life, but rather the means for taking care of the attachments that are central to being a father. Second comes the realization that, no matter what one tries to do, no matter how hard one works, he cannot fully control what might befall the child(ren) one loves. This double displacement of a job from the center of a man's life is the ethical significance of *Penny Serenade's* story.

The film's upbeat ending, one that achieves narrative closure by giving Roger the son he initially wanted, tries to mitigate the impact of its narrative. Nonetheless, the film demonstrates that being a father, while potentially a source of great richness in a man's life, makes a man vulnerable to the well-being of his child(ren). *Penny Serenade* asks us to understand that, despite the risks, being a parent, adoptive or not, is an important experience for men, one that can have beneficial effects on their assumptions about what matters in life.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the moral experience presented by a narrative film. We have seen how *Penny Serenade* endows various aspects of its characters' lives with deep moral significance. Initially, I explored the film's innovative depiction of adoption, arguing that the film illuminated some morally problematic ways in which parents were humiliated through the intervention of public agencies into their private lives.

But I have also emphasized that the narrative trajectory of the film shows us how what its two central characters take to be valuable in life undergoes a transformation in the course of their experience. This transformation—portrayed in much greater detail in the case of Roger than Julie—involves a reassessment of their lives and what matters in them. *Penny Serenade* shows that the experience of human beings has an important ethical dimension to it, and it endorses a form of masculinity that other Hollywood films reject. By presenting the outcome of a difficult educative process as a man's acceptance of his identity as a parent as his primary one, *Penny Serenade* embraces the notion that a morally superior life can be the outcome of an ethically charged experience such as that of becoming a parent.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Films\\_about\\_adoption](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Films_about_adoption). In the Tarzan film, the main issue is whether Boy will be taken from Tarzan by his unscrupulous relatives. The film does present Boy as Tarzan's son despite his not being biologically related to him.
- <sup>2</sup> Irene Dunne adopted a daughter, Mary Frances, in 1938. It is interesting to speculate on whether that had any effect on the film focusing on adoption.
- <sup>3</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press: 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> The sequence of scenes leading up to Trina's death is the weakest part of the film, especially the Christmas pageant. Aside from some clumsy foreshadowing, the scenes suffer from sentimentality. I have therefore skipped over them as much as possible.