ANALYSIS

The Cider House Rules (1985)

John Irving

(1942-)

"In *The Cider House Rules* (1985), Irving avails himself of many of the Dickensian form's classic narratological elements, including its intentionally conflicted melange of characters, its intricate layering of plots, its penchant for the detective story, and even its frequent depiction of orphans, the occupants of society's most innocent and vulnerable stations. *The Cider House Rules* also affords Irving a venue for challenging our assumptions, fears, and prejudices about abortion, that most fractious of social issues. Rather than merely rendering an overt decision about the ethics of abortion, Irving, using the Dickensian mode of characterization, chooses to confront his readers with detailed, fully realized visions of the complications and uncertainties that comprise the human condition…. Irving borrows from Dickens by making an orphan of diminutive and humble stature a central figure… In the fabulistic world of Dickens and Irving…coincidences are indispensable to the connective tissue of characterscape….

Despite Irving's careful and deliberately indeterminate depiction of human nature in his novel, Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson argue that as a polemic *The Cider House Rules* 'is seriously flawed,' and because 'Irving's "correct political vision" sometimes distorts the book's larger theme—the problematic nature of personal and social "rules"—the difficulties with Irving's new fiction are considerable.' Yet Harter and Thompson's critique of *The Cider House Rules* neglects to allow for the tremendous import of Irving's ethics of storytelling in the novel. As an essentially Dickensian novelist, Irving simply refuses to permit his readers to resort to easy and obvious decisions about either his own ethos or the ethical systems of his characters. With its variegated landscape of humanity—and the elusiveness and uncertainty that genuine humanity necessarily entails—the Dickensian novel functions in *The Cider House Rules* as the ethical vehicle via which Irving challenges his readers to consider the abortion debate from a host of vantage points, rather than merely adopting a 'correct political vision'….

Although *The Cider House Rules* has been both criticized and lauded as an 'idea' book, one that crusades for a singular position on the abortion issue, we would do well to note the author's own account of the novel's genesis: 'I wanted to write an orphan novel. It was a year before abortion entered the story,' Irving remarks, 'but it made perfect sense. In the early part of the century, what doctor would be most sympathetic to performing abortions but a doctor who delivered unwanted babies, then cared for them in an orphanage?'… While Irving admits that *The Cider House Rules* is perhaps his first polemical novel, Harter and Thompson's understanding of Irving's use of the polemic fail to account for the significance of the characterscapes that undergird Irving's fictions. Undoubtedly, Irving proffers a novel that sets forth an argument of great controversy, but, as is his practice elsewhere, the lives of his characters and the events that transpire remain too broad and various to represent a single, essentialist position within the abortion debate….

In his review of *The Cider House Rules* Benjamin DeMott contends that the value of Irving's novel lies in its treatment of abortion as a subject rooted both in our collective past and in the heterogeneous ways in which we live in the present…. 'Irving draws the readers close in the space of his imagination,' says DeMott, 'to an understanding of essential links, commonalities—even unities—between factions now seething with hatred for each other'… Irving offers detailed histories not only of the novel's two main characters, Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells, but also of Melony, Wally Worthington, and Candy Kendall, among others…. Like Dickens, Irving derides the notion of living by abstract rules, and in the person of Larch be begins his assault upon the 'rules' that govern the concept of abortion…. Larch [seeks] a practical and immediate solution for such women in need as Mrs. Eames and her daughter—a solution generated out of the pragmatics of physical circumstance as opposed to legalistic ideology…. [expediency]

Irving refuses to render any overt value judgments and offers nothing more than the precarious elements of human storytelling. Although abortion clearly lies at the center of these passages, Irving carefully avoids entering into a philosophical debate about when life actually begins or whose rights must be protected. Irving eschews any theological discussion that might affect the actions of his characters or the manner in which readers might interpret those actions. Interestingly, Larch's decision seems to spring from his understanding of his own fallibility, his own fallen nature. Through his interaction with Mrs. Eames and her daughter he recognizes the culpability of his own conduct, as well as that of a society that tacitly condones the creation of orphans, prostitutes, and unwanted pregnancies…. [Blaming society rather than human nature and individual choice is in the tradition of Marxism, which Irving has condemned.]

Larch continually falters. As with his addiction to ether—which begins as a practical remedy to the gonorrhea he contracts from Mrs. Eames and later becomes a means for both relaxing and, perhaps, escaping temporarily from his guilt… After denying Mrs. Eames daughter an abortion, he never again pauses to consider the legal or ethical ramifications of abortion when faced with a mother [*sic*] in need…. One's moral position must never be lorded over the physical needs of another…. While Larch indeed passes judgment upon those characters who seem to stand in supposed moral superiority over Missy for becoming pregnant and over him for becoming a doctor who would perform abortions, he will not deny any woman, in this instance Missy, whom he clearly sees as a victim…. Larch…claims to do both 'the Lord's work and the Devil's work'….

Irving…further complicates our understanding of Larch as both a saint and sinner by introducing the figure of Homer Wells, the eternal orphan who becomes a surrogate son for Larch, as well as his professional successor… Homer develops a relationship with another 'older' orphan, Melony, who, like himself, has yet to be adopted successfully…. While Homer and Melony develop a sexual relationship, even a loving relationship of sorts, Homer ultimately breaks his commitment to Melony when he goes to live at Heart's Rock upon the invitation of Wally Worthington and Candy Kendall…. While Melony's detective tale allows Irving to establish the gravity of Homer's betrayal of her, as well as that of his subsequent betrayal of Wally Worthington, it also affects the manner in which he sees the 'sins' of others. As with Larch's convoluted relationships with women in *The Cider House Rules*, Homer's broken promise to Melony and his secret love for Candy teach him to see life's variegated shades of meaning, to understand the foibles of human interaction, and to recognize that a legalistic approach to 'rules' never reveals the full complexity of any situation….

Because of his sympathetic vigil upon the belly of this mother, Homer cannot bring himself to believe what Larch preaches about abortion. At the same time, because of his relationship with Larch he cannot condemn his 'father's' actions either…. 'Homer felt there was nothing as simple as anyone's fault involved; it was not Larch's fault—Larch did what he believed in'…. Unlike Larch, who in his later years withdraws more deeply into his ether addiction and his medical routine… Homer self-consciously shares his love with others and cannot imagine a life without Candy or his newly conceived baby. Because he believes that Wally died in the war, Homer avoids confronting his guilt over the love he has shared with Candy or his betrayal of his best friend. Soon after the birth of Angel—baptized symbolically by a drop of Larch's sweat as he delivers him—the news that Wally has been found alive tests Homer's love for Candy, Wally, and Angel. Yet Homer's real challenge comes fifteen years later, shortly after the death of Larch by an accidental ether overdose….

As the foreman of the orchard for the last fifteen years…Homer bears the responsibility for posting 'the cider house rules'…. Homer refuses to break the 'rules' that govern the practice of medicine. He also feels that he cannot perform an abortion because of an ethical belief in the sanctity of the human soul….he considers it tantamount to 'killing' a human being…. In the novel's final chapter, aptly entitled 'Breaking the Rules,' Homer faces multiple, nearly simultaneous decisions regarding various 'rules' of ethical behavior. The impact of these decisions upon those characters that he loves and lives with make these issues especially difficult. As the title of the chapter intimates, Homer will 'break the rules,' and, in so doing, he will come to understand that ethical law cannot be approached legalistically…. Ultimately, Homer's decision to perform an abortion for Rose Rose, Mr. Rose's pregnant daughter and Angel's first love, alters his perspective about the procedure…

Clearly, *The Cider House Rules* should not be read as a novel that finally embraces the act of abortion. Homer's own belief system radically contradicts such a conclusion. The novel demonstrates the conflicted nature of human dealings and the inadequacy of legalism as a means for responding to our most pressing needs…. Homer recognizes that he cannot deny strangers what he would give freely to those he loves and those he knows: 'Because he knew now that he couldn't play God in the worst sense; if he could operate on Rose Rose, how could he refuse to help a stranger? How could he refuse anyone?… I'll give them what they want, he thought. An orphan or an abortion.'… Only the sanctity of individual choice in relation to human community can determine the system of ethical values that governs our lives."

Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack
"The Ethics of Storytelling in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*"
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"*The Cider House Rules* [is another] of Irving's novels to feature the conspicuous absence of a father. Here, the plight of orphans who lack the social identity conferred by parents is represented by Homer Wells. Here, too, the desire for knowledge in the narrative is displaced toward the maternal alone; in an orphanage where women come and go, unaccompanied by men, it is the mother as source about whom Homer muses. While Homer's own father is suppressed—a gap that will never be filled, and with no regret on Homer's part—fatherhood is nevertheless represented problematically in the novel. Senior Worthington, paterfamilias (as his name suggests) of the Edenic apple orchard, is rendered impotent, his memory enfeebled by Alzheimer's disease until he becomes literally absent in death.

Mr. Rose evokes another configuration in the oedipal drama when he rapes and impregnates his own daughter. Even Ray Kendall, idealized as loving father and mechanical wizard, sinks into impotent silence in the face of the daughter's deceptions with Homer, and such masculine-identified power as he has—in his genius with machines—is undermined when he blows himself up with a torpedo. Among natural fathers, nothing seems to exist between impotence and rapaciousness, except for Homer Wells himself, whose loving relationship with his son, Angel, is significantly disrupted by his erasure of himself as father. For fifteen years, he lives a lie by denying that he is Angel's father, and one of the goals of the narrative is to expose this lie to Homer himself, to make him accept his own fatherhood. But even in that exposure is ambivalence. Irving suppresses the revelatory scene we've been waiting for. All Homer says to Angel is that 'It's time you knew the whole story,' and the scene shifts; the son is given no chance to respond, to uncover the complexity and damage of the father's evasions. The effect is deflation and anticlimax, a rather awkward refusal to satisfy our curiosity.

Immediately after Homer's unnarrated confession, he departs the scene to take up his mentor's former position at the orphanage. That is, he never lives in a normalized, acknowledged paternal relation to his son. Irving suggests one of two things: either the impossibility of fathers living in just relation to sons, or the impossibility of himself imagining such fathers. If the latter, one may argue that the failure to imagine paternal authority is responsible for weakening the novel's thrust toward moral disclosure so that one thread of the narrative—that involving the discovery to Angel of his father's identity—collapses in on itself.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the paradox that this is the novel that most fully attempts to imagine Irving's own paternal origin: Wally Worthington is, like Irving's nameless progenitor, a World War II flyer who is shot down over Burma. His story becomes a significant set-piece in the narrative. Irving's own family romance conceives Wally as a blonde Adonis of the orchards, handsome, athletic, and innocent. The idealized projection of the absent father, however, is undercut when Wally comes home from the war, his moral innocence intact, but his physical power virtually destroyed: he is paralyzed and has been rendered sterile. In these particular injuries, then, this symbolized father depicts absence as well as, perhaps, oedipal revenge for it (a 'castration' of sorts); at the same time, the novel expresses ambivalence by forgiving that absence, locating its cause outside the otherwise ideal father's will, in powerlessness.

Perhaps because it resists imagining the progenitor as paternal authority, *The Cider House Rules* conjures fathers in other ways. Overtly about the situation of the orphan (one of the Victorians' favorite tropes) and the social plight of mothers who cannot keep their children, the novel's consistently *felt* impulse is to explore fatherly relations, figured in terms of surrogacy. Here, in the displaced paternal relationship, one can uncover more classic oedipal conflict than Irving displays elsewhere. Wilbur Larch, the crusty, dedicated obstetrician, abortionist, and pediatrician residing at St. Cloud's orphanage, conceives an intense fatherly love for Homer Wells. Unable to express this love, except in his increasingly obsessive musings in his journals, he provides a pattern for Homer's own inability to acknowledge his paternity. Nevertheless, unlike Homer, Larch desires—and assumes—paternal authority over his 'son,' whom he expects to replace him at the orphanage, and he devises an elaborate ruse in order to enable Homer to practice medicine without a license. His plan involves constructing a story for Homer, a narrative to create and explain a new identity. In this Irving enacts the son's fantasy of anxiety over the father's attempts to inscribe his identity and thus to erase his own subjectivity.

For his part, Homer at first fulfills the oedipal pattern of resistance by choosing flight from one (surrogate) father; after Larch's death, however, the Victorian morality that structures many of the novel's choices—that is, commitment to duty—supersedes the oedipal conflict in determining narrative closure. Homer capitulates to Larch's plans, assuming the identity of Dr. F. Stone so as to deliver babies and abort fetuses at St. Cloud's. The figure of the Victorian father has the last say. In this later novel, Irving seems more comfortable in determining the fixity of social identity that derives from paternal authority than in opening up the possibility of more fluid subjectivity. This is, of course, in keeping with his debt to his Victorian forefathers."

Debra Shostak
"The Family Romances of John Irving"
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Michael Hollister (2014)