

DARK APPRENTICESHIPS

THE NOVELS OF JOHN IRVING



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Dark Apprenticeships

The Novels of John Irving

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Introduction

Goal and Methodology

The following dissertation proposes to investigate the major works and contribution to American literature of John Irving, particularly through the frame of the *Bildungsroman* genre. While a number of critics take it as a given that Irving is a crafter of modern *Bildungsromane*, hardly any of them¹ has bothered to invest the time and effort needed for a further and deeper investigation of just how Irving carries on that tradition.

In addition to this lack of closer research into the makeup and classification of Irving's writing, there also seems to be quite a dearth of secondary literature once one gets up to *A Widow for One Year* (1998); *The Fourth Hand* (2001) and *Until I Find You* (2005) remain fairly untouched by the academic world.² For the purposes of this work, the former will be largely ignored though certainly briefly discussed, as it seems to represent the only novel in Irving's repertoire that is *not* "Irving-esque"; in attempting to break free from the mold of his well-honed style, he succeeded in creating something very different – a tribute to the discipline and hard work he values – but also created his worst-received book in twenty years and (in my personal opinion, though this view is sadly widespread) a thoroughly uninspiring novel.

A major focus of the work is his second most recent³ novel, the aforementioned *Until I Find You*, a book Irving has openly described as his most deeply personal to date, and a mammoth novel (over 800 pages in the paperback). Here the theme of the missing parent – a hallmark in one shape or another, and in varying degrees of intensity, in nearly all of his novels – comes in its most intense and unadulterated form, showing distinct and clearly painful parallels to Irving's own life spent wondering about a father he never knew and was quite intentionally never told anything about by his mother, and hence had to invent.

Of similar impact is the issue of child molestation, of which Irving became a victim at the age of 11, a fact which tainted his relations with women for over two decades; according to Irving himself, it was only the experience of having his own children and wanting desperately to protect

¹ A notable and excellent exception is Elke Weiß's *John Irving und die Kunst des Fabulierens* (2002).

² The key secondary works on John Irving include *John Irving* by Carol C. Harter & James R. Thompson (1986); *Understanding John Irving* by Edward C. Reilly (1991); *John Irving: A Critical Companion* by Josie P. Campbell (1998); *John Irving*, Harold Bloom, ed. (2001), and Elke Weiß's book (see above).

³ While the dissertation was being written, *Until I Find You* was the latest novel. As of the time of this dissertation's publication, Irving has since published *Last Night in Twisted River* (2009) and *In One Person* (Simon & Schuster, 2012).

them from such predations that allowed him to finally reveal the secret he had kept since childhood (and thus begin with the process of working through it). Such factors make a brief biographical sketch, which will comprise the first section of the dissertation, indispensable.

Once this has been accomplished, some preliminary remarks (largely from Irving himself) on Irving's unique approach to the writing process will help to round out the necessary background information before turning to the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and particularly its evolution from German prototype to the twentieth / twenty-first century Anglo-American "version." Attempting to fill this gap in the research will necessitate, prior to addressing the evolution, closely re-examining the genre itself in terms of what does and what does not constitute a *Bildungsroman*.

A question of key importance to this work is that of where Irving chooses to utilize traditional methods and where he deviates from and innovates upon them, as evinced in a number of his most memorable and, from a *Bildungsroman* perspective, most interesting novels. Here a total of five⁴ of his to date twelve novels will be discussed, starting with his breakthrough work *The World According to Garp* and ending with the aforementioned *Until I Find You*. Once these concrete examples have been thoroughly examined, the dissertation will continue with an overall analysis of his varied and evolving writing style and will address his contribution as *Bildungsromancier* and to modern American literature.

Finally, this work will investigate and discuss what may be considered Irving's "internal" *Bildungsroman*. Though Irving himself is extremely critical of taking authors' biographies into consideration when discussing their work, the very themes and approaches he has chosen make doing so practically unavoidable; interestingly, this has had something akin to a "chilling effect" on academic research into his work: the biographical tinge has been taken as something of a given and as such never been thoroughly investigated. This being the case, the question to what extent Irving's development as a novelist reflects his own personal, inimitable and appropriately skewed "coming of age" calls for closer examination.

John Irving: Biography in Brief

The man who would come to be known worldwide as John Irving was born John Wallace Blunt, Jr. on March 1, 1942 in Exeter, New Hampshire. Irving never met or knew his biological father, whom he for years believed had divorced John's mother before his birth. As he would

⁴ These five are: *The World According to Garp* (1978), *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), *The Cider House Rules* (1985), *A Widow for One Year* (1998), and *Until I Find You* (2005).

later discover, they in fact did not split until he was two years old.⁵ His mother would soon remarry, and at the age of six young John was adopted by his stepfather, Frances Winslow Irving, becoming John Winslow Irving.

Irving recalls his childhood as one with a number of trials and major traumas. An aloof child and one who enjoyed spending a great deal of time on his own,⁶ Irving also struggled with dyslexia, which at the time was still undiagnosed. As such, school was difficult for him; though he would succeed in graduating from the rigorous Phillips Exeter Academy, it would take him five years and not the customary four.⁷ Tellingly, these first difficult experiences with the world of reading and writing by no means deterred Irving from enjoying literature; instead they instilled in him a sense of discipline, of having to earn what others took for granted: reading and writing, understanding and being understood.

Running deeper than these difficulties, however, was the constant “presence in absence” of Irving’s biological father, the result not only of the boy’s natural curiosity, but also and especially to the fact that his father’s identity, character, etc. were all taboo topics for his mother; quite simply, she (and the rest of Irving’s family) adamantly refused to tell him a single thing about him. While Irving has repeatedly emphasized what a gift this was to him as someone learning to develop and expand his own imaginative abilities, it also had the double effect of withholding from him crucial information as to his provenance and of providing him his first, formative experience with the adult world of keeping secrets.⁸

Nor, sadly, was this to be the last such experience. In 1953, when Irving was only 11 years old, he was sexually abused by a much older woman, a friend of his mother’s in her twenties. Though Irving claims that, at the time, he did not necessarily understand that a crime had taken place and was very fond of the woman, what hurt him more than the act itself was the fact that he had to keep it a secret.⁹ As he progressed through puberty, Irving was also forced to recognize that he had a fixation on older women. At the time Irving blamed himself for this fixation, assuming there had to be something wrong with him; in retrospect, he claims that likely what he felt (though certainly not consciously) was the urge to keep forming secret relationships, in keeping with his sexual initiation.¹⁰

The combination of these secrets, both as to “where he came from” and “where he had been,” i.e., of having to imagine the biological father he never knew and to conceal a crime,

⁵ Academy of Achievement (2005) for actual account; Irving still believed in his mother’s original version of the facts in a 1998 interview, cf. New York Times, p. 2

⁶ Academy (2005), pp. 2-3

⁷ UNH (2005) p. 1

⁸ Cf. the character of Dr. Wilbur Larch on maturity and keeping secrets in *The Cider House Rules*.

⁹ New York Times (2005), p. 1; 3sat (2006), p. 2; Das Erste (2006), p. 1

¹⁰ Das Erste (2006), p. 1

would have far-reaching consequences for Irving, both as author and as human being, as shall be demonstrated and examined far more closely over the course of this work.

To return to Irving's formative years, he claims to have begun storytelling in spiral notebooks at the age of 12 or 13¹¹ and to have discovered Dickens, who was to become his lifelong role model, at the age of 14. Asked about how he was inspired, Irving responded:

I just know that there was a way I felt when I finished reading "Great Expectations." It was the extremes of it that captivated me...The power of self delusion. The power of wishful thinking [...] It was a great story, a story that moved me and when I finished it I wanted to begin again. I was 14 when I read it and I'm sure there were other books in my childhood that had a similar effect on me. But it's the first one I remember.¹²

After graduating from Exeter, where he had become intensely involved in school wrestling, in 1961, Irving enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh, where he would only stay for one year, having learned the lesson that his aspirations for a future in wrestling held little promise.

The years that followed brought significant changes to Irving's life. Returning to his "first love" of writing and seeking to broaden his horizons, Irving spent 1963-1964 abroad in Vienna, his first opportunity to view his home country from the outside.¹³ In 1964 he married his first wife, Shyla Leary, and their first son Colin was born the following year, the same year Irving graduated from the University of New Hampshire.

This college experience was crucial to Irving for a number of reasons. Pittsburgh had disabused him of his greater wrestling ambitions (though he still wrestles to this day) and Vienna would open his eyes to the greater world around him, but marriage and fatherhood were arguably even greater influences, for extremely varied reasons.

Firstly, as Irving has plainly stated from very early on in his career, his writing and worldview were greatly influenced by becoming a father while still in college (age 23). This made Irving an overprotective father overnight. As he himself claimed in a 2005 interview, "From the moment I became a father at too young an age, the world became a terrifying place."¹⁴ This is echoed in the behavior of the eponymous protagonist from Irving's breakthrough work *The World According to Garp*:

¹¹ Atlantic (1998), p. 7

¹² Salon (1997), p. 6

¹³ This would prove formative, not only in light of the fact that Vienna has crept into a great number of his novels, particularly the earlier ones, but also for Irving's scathing criticism of American prudishness and political ignorance.

¹⁴ UNH (2005), p. 2

There was so much to worry about, when worrying about children, and Garp worried so much about everything; at times, especially in these throes of insomnia, Garp thought himself to be psychologically unfit for parenthood. Then he worried about *that*, too, and felt all the more anxious for his children. What if their most dangerous enemy turned out to be *him*?¹⁵

Irving's new status as father and husband also had very real world consequences as well, namely, it exempted him from the draft for the Vietnam War. Irving has himself reflected on how this served to distance him from his contemporaries: on the one hand, he had to shoulder the responsibilities towards a wife and child at an early age, on the other he was spared the tremendous decision of what to do if he were drafted for the war.¹⁶

Despite his anxieties about fatherhood and newfound responsibilities, this was an extremely creative period for him. Not only did he and Shyla have a second son, Brendan, in 1970, Irving now also put out his first novels: *Setting Free the Bears* (1968), *The Water-Method Man* (1972), and *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974), the second and third of which were published during his time at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, where Irving would meet, study under and befriend Kurt Vonnegut.¹⁷

Though his first three books received respectable acclaim, none of them can be said to have made him a household name or, more importantly for Irving, none was enough of a financial success to allow him to write full-time. This would come four years later with what is surely Irving's most widely known book, the previously mentioned *The World According to Garp*, which would not only ultimately sell millions of paperback copies and be translated into countless languages worldwide, but which also established Irving as a wildly successful if not altogether uncontroversial author.¹⁸

That is not so say, however, that Irving's worries were over. Only three years after *Garp* was published, he and his first wife divorced; Irving readily admits that the years following the divorce were extremely hard for him.

To complicate matters further, it was at this time that his mother gave him the letters his biological father had written her during the Second World War, where he had served as a bomber pilot, along with pictures and newspaper clippings. Not only was this the first time in Irving's life that he received any information on his father beyond his name; the letters also made it clear that, although John Blunt had indeed wanted to divorce Irving's mother, he had also wanted to be a part of raising their son, something she had never allowed.

¹⁵ *The World According to Garp*, p. 196

¹⁶ UNH (2005), p. 2

¹⁷ Powells (2005), p. 8

¹⁸ Here I am referring on the one hand to the massive, unprecedented marketing campaign and, on the other, to the nature of his success, i.e., the question of whether he is simply pandering to the masses.

Irving, who until quite late in his career claimed to be either apathetic¹⁹ towards the identity and whereabouts of his biological father or even mildly hostile²⁰ towards him, would ultimately admit that the question of who his father was never truly left him, and that he often hoped, especially after the runaway success of *Garp*, to hear from him. Now, thanks to the actions of his mother, he had to realize that at least a part of the demonizing he had done of his father as a child had ultimately proven groundless. He now knew that he'd had a father, who was presumably still alive, and who had wanted to be a father to him from day one. Now a grown man, and affluent, Irving could have undertaken to finally track down his long-lost father.

Emblematic of the familial complexities of both Irving's novels and remaining biography, he claims that, while he did want to do so, he ultimately chose not to out of respect for his step-father, Frances Winslow Irving, whom he very much loved.²¹ As a result, though Irving now had to reconsider the image of the lost father he'd harbored for almost forty years, the fact of the matter was that his true father remained nearly as much a mystery, and every bit as absent, as before.

But if the eighties brought him considerable pain and confusion, these feelings were also mingled with renewed success and joy. It was in this decade that Irving produced no fewer than three new and highly successful novels: *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), *The Cider House Rules* (1985) and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989). Further, in 1987 he remarried, to the Canadian literary agent Janet Turnbull.

In 1991, John and Janet would have a son of their own, Everett, and Irving, far from resting on his laurels, would continue writing. In 1994 *A Son of the Circus*, Irving's first novel set in India, was published, and in 1998 *A Widow for One Year*, his ninth novel, was completed.

Significantly, in the same year that *Widow* was released, Irving began work on his to date longest and by his own admission²² most personal novel, *Until I Find You*, in which the protagonist (named Jack Burns), whose life we accompany from the age of 4 to his mid-thirties, is haunted by the unanswered questions surrounding a father he never knew, and who is sexually molested while still a young boy. Significantly because, while Irving also took time out to write his tenth novel, *The Fourth Hand* (2001), *Until I Find You* would not be completed until 2005. This lengthy incubation period was surely due in part to the book's mammoth proportions; weighing in at over 800 pages, it stretches the envelope of being a novel. Yet far more

¹⁹ In B&N/ Book Magazine (2001), p. 4, he claims: "I have never lost a single night's sleep wondering or imagining who my biological father is."

²⁰ In New York Times (1998), p. 2, "Whoever he is, to his credit, he didn't come looking for me either."

²¹ New York Times (2005), p. 1

²² Ibid.

important are the events in Irving's own life that transpired during and certainly informed the book's development.

In December 2001, following one of Irving's countless televised interviews, he was contacted by one Christopher Blunt, who told Irving they might have had the same father. Agreeing to meet with him, Irving learned that this was indeed the case, and further that his biological father, a good and well-loved parent, had married three more times after Irving's mother and sired four more children before passing away in 1996.

It is incredible that Irving would make arguably the most important discovery of his life, namely about his father's true life story, at a time when he was already nearly finished with a book designed to exorcise the twin demons of his childhood: an absent father and the trauma of molestation. When asked about the timing of the novel, Irving explained in an interview that he'd known for years that he would eventually write a novel with the absent father as its central theme, but kept putting it off. Once he got into his fifties, however, he decided he should write the book while he could still handle the emotional price he knew doing so would exact.²³

Just how high the price of confronting these deep-seated pains was may be seen in the unusual progression of *Until I Find You*. Irving claims that, in April 2004, he felt the novel (now 819 pages in length) was complete, and sent it to his publisher. Suddenly overcome by a change of heart, he demanded the text back for review and, being who he is, his wishes were accommodated. The reason he wanted it back was a very personal and understandable one: the book, written in the first person, had so many resonances with his own pain and traumas, Irving simply couldn't stand it; as such, he spent the next seven months rewriting the entire book in the third person. As he put it: "My spirits lifted. Jack Burns wasn't me anymore."²⁴ In 2005 then, *Until I Find You*, Irving's most personal and most painful novel, was released.

An Introduction to Irving's Writing

Perhaps the most important starting point, with regard to Irving's writing, is not the manner in which he writes, or the themes he examines, but rather his motivations for doing so. First of all it is clear that, unlike his fictional protagonist T.S. Garp (with whom Irving is often confused), Irving sees writing as his calling:

²³ UNH (2005), p. 3

²⁴ New York Times (2005), p. 2 Elsewhere, Irving has claimed he changed the novel's voice to make it more distanced and less "sloppy"; cf. Powells.com (2005), p. 8., where he justifies the change of voice as follows: "From a writing point of view, personal isn't always a good thing to be. It means sloppy; it means a lack of control; it means attenuation."

I don't agree with Garp. I don't agree with him on many counts. [...] he is always imagining, even envying, the prospect of having a "real" job – because he can't quite feel that writing *is* a real job. I know a lot of writers like Garp. I'm not one of them. I always felt writing is a real job. I *hated* having what Garp calls a "real" job – that is, something other than writing.²⁵

Further, Irving not only considers himself to be a moralist²⁶ but is also of the opinion that novelists and other storytellers have certain duties or obligations, a point (and point of view) that will be explored in greater detail over the course of this work:

Authors have responsibilities. In a novel, you can say things much more precisely and with more detail than in non-fiction. You can make things more vibrant, more uncomfortable. You can't do that in so-called real life. But I consider it *my* job to write about those things people would otherwise rather not think about.²⁷

Irving discovered Dickens at an early age. As he developed as both reader and writer, Irving would become increasingly enamored with the genre of the 19th century novel, particularly the works of Dickens and Hardy. As is reflected in Irving's novels, rather than delving into the modern and postmodern concepts of experimentation with form and "fiction about fiction," he is far more interested in the development of plot and character:

I've always been a fan of the 19th century novel, of the novel that is plotted, character-driven, and where the passage of time is almost as central to the novel as a major minor character, the passage of time and its effect on the characters in the story.

Those old 19th century novels, all of them long, all of them complicated, all of them plotted. Not just Dickens, but especially Dickens, but also George Eliot, Thomas Hardy. And among the Americans, Melville and Hawthorne always meant more to me than Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald. I'm not a modern guy.²⁸

Or, somewhat restated and with reference to *Until I Find You*:

This is a long book. This is eight hundred twenty-six book-pages. Why do you keep reading it? Because you are emotionally engaged. Because you care about what happens to the people. [...] That idea goes back to the nineteenth century novel and says, The reason we are entertained, the reason we want to keep going, is that we have an investment in these people.

²⁵ The Atlantic (1998), p. 6

²⁶ eineStadteinBuch (2005), p. 4

²⁷ 3Sat (2006), p. 3, translated by the author. Original German text: "Der Schriftsteller hat Pflichten. Im Roman kann man Dinge viel genauer und detaillierter sagen, als im Sachbuch. Man kann sie lebendiger darstellen, unbequemer. Im so genannten echten Leben geht das nicht. Ich halte es aber für meine Aufgabe, über die Dinge zu Schreiben, denen man sich sonst lieber nicht aussetzt."

²⁸ Academy (2005), p. 3

That would suggest that the people have been in some way realistically created, that the novel is not an intellectual, discursive exercise, that it is a creation of characters whom you want to follow and that there is a story, a plot, that has engaged you. This is not part of the twentieth century mantra.²⁹

Though he has claimed that human relationships and the evocation of emotional responses from the reader, i.e., making the story emotionally involving, are far more important to him than themes or issues, it nonetheless becomes apparent that his works address a number of major themes, in keeping with the aforementioned point of what he considers the storyteller's duties.

These themes may broadly be broken down into the sociopolitical and the human or individual categories, though there are certainly many cases of overlap. The former include (to name but a few) the abortion debate, the crimes of rape and child molestation, what was once known as the war of the sexes, the Vietnam War, and the rise of the feminist movement.

The latter often has much to do with the search for and attendant difficulties in establishing identity, a task often (if not to say categorically) made far more difficult by the loss or absence of a key figure from the protagonist's immediate (familial) environment. In short, we rarely if ever find an Irving protagonist who starts the story as part of a traditional familial unit, and even these fortunate few cannot entertain the illusion of being able to keep their loved ones until novel's end.

There are not only obvious parallels to Irving's own biography here, but also and equally importantly we recognize a distinctive complex, the first element of which is Irving's previously mentioned fixation on the passage of time. None of Irving's protagonists exists in a vacuum, nor do any of the novels (with the marked exception of *The Fourth Hand*) cover only a short span of time; more in the tradition of family sagas, they deal with decades of both growth and loss.

This brings us to the second and arguably most important element: loss. Perhaps the most defining universal element among Irving's protagonists is that of loss, or of absence: their personalities, the paths they tread, are invariably and indelibly marked either by what has always been missing (in Garp's case, a father of any kind; in Ruth's case from *A Widow for One Year*, the two brothers who died before she was born) or by what they lose in the course of the novel: Garp's mother, shot by an anti-feminist, or Ruth's father, who ultimately commits suicide. These losses, as well as the more ephemeral but no less telling losses of innocence, and how the characters overcome (or fail to overcome) them, are at the heart of Irving's stories.

²⁹ Powells (2005), pp. 6-7

The next element to consider in this brief introduction is that of the rapacity of life. Present from Irving's first novel, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968), where he refers to it as the "gale of the world," and echoed through the ten novels to follow, is the reminder and warning that there are no guarantees, and that, moralist intent or no, there is no karmic rhyme or reason to who dies, or when: there very often is no *why*. Irving's characters, then, inhabit a fairly dark world in which we have only a veneer of civilization and safety, and in which we must make the most of life, ever aware that it can disappear overnight. Irving's own statements confirm this:

I think the part about a missing parent, the part about imagining who someone is because they've been removed from your life – in *The Cider House Rules*, everybody's an orphan; Garp doesn't know who his father is – the serious things that repeat themselves thematically all have to do with loss and how you handle it.³⁰

I explore loss. Early loss. And the selectivity of memory, and the difference between people who change – sometimes all the time – and others who obdurately stay the same. And in most books the passage of time, and its effect, is almost a character. And, yes, the way life jumps you from behind.³¹

Above all this second passage touches on another keyword for Irving: memory. In Irving's writing, memory essentially has two key incarnations: firstly (at the story level) in the sense of how selective and unreliable our memories are; and secondly (at the storytelling level) the connection and interaction between imagination and memory in crafting novels. This first form is most prevalent in *Until I Find You*, and will as such be addressed in detail much later in this work. The second form and the debate surrounding it, however, are crucial to understanding Irving's writing.

Many critics have attacked Irving for the obvious parallels between the lives of his characters and his own biography. And Irving himself has disparaged what he calls "autobiographical novelists, writers who aren't able to pass beyond the confines of their own experience. It's fine to be autobiographical in your fiction, but you must go beyond what merely 'happened.'"³² While Irving readily admits that he has drawn on elements from his own life in his storytelling, he insists on the importance of distancing one's memory from the story; this is not only vital to the creative process, but also a defense mechanism for the storyteller. For example, Irving's grandfather on his stepfather's side – a doctor – provided the inspiration for Dr. Wilbur Larch, an abortionist and the protagonist's surrogate father, in *The Cider House Rules*, and his grandfather on his mother's side who, as an amateur thespian, had often been cast in female

³⁰ Boston Globe (2005), p. 1

³¹ Guardian (2001), p. 2

³² The Atlantic (1998), p. 7

roles in all-male productions, provided the mold for the cross-dressing Jack Burns, whose childhood is also to a great extent based on that of Irving himself. As such, these characters are only partly factual, the remainder of their personalities, behaviors and life stories being the products of the storyteller's imagination.³³ And retelling not only the experience of growing up while constantly wondering about who your real father is – a topic previously touched on in *The Cider House Rules* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* – but also the trauma of being sexually molested in *Until I Find You* would, by his own admission, have been too emotionally crippling for Irving without the device of distancing.³⁴

In turning from what Irving writes about to how he goes about doing so, it may prove useful to first discuss a fairly unique aspect of his approach: namely, starting at the end. As Irving explains:

I don't begin a novel or a screenplay until I know the ending. And I don't mean only that I have to know what happens. I mean that I have to hear the actual sentences. [...] And I don't want to begin something, I don't want to write that first sentence until all the important connections in the novel are known to me. As if the story has already taken place, and it's my responsibility to put it in the right order to tell it to you.³⁵

And elsewhere, in similar vein:

The story has already happened – it's as if I'm retelling something that already exists. It exists in *my* mind, anyway. It's over.³⁶

I intentionally reiterate this last point, as it seems essential in understanding Irving's unique approach, while at the same time touching on the two fundamental themes of imagination and memory. His statements above allow for example the interpretation that it is his goal, in crafting his stories, to imagine them so intensely, to enrich them with so much detail and inhabit them with such colorful characters, that the *imagined* story becomes as tangible to him as a *remembered* story. As such, there are no pauses or gaps in the story, as (ideally) the storyteller has “covered all the bases”; the lives of the characters are already laid out before him, and he need only “remember” them – accurately, it goes without saying, but also at times deciding for himself what to reveal and what to conceal or obfuscate – for his readers.

In order to be able to provide such detail and completeness, Irving invests a tremendous amount of time and research into his novels. This can be seen from the outset of his writing

³³ Boston Globe (2005), p. 2, in this regard see also Titel-Magazin (2006), p. 2

³⁴ This is evinced by his previously mentioned rewriting the entire book from first to third person. See also Titel-Magazin (2006), pp. 3-4. on distancing through revision.

³⁵ Academy (2005), p. 4

³⁶ Powells (2005), p. 3

career. His first five novels, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968), *The Water-Method Man* (1972), *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974), *The World According to Garp* (1978), and *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) all tie in some shape or form into the city of Vienna, and specifically to wartime (the Second World War) and *post bellum*, occupied Vienna. So as to be able to speak with any authority on what happened and, far more importantly, with what realistically could have happened to the inhabitants of the city from the time of the *Anschluss* to the end of its occupation, Irving explored Austrian history in detail.³⁷

Nor did his approach change in the novels to come; if anything, his research methods became more intensive. In a 2005 interview, Irving explained:

The research in my novels is pretty carefully delineated. I have to do it: the OB-GYN with Dr. Larch in *The Cider House Rules*, the orthopedic surgery in *A Son of the Circus*, the business of granite quarrying and being a body escort in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, even the prostitutes in *A Widow for One Year*. I feel I have to be the dutiful journalist. I have to put myself in the hands of someone whose life that is and learn it. You just have to know that stuff or you shouldn't write about it.³⁸

That is not to say, however, that Irving considers himself a particularly good author because of his approach to research:

The research is easy. We all went to school, for God's sake. We know how to do it. It's time consuming, but one shouldn't be given credit for it; one should only be held accountable when one *hasn't* done it. It's not difficult. It just takes time.³⁹

This in turn helps to explain why Irving, one of the most successful modern (if only chronologically) American authors, is at times so rabid in his attacks on critics; it has far less to do with their disapproval of his topics or style, and far more with what he considers to be their lack of respect for the craft of storytelling and how as a result they are remiss in what he sees as their duty, namely to thoroughly and duly research an author's work before critiquing it. He claims that, when he himself writes a book review:

It's like I'm writing that book review for every bad book reviewer I've ever known and it's a way of saying (thrusts a middle finger into the air) *this* is how you ought to do it.

³⁷ Here the reader should recall Irving's aforementioned study abroad in Vienna, a shaping experience for him. This is not only reflected in the above-mentioned and later novels, it is also relevant because it brought Irving into contact with Günter Grass, who Irving cites as an inspiration.

³⁸ Powells (2005), p. 2 Here Irving also points out his feeling of connection to Michael Ondaatje, who approaches research in a similar way: with a readiness to learn something completely new.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

I like to rub their noses in it. It *is* hard and it *should* be hard because if you're dealing with a book somebody spent two, four, five or six *years* on, you shouldn't turn this thing around in five or six *days*. This isn't college, it's not a late paper. This has been somebody's life for four or five years and you don't have to like it, but you do have to respect it.⁴⁰

Nor does the work invested in his novels start and stop with the research. Though inarguably a talented writer, Irving himself attributes his success far more to the degree of effort he puts into writing, and specifically into revision; he is not only fastidious in his research, but is a firm believer in the value of constantly and doggedly rereading what you have written, perfecting it in the process.

There's no reason you should write any novel quickly. There's no reason you shouldn't, as a writer, not be aware of the necessity to revise yourself constantly. More than a half, maybe as much as two-thirds of my life as a writer is rewriting. [...] I can rewrite sentences over and over again, and I do. And the reshaping of something – the restructuring of a story, the building of the architecture of a novel – the craft of it is something I never tire of. And maybe that comes from what homework always was to me, which was redoing, redoing, redoing. Because I always made mistakes, and I always assumed I would. [...] I knew how to concentrate, because I had to.⁴¹

Asked how he knew when a novel was done, Irving's response was "Usually it's because somebody says, 'Enough already.'"⁴² By way of example, it took Irving seven years (while simultaneously working on other projects; he wrote *The Fourth Hand* practically in his spare time) to complete *Until I Find You*; he estimates that five of those seven years were spent on revision.⁴³ He has made it abundantly clear that he feels it to be one of the cornerstones of good writing, and something lacking in much of modern literature:

I think that whatever people do, they don't do it enough. They don't give it one more look or two more looks or three more looks, and the advantage of re-looking at something is huge. But most of our culture, it's in such a hurry; the idea of painstakingly going back over something a tenth time or a fifteenth time – I mean, that's not what we do. That is the virtue that I have learned, both from wrestling and from writing. You can't go over anything enough. You can't.⁴⁴

The last of the "three Rs" in Irving's method is repetition. What other authors (and many critics) consider a weakness, Irving sees as both a strength and a valuable tool, i.e., repetition – not simply of phrases or character types, but also of broad themes – both promotes and is a

⁴⁰ Salon (1997), p. 4

⁴¹ Academy (2005), p. 3 Here we should keep in mind his struggles with dyslexia.

⁴² Powells (2005), p. 8

⁴³ Titel (2006), pp. 3-4

⁴⁴ Powells (2005), p. 7

hallmark of skilled craftsmanship. Given Irving's lasting love for wrestling, it is not surprising that he refers to the sport when discussing his approach to writing:

In any of the martial arts [...] you repeat over and over again the dumbest things, the simplest moves, the simplest defenses, until they become like second nature. But they don't start out that way. They don't start out that way. And I think what I've always recognized about writing is that I don't put much value in so-called inspiration. The value is in how many times you can redo something. The value is in the importance of the refrain. The third time you repeat something, it has more resonance than the second time you repeat something, if it's good enough to begin with. Right?⁴⁵

As such, Irving is hardly apologetic as regards the repetition of certain themes, such as loss, betrayal, and abandonment, but also reconciliation, rebirth and legacies. If he can successfully create, and recreate, and recreate these themes, but in ever-new incarnations, then this is by no means a weakness; instead it shows the ability to create new variations on a theme without losing the significance of the original.

In summary, we can say that Irving approaches his stories as follows: the stories necessitate thorough research, which Irving wholeheartedly and often painstakingly engages in (e.g. interviewing police officers and prostitutes in Amsterdam to find out just how prostitution is handled there). Once he has created the basic outline of the story he wants to tell, whereby he starts with how it will end, he begins the lengthy process of revision, until the characters (the foremost concern) ring true for him. And if certain elements or themes from previous novels also appear in the story, provided they are as distinctive and unique as their predecessors, this poses no problems; on the contrary, presenting elements that are reminiscent of but certainly different from those in earlier stories would seem to present Irving a welcome challenge.

The "Difficult" Genre of the *Bildungsroman*

In his excellent analysis of the *Bildungsroman*'s evolution as a genre, Thomas L. Jeffers provides a brief summary that aptly captures the crux of the difficulties inherent in its classification:

But for my money the ability to recognize a story of *Bildung* depends not merely on literary training, necessary as that obviously is, but on the story's imitation of patterns of development endemic to the race itself [...] Thus what Northrop Frye might have called the archetype behind the archetype of *Bildung*, the tale of a god's growing up and finding his "vocation" as a messiah for a people, or as a slayer of the Evil One, whether dragon, father, or mother, would itself emanate not from an earlier literature [...] but from the psychophysical experience of human

⁴⁵ Academy (2005), p. 5

beings themselves, leading ... their creative but bounded lives. [...] Their culture, their stories [...] must ultimately derive [...] from the pre- or scarcely linguistic, largely physical, homo-erectian encounter with the world. The view from the faculty club or the local Starbucks doesn't usually extend that far, but we should, as "common readers," try.⁴⁶

In an interview from 2000, Irving stated that: "So much of writing is in not losing touch with what an experience the passage from childhood to adulthood truly was. Dickens always said that he was a writer because he never lost touch with his childhood. I think that the same could be said for any writer."⁴⁷

These words and this stance certainly speak for the argument that Irving is a proponent of the *Bildungsroman* tradition. And indeed among the secondary literature on John Irving, a number of researchers have already made this claim.⁴⁸ Why, then, do we need to revisit and reinvestigate this aspect of Irving's writing?

In short, for the simple fact that said researchers, while recognizing the pattern, do not (with the notable and admirable exception of Weiß) see fit to explore to any significant depth in just what way Irving continues the *Bildungsroman* tradition. As such, a number of key questions on Irving's mode of and contribution to storytelling remain unanswered, and will continue to be so if the analysis of this aspect of his writing is limited to the perfunctory.

It goes without saying that an exhaustive analysis of the *Bildungsroman* as genre would eclipse the current object of study, and would not necessarily bring us closer to understanding it. Nevertheless what certainly can aid us here is 1. first to establish an initial definition of what can be considered a *Bildungsroman* and what cannot; 2. to outline the evolution of the *Bildungsroman* from its German roots through the English reading to the American "grandchildren"; and 3. in so doing to arrive at a list of central, fundamental traits that allow us to recognize elements of the *Bildungsroman* when we encounter them.

Among the countless studies of the *Bildungsroman*, or apprenticeship novel,⁴⁹ an extremely useful guide is that provided by Randolph P. Shaffner in his 1985 book *The Apprenticeship Novel: A Study of the 'Bildungsroman' as a Regulative Type in Western Literature with a Focus on Three Classic Representatives by Goethe, Maugham and Mann*. It is perhaps demonstrative of the difficulties surrounding any "definitive" classification of the apprenticeship novel that Shaffner, who from the outset makes it clear that it is not his goal to

⁴⁶ Thomas L. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (2005), p. 54

⁴⁷ Salon (2000), p. 2

⁴⁸ Cf. H&T (1987), p. 11; Campbell (1998), p. 16, p. 89; Bloom (2001), p. 31, pp. 45-46; Weiß (2002), p.16, pp. 21-22, 72

⁴⁹ As will become clear, this is the translation Shaffner prefers. For the purposes of this work, it should be considered synonymous with *Bildungsroman*.

provide “the” true answer, nonetheless at one point arrives at a list of no fewer than 23 “concrete potentialities,” 5 characteristic “presuppositions” and 8 “additional qualities.”⁵⁰

What the *Bildungsroman* Is Not

Though Shaffner has certainly done his homework, what may initially help us more is to establish what the *Bildungsroman* is not, i.e., to delineate it from other genres. This step allows us to work with a comparatively manageable list, as he addresses only seven other types of book that border on or are conflated / confused with the *Bildungsroman*, namely the novel of adventure, picaresque, sentimental, educational, developmental, artist and autobiographical novels.⁵¹

If we take Dickens' *David Copperfield*, for example, by all accounts an apprenticeship novel, how do we recognize it as such? What allows us to say that it *is* an example of the *Bildungsroman* and *is not* something else?

Turning to the first genre mentioned, we may distance *David Copperfield* from a novel of adventure (*Abenteuerroman*) in that, while young David certainly has his fair share of adventure he, unlike the protagonist of the novel of adventure, undergoes a maturation process over the course of the novel. Heroes of adventure novels are heroes from start to finish, whereas *Bildungshelden*⁵² only evolve in the storytelling. What is more, the events that transpire in the lives of the latter are subject to a certain sense of order; they lead somewhere, to acculturation and identity formation. In keeping with the concept of *Bildung*, i.e., education in the broadest sense of learning what are often referred to in this context as the “ways of the world,” what befalls the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, be it windfall or downfall, serves to shape him or her; since no such development takes place with the heroes of adventure novels, there are no such trammels on the rhyme or reason of their escapades: if the point of the hero is merely to be heroic, then he (or she) can do so in any given situation, and we need only sit back and enjoy.

A similar delineation may be made between the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque (*Schelmenroman*), often considered a subclass of the adventure novel. Here, similarly to the adventure novel, the reader is witness to the exploits of the protagonist. In contrast to the adventure hero, the tendency with the *Schelm* is to be the “hard luck kid”; often coming from the

⁵⁰ Shaffner (1985), pp. 17-18

⁵¹ Here I have opted to use the English names of these types of books; the German equivalents are, in the same order as above: the *Abenteuerroman*; *Schelmenroman*; (no standard equivalent for the sentimental novel); *Erziehungsroman*; *Entwicklungsroman*; *Künstlerroman* and *Autobiographie*.

⁵² For simplicity's sake, when I use the German term I will use the masculine *Bildungsheld* / *Bildungshelden*, while recognizing that there have certainly been any number of heroines (*Bildungsheldinnen*) of no less importance.

lower social strata, he or she moves from one adventure to the next, coming into contact – as the young David Copperfield certainly also did with Uriah Heep – with shady characters. The difference is that the *Schelm*, like the adventure hero, remains untouched by these episodes and does not grow or learn from them. He or she may comment on them – indeed the chief function of the *Schelm* would seem to be that of social commentator – but does nothing to change them or his or her own life. Copperfield grows as an individual; the *Schelm* merely survives.

The apprenticeship novel could also be confused with the sentimental novel, as both focus largely on the inner world and inner workings of the protagonist. In the narration of *David Copperfield*, we spend a vast deal of time inside David's head, sharing in his emotional reactions to the world around him.

The difference would chiefly seem to be one of focus. In the sentimental novel, we also catch glimpses of self-revelation, and they offer insight into the protagonist's growth (here having already set itself apart from either the adventure novel or picaresque). Yet comparatively little attention is paid to how this growth is achieved, to the catalysts and the hero's response. David, for example, is greatly shaped by his experiences with destitution, the early death of his mother, and a disastrous first marriage, all of which we experience hand in hand with him, allowing us not only to see how he grows but to much more richly appreciate just how and why such self-development came to pass, an aspect largely ignored in the self-revelation of the sentimental novel.

Moving on from the adventure novel, picaresque and sentimental novel, Shaffner turns to address the somewhat hazy distinctions between the apprenticeship novel and both the educational (*Erziehungs-*) and developmental novels (*Entwicklungsroman*). The former would seem fairly straightforward, focusing as it does on the protagonist's education, which at times has led it to be conflated with the apprenticeship novel. Why, then, do we need two terms, and how do they distinguish themselves from the developmental novel?

Whereas, when separating the sentimental novel from the apprenticeship novel the difference was a matter of focus, here it is one of volition, of choice. Though this has certainly been a matter of debate literally for centuries,⁵³ a useful distinction would seem to be between *Bildung* in the broader sense mentioned above, i.e., between the development of culture through life's "larger" and "smaller" moments, at one's own pace and in accordance with one's own desires, as opposed to *Erziehung* in the stricter sense of schooling and training and thus of something regulated and in one form or another imposed on the protagonist. To return once more to the example of David Copperfield, his experiences in the blacking factory, while undoubtedly a phase of his life that remains indelibly in his character, are (thankfully) only one

⁵³ Cf. Shaffner, pp. 9-10. Here we certainly see problems of definition reaching back into the late 18th century.

aspect of what shaped him. While they represent *Erziehung*, every other incident that shapes the man we come to know at novel's end belongs to his *Bildung*.

We can make a similar distinction with regard to the apprenticeship and developmental novels. While, as the name implies, in the former too we see the protagonist's development, we are again confronted with the criteria of choice, i.e., the developmental novel shows the growth of the protagonist, but is more in keeping with snapshots from a scrapbook. We can see how and who they were at age 10, age 20, age 40, etc. but this would seem to be more factual than volitional, by which I mean (and which Shaffner emphasizes) the hero of the apprenticeship novel at some point makes a conscious choice and invests a conscious effort into arriving at a more fully developed human being by novel's end; he or she sets out, if such an overused analogy may be forgiven, on a journey to find him or herself.

A further distinction Shaffner makes, and certainly an intriguing one, is that the apprenticeship novel, unlike the developmental novel, rarely ends with the protagonist's death; instead we usually leave the *Bildungsheld* with his or her goal achieved and "armed for life."⁵⁴ This would seem to be in keeping with and conducive to the intent of the genre; while simple development must – quite logically – end in death (as organisms can only develop from cradle to grave), the goal of *Bildung* from Goethe through Dickens and beyond is to end with a protagonist who has undergone many travails in order to become an individual capable of facing and mastering life's challenges. As such, it is better to leave the protagonist's story at a point in time where they are alive and well, and where we can imagine them continuing to prosper.

It goes without saying that these distinctions alone hardly suffice to resolve the dilemma of separating the apprenticeship, educational and developmental novels. Is the distinction between *Erziehung* and *Bildung* really so cut and dry? Can't they take place simultaneously and, in actual human experience, alternate quite literally from moment to moment? And as regards volition, Huck Finn is seen by many as belonging to the classic American examples of the *Bildungsheld*, but is there ever a point where we see him sit down on the banks of the mighty Mississippi and declare to himself, along the lines of a Wilhelm Meister or at least of a young David (with whom he more reasonably could have been expected to enjoy himself), his goal to develop into a better person?

Confounding as they may be, the aforementioned considerations – distinguishing between *Bildung* and *Erziehung* on the one hand and the question of volition on the other – are by no means insurmountable. While it goes without saying that there is considerable overlap between *Bildung* and *Erziehung*, the fact remains that there are also clear divergences: acts of

⁵⁴ Shaffner, p. 12

betrayal and of devotion (provided they result in the growth of the protagonist's character) can certainly fall into the former category, while one is hard put to find room for them in the latter.

Insofar as the matter of choice is concerned, the difficulties that arise in reconciling it with more contemporary protagonists (and thus especially with the American apprenticeship novel) is that choice is rarely as grandiose as in bygone eras; we rarely find something akin to David Copperfield's bold statement: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."⁵⁵ We live in the 21st century: it is not exactly commonplace for someone to sit down at their desk and decide to become "the hero of their own life", which is not to say that the moment does not come, it simply comes in the blur of the now, of mediated, high-speed, digital and globalized life as we know it. Contemporary protagonists may to some extent have a personal vision or visions, but said visions (if they exist at all) are comfortingly and authentically muddled by their human shortcomings and the white noise of greed, lust, pride, etc. Irving's protagonists T.S. Garp and Homer Wells are not David Copperfield, who for that matter was no Wilhelm Meister.

That being said, accepting such a view of volition does not necessitate throwing out Shaffner's excellent categories for recognizing the *Bildungsroman*. As he himself points out, self-formation – becoming a better person – cannot be the protagonist's *direct* goal; it is their *indirect* goal, achieved in the pursuit of more realistic and immediate ones. Citing Hermann Weigand, he gives the following example:

Wilhelm Meister describes his direct goal as "a brilliant career on the stage," only to discover years later that he lacks the fundamental qualifications for success. Similarly, Hans Castorp sacrifices all prospects of a practical career to the direct "pursuit of a quixotic passion." Weigand concludes that "in each case, the by-product of these strivings, struggles, pursuits, and passions is something infinitely richer than the specific result coveted, altogether regardless of success or failure." He identifies this by-product or incidental yield as life-art, "Lebenskunst," otherwise known as self-formation.⁵⁶

As such, choice need not mean a sweeping gesture of self-betterment, but can instead be seen in the accumulation of responses (including many mistakes along the way) to the rapacity of life: a concatenation of countless choices, both life-changing and mundane, that move the *Bildungsheld* toward their ultimate goal: the self. Here – and this is an essential point to bear in mind – it is perfectly acceptable if the protagonist "confronts the elusive goal of culture

⁵⁵ *David Copperfield*, p. 3

⁵⁶ Shaffner, pp. 24-25

less as an active contributor to his own formation than as an active recipient of his being formed by life.”⁵⁷

In closing this initial delineation of what the apprenticeship novel is *not*, two final genres would seem of particular importance, and are also addressed in Shaffner’s analysis, namely the artist novel and the autobiography. Both are not only essential to delimiting the genre of the apprenticeship novel in general, but also with specific reference to Irving’s works. One reason for this is his tendency to use artists in the broader sense as protagonists: the protagonists of the five novels under consideration in this work include two novelists and an actor, and above all writers of various kinds and varied caliber are prevalent in other essential characters in nearly every book. The other reason is the aforementioned focus on the autobiographical elements and influence on Irving’s own writing.

With regard to the first category, Shaffner’s distinction is a fairly black and white one, but would seem nonetheless quite useful. One of the key characteristics of the *Bildungsheld* is that he or she at some point moves beyond himself or herself, to not only grasp but to also care about the greater society; there is a move from selfishness to selflessness.⁵⁸ Shaffner describes this as a “reconciliation with reality,” something which never takes place in the *Künstlerroman*. While we can see various parallels and similarities in the development of an artist in the *Künstlerroman* and artistic development in many examples of the *Bildungsroman*,⁵⁹ the key is the focus on inner life shared by the two genres; the former never moves beyond it, while it is essential that the latter does. Or, restated, the hero of the apprenticeship novel – artist or no – while greatly focused on internal processes, must ultimately grow past a sole focus on his or her own development and wellbeing and look to the needs of others.⁶⁰

It could be argued that the last of Shaffner’s comparisons runs along similar lines – hardly surprising in light of the fact that the artist novel is often an autobiography or biography – namely that there is a crucial step in the apprenticeship novel missing from the autobiography. While many apprenticeship novels contain autobiographical elements (if not to say they are a hallmark of the genre), they invariably move beyond the “this happened to me” (the individual) to “this could happen to anyone” (the universal).⁶¹ It is this element, the portrayal of emotions and situations that ring true and present an image or feeling of universal applicability, of universal authenticity, that set the apprenticeship novel apart.

⁵⁷ Shaffner, p. 24

⁵⁸ For an excellent discussion of how this takes place in *David Copperfield*, see Jeffers (2005), pp. 61-62

⁵⁹ Jeffers readily recognizes this trend, though he, too, sees clear differences between the two genres. Jeffers, p. 53

⁶⁰ Shaffner, pp. 13-14

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13

What the *Bildungsroman* Is

Having now examined at some length what sets the apprenticeship novel apart, i.e., how related or similar genres are nonetheless ultimately different from it, we may now turn to the characteristics of the apprenticeship novel *proper*.

The apprenticeship novel, at the most rudimentary level, is a book about how little boys grow up to become (hopefully functional) men, and – equally interesting but far less commonly written about – how little girls grow up to become (hopefully equally functional) women. In so doing, it not only covers both the real-world events that make this change happen but also allows us to see the inner workings of these children-to-adults as they make their way.

In looking for further key criteria, two books are of particular help. Not only is Shaffner's work of great value, but also Thomas L. Jeffers' *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (2005).

One of Shaffner's most useful contributions is in seeking to isolate the underlying assumptions of the apprenticeship novel; he identifies five, namely that: 1. living is something that can be learned, 2. a young person can acquire and "master" this skill, 3. freedom of choice is essential for that young person, 4. he or she must have some innate potential for becoming an exceptional individual, and 5. the novel has an overall affirmative attitude towards life.⁶²

What might initially raise eyebrows about these assumptions is the third, namely the potential to become someone "exceptional." Does that mean the *Bildungsroman* is only meant for potential geniuses, and mere mortals need not apply?

Hardly. Going back to the roots as it were, Shaffner draws on Goethe, who stated: "Der Mensch frage sich selbst, wozu er am besten taugt, um dieses in sich und an sich eifrigst auszubilden. Er betrachte sich als Lehrling, als Geselle, als Altgeselle, am spätesten und höchst vorsichtig als Meister."⁶³ Shaffner himself elaborates on this point:

The exceptional individual, in accord with Goethe's description, develops himself zealously for the life that conforms to his exceptional endowments. And occupation notwithstanding, only the individual who would claim adaptability solely to death could fail to qualify for an apprenticeship to life. Each human being carries within himself the potential for development as a unique, and hence exceptional, individual. Whether he aspires to realize his potentialities invites, of course, a vital but separate concern. The apprenticeship novel presupposes only

⁶² Shaffner, pp. 17-18

⁶³ "A man asks himself to what is he best suited? in order to develop this zealously in himself; he sees himself as apprentice, as journeyman, as assistant, at the latest and with utmost caution as master." Translation: Ibid., p. 17, original quotation from Goethe's *Allgemeine Betrachtungen zur Weltliteratur VI. Schriften zur Literatur*.

the existence of universal potentialities in its own apprentice, who, more importantly, demonstrates aspiration as well.⁶⁴

In essence, then, it would seem that the third assumption, taken together with the fourth which was just explained, takes on a new dimension: in short, choice, attitude and willpower, not God-given talent, are what make a *Bildungsheld*; the apprentice to life qualifies simply by choosing to begin the apprenticeship.

Jeffers' *Apprenticeships*, a far more recent work, is much less concerned with the (equally important) assumptions of the apprenticeship novel and far more with how to recognize one when we see it. Here he first cites the late Jerome Buckley's definition:

Tolerating and profiting from European and Anglo-American traditions alike, Buckley defines the *Bildungsroman* by reference to an archetypal plot. A sensitive child grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors' – and often by his family's – social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness. School and private reading stimulate his hopes for a different life away from home, and so he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins. He has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values. He makes some accommodation, as citizen and worker, with the industrial urban world, and after a time he revisits his old home to show folks how much he has grown. No single *Bildungsroman* will have all these elements, Buckley says, but none can ignore more than two or three.⁶⁵

In addition to this framework definition, Jeffers contributes three "litmus tests" of his own devising, namely what he calls the sexual test, the vocational test and the rumination test. The first test is very straightforward: the *Bildungsheld* must move past parental love; they must seek to find a romantic love of their own.

The second test is the nature of the profession the *Bildungsheld* chooses for himself or herself. In some way, shape or form, their vocation must extend beyond the individual to the universal; it cannot be exclusively self-serving, but must in some way contribute to the common good. Jeffers emphasizes that, especially for contemporary *Bildungshelden*, finding such a profession has been complicated by the vastly greater freedom they enjoy in comparison to their predecessors, which is both "a burden and an opportunity."⁶⁶

The idea of contributing to the greater good, or of humanitarianism,⁶⁷ is an essential criterion, and one which will certainly be returned to over the course of this work. For the time being, however, we must turn to the matter of the third test, rumination.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 17

⁶⁵ Jeffers (2005), p. 52

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 52-53

⁶⁷ Cf. Shaffner, p. 25 for an earlier exploration of this aspect.

Simply put, the protagonist must be reflective and contemplative; he or she must deliberate as to the pros and cons of their actions and must give considerable thought to the life and world they are a part of. As Jeffers elaborates:

The third test, back up the “magic” hill, is that business of ruminating, but specifically about the *connections* between art, ethics, and metaphysics, the practical stress falling on the middle term. Happily, the novelistic presentment isn’t as schoolish as my last sentence makes it sound. It is a hero’s lived experience of keeping or not keeping promises, of telling or not telling the truth, of being faithful or unfaithful to parents, friends and spouse, with or without respect to income and class, that gives rise to his conceptual beliefs about [...] the Good and the True, or fashions his taste for some instance of the Beautiful.⁶⁸

We will return to Jeffers’ ideas shortly, but should first return to another key characteristic of the apprenticeship novel. As was previously mentioned in the examination of what does not constitute a *Bildungsroman*, apprenticeship novels, though they often contain autobiographical elements, are not to be confused with simple autobiographies, displaying as they do a shift from individual to universal experience and meaning.

Both the previously mentioned Jerome Buckley and, much later, Michael Minden in *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance* (1997) addressed the at times prevalent autobiographical elements of the apprenticeship novel, from two different but very rewarding perspectives. Buckley, in closely examining *David Copperfield*, determined that, while Dickens’ own life story heavily influenced the book, the book nevertheless can hardly be said to retell that life story:

Nonetheless, though their lives touch at many points, David Copperfield is clearly not Charles Dickens. Neither as children nor as adults, except perhaps in their habits of observation, are they at all alike in temperament. [...] As the reversal of initials might imply, David is his creator’s counterpart rather than his double; he is as quiet, serene, gentle and self-effacing as Dickens was passionate, excitable and aggressive. Though he also suffers intensely as a child, David transcends his miseries and bears few lasting scars.

His experience is ordered⁶⁹ in a positive direction; the grim yields to the hopeful. Thus his schooling under the sadistic Mr. Creakle and his servitude at Murdstone and Grinby’s precede his happy days at the idealized academy of Dr. Strong, whereas the school to which Dickens was sent after his release from Warren’s warehouse was considerably inferior to the one he had attended before his great humiliation. Unlike Dickens, David never for long feels abandoned and betrayed by father and mother; for though an orphan, he is given a memorable series of substitute parents, from the evil Murdstones to the altogether good, gruff Aunt Betsey. In the novel, passages of fresh objective creativity mingle with the painful

⁶⁸ Jeffers, p. 53

⁶⁹ Here we see evidence of the previously mentioned distinction between the chaos of an adventure novel and the order and sense of an apprenticeship novel.

autobiographical fragments describing the blacking factory, and the light of comedy begins to dispel the darker shadows of self-pity [...] ⁷⁰

Minden, focusing arguably on the progenitor of the *Bildungsroman* and one of his most notable German successors, cites Thomas Mann's reflections on Goethe:

Goethe somewhere calls Wilhelm Meister his beloved likeness ('geliebtes Ebenbild'). How can this be? Shouldn't any man who is not afflicted with incurable vanity become conscious, by contemplating his own likeness, only of his own need to improve himself? Yes, this is precisely what he should do. And it is precisely this sense of a need to improve and perfect oneself, this awareness of one's own self as a duty, a moral, aesthetic, cultural commitment, that finds objective expression in the hero of the autobiographical novel of formation and education (*Bildungs- und Entwicklungsroman*). This awareness is concretized in a *thou* in relation to which the poetic *I* can become guide, formative influence, and educator.⁷¹

These observations are significant for a number of reasons. Buckley illustrates quite strikingly how the *Bildungsheld* is not to be confused with the author. Further, not only do we see the discrepancy, but also the nature of said discrepancy: though both Dickens and David had very hard childhoods, in many cases life seems to have treated David better in that, even when misfortune befell him, it was often leavened by newfound, unlooked-for opportunities and, in general, we can say that his life (with admitted setbacks) generally proceeds in a positive development. Such an ordered life – in the sense of an ultimately benign universe that would seem to work on the basis of karmic causality – is a very comforting thought, and Dickens, though it remains beyond his reach as someone living in the real world, has the power to gift young David with it. In this sense at least, that when we try to be and do good, the universe will respond in kind, the *Bildungsromancier* can seek to "perfect" the world of the *Bildungsheld*.

What the passage from Mann shows us is a different but equally significant point, addressing as it does the relation between creator and created from another perspective. While the idea of the author creating an alternate version of himself or herself is hardly remarkable in and of itself, as drawing on our own lived experiences resides at the most fundamental levels of storytelling, what we see in the relationship between Goethe and Wilhelm Meister, and which

⁷⁰ Buckley (1974), pp. 33-34

⁷¹ Translation provided by Minden. Original German text: "Goethe nennt Wilhelm Meister irgendwo sein 'geliebtes Ebenbild'... Wieso doch? Liebt man sein Ebenbild? Sollte nicht ein Mensch, der nicht an unheilbarer Selbstgefälligkeit krankt, in der Anschauung seines Ebenbildes der eigenen Verbesserungsbedürftigkeit sich recht bewusst werden? Doch, eben dies sollte er. Und eben dies Gefühl der Verbesserungs- und Vervollkommnungsbedürftigkeit, dies Empfindung des eigenen Ichs als einer *Aufgabe*, einer sittlichen, ästhetischen, kulturellen Verpflichtung *objektiviert* sich im Helden des autobiographischen Bildungs- und Entwicklungs-Romans, vergegenständlicht sich zu einem Du, an welchem das dichterische Ich zum Führer, Bildner, Erzieher wird." Mann, Thomas, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* IX, pp. 149-50, cited in Minden (1997), pp. 209-210

has parallels in Dickens and *David Copperfield*, is the creation of a very specific variant of oneself, namely a perfectible⁷² variant.

Combining the two trends creates very intriguing possibilities as regards both the intent and the psychological value of this mode of storytelling for the author. It would seem to be almost a form of wish fulfillment in that the author creates what we might term an “altered duplicate,” someone who shares many of the same traits but uses them differently, and someone whose misfortunes come only as stepping stones on the way to an ultimately beneficent resolution; a perfectible if not perfect *Bildungsheld* in a better world than our own. This close but not identical connection allows the *Bildungsromancier* to tell stories that draw on but not mirror his or her own, with a double benefit: first of all, an endlessly authentic source of material,⁷³ and second, the cathartic option of remolding that material in such manner that the thousand frailties and doubts that are part and parcel of the human condition need not apply to their subjective self, whose life may progress through hardship to the comfort of well-deserved happiness.

In light of the passages from Mann it would seem that Goethe engaged in this type of writing, and Mann would appear by his own admission to have done so as well. And, evidence that this phenomenon is by no means exclusive to the “classic” German model of the *Bildungsroman*, Dickens’ statements on *David Copperfield*, a book he claimed “I can never open...as I open any other book”⁷⁴ reveal strikingly similar ties between author and *Bildungsheld*. Perhaps most telling of all in this regard is the fact that, in Dickens’ case, *David Copperfield* followed an autobiography he had begun several years earlier but ultimately abandoned, finding the process of exploring his childhood memories (directly) too painful.⁷⁵

Summary of General Characteristics

Before addressing the evolution of the *Bildungsroman*, it may be helpful to summarize the rough outline of the genre we have at this point. The main motif of the apprenticeship novel is one of maturation and transformation; it depicts the journey to the developed self. In this depiction, it is not as exclusively internal as the sentimental novel, focusing as it does much more on the how and why of maturation, i.e., on real-world catalysts. Further, while education in

⁷² Cf. Minden, pp. 209-211, esp. p. 211, where he speaks of “the authority to inhabit and represent one’s own subjective being as potentially perfectible.”

⁷³ Minden, p. 210, Mann: “With wit and feeling (*Geist und Empfindung*) any life can be made into a ‘novel’”...

⁷⁴ Buckley, p. 33

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31 As we will see, this dovetails nicely with Irving’s self-professed approach of using modified memory: chosen memories amplified and elaborated using distancing, a device that can benefit both good storytelling and safeguard the emotional health of the author.

all forms is central to the *Bildungsroman*, the weight is on those lessons taught us by life itself; and how we learn (or fail to learn) these lessons is contingent upon our free choice, our free will.

Following closely on the notion of free choice is the realization of the need to mature and willingness to undertake the process, whereby both the realization and the readiness to make a start can themselves be very gradual and incremental accumulations. Once the process has begun, it ultimately necessitates a shift in the protagonist's character from selfishness to selflessness, and the events of their life that are portrayed move beyond individual to take on universal meaning.

The *Bildungsroman* as genre works on a number of assumptions, namely that living well is something young people can learn, and that the protagonist (freely) chooses to do so. They must also have the potential to develop into a unique individual. Finally, the general tenor of the apprenticeship novel is life-affirming.

Insofar as recognizing the individual phases of the apprenticeship novel, Jerome Buckley's guidelines are quite useful. In the first phase, the protagonist normally grows up in an environment stifling to his or her imagination, ending in their separation: hoping to shake off the limitations they are confronted with there, the protagonist leaves home for another setting, where they receive their "real" education (their apprenticeship to life, as Shaffner would call it); this is the initiation phase, and generally involves not only the search for a love interest but also a degree of accommodation with the world the protagonist lives in. Finally, there is the return phase, where the *Bildungsheld* returns home, displaying how much he or she has changed.

Thomas J. Jeffers' three tests also help us identify *Bildungshelden* and thus *Bildungsromane*. Does the protagonist seek romantic love? Do they ultimately choose a vocation that helps others? And do they reflect on their choices and actions? If we can answer these three questions in the affirmative, we are dealing with an apprenticeship novel.

Finally, the *Bildungsroman* may be characterized by a unique connection of creator (author) and created (protagonist). While the latter is never identical to the former, they may very well share common experiences or character traits with them, and serve as their counterpart. Here the fictional counterpart may also be presented as a "perfectible" version of the author, the author as he or she "might have been."

It must be emphasized that none of these tests or rules of thumb can be considered definitive, and the majority make no such claims. But taken together they may help us to narrow down just what it means to be an apprenticeship novel, a variegated yet finite genre, and to recognize patterns as to which elements are most important.

A Brief Outline of the Evolution of the *Bildungsroman*

Having arrived at a set of working guidelines for what constitutes a *Bildungsroman*, what also needs to be touched on is the question of how the genre has been adapted in the over 200 years since its inception.⁷⁶ Here I feel it is important to keep in mind from the outset just what the goal of such an exploration is and why it should be undertaken. It is namely not my goal to focus more intently on the *Bildungsroman*; rather, two key factors come into play. First of all, if an author like John Irving, which is to say a 20th-century and now 21st-century American novelist, is judged strictly by the “canonical” criteria for what represents an apprenticeship novel, the resultant image needs must invariably be skewed and ultimately prove incomplete. Quite simply, though classic hallmarks of the genre (thankfully) remain, too much time has passed and too many hands have contributed to the formation and transformation of the apprenticeship novel to allow a simple evaluation of contemporary examples using the same rules applied to Goethe or, to a lesser extent, to (say) Thomas Mann.

Secondly, we must bear in mind where John Irving has been, both literally and figuratively. On the one hand, there is Irving’s fairly unique exposure to Austrian / German influences in the form of his previously mentioned year abroad in Vienna, where he first read Günter Grass’ *The Tin Drum*,⁷⁷ coupled with his own statement that his favorite book is Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*; it is therefore safe to say that at least some German influence is present.

On the other, we should keep in mind Irving’s almost slavish dedication to carrying on the Dickensian tradition. He has on a number of accounts claimed to be greatly influenced by Dickens’ works, and passages from and references to the works of Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Charlotte Brontë have found their way into Irving novels such as *The Cider House Rules*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and *Until I Find You*, which makes a strong case for an English (and particularly Victorian) influence on his writing.

None of which changes or diminishes the fact that Irving, though exposed to and apparently affected by both his German and English predecessors, is in the final analysis a contemporary American novelist and as such cannot be strictly bound by the parameters applicable to the other two categories of storytellers. Yet taking such influences into account can not only serve to deepen and enrich our understanding of how he writes and why, in Irving’s

⁷⁶ This figure is based on the (not undisputed) assumption that Wilhelm Meister (1794-1796) was the first *Bildungsroman*.

⁷⁷ Cf. *EineStadtEinBuch*, p. 4. Irving would go on to include an essay on Grass in his memoirs *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, and to defend Grass when the latter’s connections to the SS became public in 2006, cf. washingtonpost.com (2006), p. 1.

case it would indeed seem that *not* considering such factors would necessarily provide an at best incomplete portrait of the author.

As such, the following discussion will on the one hand seek to take into consideration the evolution of the genre and attendant changes to its applicable “rules,” while at the same time leaving room for the interpretation that Irving can be “judged” as a representative of any of the three variants, or as having developed and utilizing an amalgam of them all.

The genre of the *Bildungsroman*, as the name alone makes clear, originated in Germany and refers to novels centered on *Bildung*, a broad term which can include formation, education, training, etc. Though Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766-67) certainly contained *Bildung* as a central theme, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) is generally held to be the prototypical *Bildungsroman*. Beyond a purely historical interest, this German genesis of the apprenticeship novel is worth examining for a number of reasons.

First of all, though Wilhelm Meister remains the “poster boy” of the *Bildungsroman* genre, and though it quickly became clear that a “new type” of book had been added to the canon, the actual term *Bildungsroman* would not appear until 1819, when Karl von Morgenstern coined it and, though cited by others, most notably the literary historian Wilhelm Dilthey also sought to spread its use, it did not become a recognized literary category until at least 1870.

Secondly, it is worthwhile to examine just how this new style of novel came into being. Goethe is rightly recognized to this day for his enormous contribution, and his great works are considered among the cornerstones of German literature, *Wilhelm Meister* certainly among them. Further, the 1817 *Brockhaus Conversations-Lexicon*, in defining the genre of the novel (we must recall that this was two years prior to von Morgenstern’s coinage), claimed that it focused on “[The] ... life and fate of an *individual* from his birth to his completed *Bildung*, from which, however, the entire tree of humanity, in all its manifold branches in the beautiful time of its maturity and perfection, can be deduced – the apprenticeship of the disciple until he is raised to a master, that is the novel.”⁷⁸ Further, the *Brockhaus* felt that Germany was the ideal “home” for this new type of novel because “in this so idealistically organized Germany with the beautiful and peculiar sensitivity of its inhabitants for the pure education of the individual, without other degrading and limiting considerations, this spirit of the time arose in its most beautiful blossoming.”⁷⁹

Yet taken at face value, this presents a very misleading image of the *Bildungsroman*’s inception. Its prototype was certainly German and, as generally defined, highly introspective.

⁷⁸ Steinecke, Hartmut, “The Novel and the Individual: The Significance of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* in the Debate about the *Bildungsroman*,” in Hardin, James (ed.), *Reflection and Action: Essays on the Bildungsroman*, p. 79

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80

But here we see another problem. Not only is it difficult to arrive at a working definition of the apprenticeship novel by seeking telltale traits, similarities and differences; attempts to find a “historical” definition have proven similarly fraught with difficulty.

Many have taken the logical approach of assuming that the “definitive” meaning must be that which was commonly held in the age of Goethe. Yet assuming that there was any such consensus ignores significant differences of opinion as to the goal of *Bildung* among writers such as Goethe and his German contemporaries, none of whom is known to have ever referred to their works as *Bildungsromane*.⁸⁰ This being the case, our next recourse would seem to be the literary definitions as put forward initially by von Morgenstern and later (as this is the definition that would ultimately establish itself) Dilthey.

Aside from giving historical credit where it is due, von Morgenstern’s definition is certainly also worth mentioning for the fact that he connected the word *Bildung* not only to the protagonist’s development and education, but also to the *Bildung* of the reader.⁸¹ And indeed many German intellectuals believed that their novels could transform their readers. Yet this trend appears to have been extremely short-lived. Bearing in mind that *Wilhelm Meister* was published in 1795, only ten years later these self-same intellectuals (e.g. Jean Paul and Joseph von Eichendorff), due in no small part to the shocks of the Napoleonic years, had grown increasingly disillusioned about transforming their readers, the former’s *Flegeljahre* (1805) going so far as to itself condemn the folly of using literature to educate and liberate.⁸²

This shows the difficulties associated with von Morgenstern’s definition, which was only fairly recently discovered⁸³; Dilthey’s is, fairly or not, by far the more established one. He explains the theme of the apprenticeship novel as being the story of a young man “wie er in glücklicher Dämmerung in das Leben eintritt, nach verwandten Seelen sucht, der Freundschaft begegnet und der Liebe, wie er nun aber mit den harten Realitäten der Welt in Kampf gerät und so unter mannigfachen Lebenserfahrungen heranreift, sich selber findet und seiner Aufgabe in der Welt gewiß wird.”⁸⁴

Aside from being fairly concise, this definition is extremely interesting when put in historical perspective; Dilthey first mentioned it in *Das Leben Schliermachers* (1870) and later

⁸⁰ Hardin (ed.), p. xii

⁸¹ Ibid., p. xiv, cf. Mahoney in same text, pp. 111-116

⁸² Ibid., pp. 110-111

⁸³ Ibid. (Martini), p. 2, Fritz Martini is the one who made this discovery while researching Goedeke’s three-volume *Grundriß der deutschen Dichtung* (1900).

⁸⁴ Originally from *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin* by Wilhelm Dilthey and Gabriele Malsch, 26th ed. (2005), p. 252, cited in Hardin, p. xiv. Hardin uses the following English translation: “a young man who enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world.”

returned to it in *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1906), by which time he claimed that, if one were to read books like *Flegeljahre*, he or she could not help but notice that “Wer heute [diese Bücher] liest, in denen die ganze Summe des damaligen Bildungsromans zusammengefaßt ist, dem kommt aus diesen alten Blättern der Hauch einer vergangenen Welt.”⁸⁵ Yet, as Jeffrey L. Sammons has discovered, it is hard to say for just which novels Dilthey so nostalgically longs, as the *Bildungsroman* practically disappeared in nineteenth century Germany, there being only a handful of examples to be found, a fact that has led later researchers to classify it as an “unfulfilled” or “phantom genre.”⁸⁶

This dearth of examples in the nineteenth century may partly be explained by considering the more global literary trends prevalent in the era. The German *Bildungsroman*, which from the outset had a largely internal / introspective focus, came into being only shortly before major changes in the dominant genres. In the 1820s it was largely supplanted by the historical novel throughout Western Europe, and after 1830 both the epochal and social novel grew in popularity. Though this new focus on the individual’s interactions with society also spread to Germany in the *Vormärz*, it would appear to have been a case of “too little, too late” as, with the failure of the Revolution of 1848, the social novel firmly established itself for decades to come.⁸⁷

This does not necessarily mean, however, that there were next to no books in the tradition of *Wilhelm Meister* written in nineteenth-century Germany. Here, it must be emphasized, we have a case of the terminology hindering rather than helping us in classifying the genre, a classificatory back formation if you will. Hartmut Steinecke claims that what we see in the nineteenth century and above all between 1830 and 1870 is an attempt on the part of German writers to reconcile the *Wilhelm Meister* model with the prevalent social novel; books in the tradition of Goethe were certainly written in Germany, but the narrow definition used to classify them (after the fact) could not accommodate or recognize them as *Bildungsromane*.⁸⁸

Before moving on, it might help to stop and take stock of a few key points. First of all, the initial drive of the *Bildungsroman*, inspired by Goethe, to transform the reader, was fairly quickly abandoned. Further, in attempting to reconcile itself with other dominant trends, the *Bildungsroman* sought to integrate social interaction, though its initial focus had been almost strictly internal. As a result, nineteenth-century German authors after Goethe largely produced an amalgam of the apprenticeship and social novels. The focus of the German *Bildungsroman*, and of these “hybrid” novels, was squarely on the individual, and heavily introspective and

⁸⁵ Hardin (ed.), xiv-xv. This may be translated as: “Whoever now reads [these books], which encompass the sum total of the *Bildungsroman* as it was then, can sense the air of a lost world arising from their old pages.”

⁸⁶ Ibid. (Sammons), pp. 32-33, “unfulfilled genre”: Jürgen Jacobs (1972), “phantom genre”: Sammons (1981)

⁸⁷ Steinecke in Hardin (ed.), pp. 82-87

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 100, he suggests the term *Individualroman*, p. 94. Authors included e.g. Immermann, Keller and Raabe.

philosophical questions, including human nature, were addressed. This philosophical focus need not be construed negatively; as Martin Swales has pointed out:

No other novel form is so engaged creatively by the play of values and ideas; yet at the same time, no other novel form is so tough in its refusal to hypostatize consciousness, thinking, insight as a be-all and end-all. [...] And I want to insist that German literature is philosophical not in the sense that it has a philosophical scheme which it wants to impose but rather in that it asks after the place of philosophizing, of reflectivity, in living. Ultimately its finest products always suggest that consciousness and being are inextricably intertwined; that consciousness is not a realm serenely encapsulated from the stresses and strains of living.⁸⁹

In the development of the German apprenticeship novel over the course of the nineteenth century, we have seen how trends in England and Western Europe affected the works of German authors. Yet it is also indisputable that the German works (or rather an idea of them) greatly affected the English. Here, once more, we see the difficulties of definition. In short, just as Dilthey's definition would ultimately prevent many of the "hybrid" novels mentioned above from being considered *Bildungsromane* in their own right, it also heavily influenced English authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dilthey, in popularizing the term *Bildungsroman*, interpreted *Wilhelm Meister* in such a way that the harmonious development of the protagonist and the emphasis on the internal and the personal were given what would seem undue attention.⁹⁰ Further, what became "lost in translation" was Goethe's practical understanding as opposed to his ideal understanding of human development; namely the recognition that, for the majority of us, the goal cannot be to become the "universal man" (the idea of universal woman being at best of comic interest at the cusp of the nineteenth century), i.e., a master of all trades; and that, instead, we must specialize, must find an individual vocation and dedicate ourselves to developing within that single field.⁹¹

Attempting to accept an ideology in pursuit of a goal that Goethe himself had already recognized as impractical posed major difficulties for English writers of the nineteenth century, chief among them Walter Pater, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, each of whom took away different things from it. Pater, it seems, was deeply inspired by Goethe's work, and in *The Renaissance* analyzed the former's *Bildungsidee*, arriving too (no thanks to Dilthey) at the previously mentioned conclusion that specific and focused development must supplant the overly lofty goal of universal development. Mill does not seem to have fared quite as well; while he very much appreciated the goal of a complete development of the human being, he balked at

⁸⁹ Swales in Hardin (ed.), p. 68

⁹⁰ Steinecke in Hardin (ed.), pp. 92-93

⁹¹ Jeffers (2005), pp. 46-47

what he took to be the paradigmatic, prescriptive aspects of the *Bildungsidee*. Finally Matthew Arnold, in his *Culture and Anarchy*, generally applauded Goethe's concept of freedom of choice, while at the same time expressing his concern that, taken too far, it could lead to social disintegration. Here Arnold, just as Pater and Mill, also seems to have overlooked Goethe's misgivings about the realization of the "individual as a whole" and preached precisely this goal, which Arnold believed would in turn lead to the growth of culture in the individual.⁹²

And indeed "culture" would seem to have become the rallying cry of the English *Bildungsromancier* as the novel spread, enriched by the contributions of authors such as Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot, to name but a few examples. In the roughly hundred years between the 1824 translation of *Wilhelm Meister* in England (American readers would have to wait until 1865) and the initial ebbing of the *Bildungsroman* in England in the 1920s,⁹³ English authors managed to create a version of it distinctly different from their German predecessors.

First of all, the balance between the internal and the external was shifted; while the apprenticeship novel, focused as it intrinsically is on personal development, must as a matter of course spend a great deal of time on internal issues, English authors sought to balance this with a healthy dose of interaction with the outside world, and above all interactions with the protagonist's social environment.⁹⁴ In similar vein, informed as it was by a different literary development, including the influence of the social novel, the English *Bildungsroman* – one need here only conjure again the setting of *David Copperfield* – not only included more story but also and importantly depicted the societal and psychological constraints its protagonists had to contend with, and sought to depict the reality and weight of social conditions.⁹⁵

In keeping with this thinking, the English *Bildungsroman* moved beyond the focus on individual choice of the German model to stress that young people also needed opportunity; the freedom to choose to never go hungry again does you precious little good if you are living on the street. Young people have talents (here it should be emphasized I am referring to their natural gifts, regardless of type or degree) and should be given the opportunity to develop them, regardless of sex or social class.⁹⁶

A further important point is that the traditional family unit – the nuclear family, though the term did not exist at the time – was by no means a precondition for the protagonist's

⁹² Jeffers, p. 48

⁹³ Buckley (1974), p. 265. The apprenticeship novel would resurface there after the Second World War.

⁹⁴ Jeffers, pp. 3-4, 55

⁹⁵ Hardin (Mahoney), p. 99

⁹⁶ Jeffers, pp. 58-59, 70 Here it is interesting to note that, despite the fact that the German model after Goethe focused on the development of the bourgeoisie, Goethe himself, along with Schiller, held similar views to those of Dickens that development should be independent of social status.

development. Indeed, a recurring theme is that of the loss of parents (to death or through abandonment), above all the idea of the “absent father” which in turn leads to what has been dubbed the “crisis of succession”: if the protagonist does not know who his father is, who does he have to emulate?⁹⁷ Two final points to mention here are that, at least in the nineteenth-century examples, the English *Bildungsroman* as a rule did not wholly place the fate of the protagonist in his or her own hands; while individual choice remained essential, Providence was often at play as well.⁹⁸ And lastly but significantly, we tend to see the strong autobiographical ties between author and protagonist mentioned earlier in this work, not only with Dickens but also in varying degrees for D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and W. Somerset Maugham.⁹⁹ These authors, and many others, invested a great deal of their own lives and memories, joyous and painful, into their main characters, creating in the process what we might call “novels of therapy.”

Though the *Bildungsroman* took a bit more time to reach the States, reach them it did. And though there were also great early works, such as the autobiographical *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), for the sake of classification later examples such as Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) or Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) are likely more important for our purposes, as are their English “counterparts” such as William Golding’s *Free Fall* (1959). In short, what can be seen here is not so much a clear dividing line between English and American versions, but rather a progressing trend in both countries that separates the twentieth (and twenty-first) from the nineteenth.

As was previously mentioned, the *Bildungsroman* largely fell out of favor in England in the 1920s; at the same time it began to enjoy a revival in the United States. The post-World War Two era, in turn, would see the genre alive and well on both sides of the Atlantic, and with similar changes in the novel type. Firstly, the helping hand of Providence, prominent in Victorian era novels, effectively disappeared: the world of the twentieth century *Bildungsroman* was a largely godless one. Secondly, the family unit continued to disintegrate, which had the effect, as Jeffers has recognized, of creating protagonists who, in the pronounced absence of fathers (he terms this “father-ache”), develop parasitic relations with their mothers and find themselves forced to find surrogates to meet their needs for guidance.¹⁰⁰ As the twentieth century progressed, the previously mentioned crisis of succession combined with the general decay of

⁹⁷ Jeffers, p. 70. Here I have deliberately used a male example, which was prominent at the time. Jeffers himself shows two excellent examples of female apprenticeship novels, *What Maisie Knew* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, both by the American author Henry James.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156; Buckley, pp. 164-65, p. 249

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188

religious faith and (with Vietnam at the latest) a disillusionment with established structures and ideologies of any kind.

As a result, the protagonists of twentieth century Anglo-American *Bildungsromane* are generally in familial units that are every bit as incomplete and often more complex than their nineteenth century predecessors. The other institutions that could provide help (e.g. church and state) have become little more than worn symbols, leaving the protagonist unanchored in society and in their own family. This has in turn often produced “heroes who aren’t heroes” in more contemporary apprenticeship novels; while the story surely revolves around them, it would no longer seem appropriate to refer to them as *Bildungshelden*. The “happy end,” if there is one at all, is often mingled with and obfuscated by the complexities of modern relationships and their attendant affairs, betrayals, split and recombined families. And as a footnote on the ubiquitous question of the family, it is interesting to note that, while the male protagonists of nineteenth century apprenticeship novels often married and became fathers themselves by novel’s end, their twentieth century equivalents rarely did; in the early part of the century they often died too young to take this step, but in later stories it simply never happened, suggesting that – having grown up fatherless themselves – they aren’t suited to becoming good husbands and fathers.¹⁰¹

In his *Edmund Talbot und seine Brüder* (1999), Christoph Schöneich has done much to both explore and champion the continued vitality of the *Bildungsroman* genre, identifying several key evolutions in the shift to the modern. Following the dystopian and destructive negative *Bildungsromane* produced on the cusp of the twentieth century by the likes of Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde, the genre seems to have progressed to a somewhat more sober take on life, which had both positive and negative aspects. The *Bildungshelden* of the 20th and 21st centuries, enjoying considerable freedom (especially in comparison to their 19th-century counterparts), are nonetheless far less likely to find fulfilling conclusions to their own life stories. This is due to a quintessential shift in power and focus: whereas their progenitors were to greater and lesser extents powerless, but the development of their own personalities was of vital importance, today’s protagonists can in many senses write their own ticket, can plot their futures for themselves; but these selfsame futures are depicted as largely inconsequential factors.¹⁰² More keenly aware of the irrelevance of their own growth, latter-day *Bildungshelden* are prone to feelings of powerlessness.

¹⁰¹ Jeffers, p. 190

¹⁰² Schöneich, *Edmund Talbot und seine Brüder* (1999), p. 32 (hereafter “Schöneich”)

As such, in a very real sense the *Helden* and *Heldinnen* of these later English and American novels – the increasing significance of female protagonists¹⁰³ being a further hallmark of the genre’s evolution – come full circle back to the *Bildungsroman*’s German roots: though by no means turning a blind eye to the social realities that surround us, they nonetheless place the focus more squarely on internal developments, on the emotional and the psychological. Faced with realities where the self is largely irrelevant, the development of that self becomes a much more ongoing than completed process; accordingly, we accompany modern and postmodern *Bildungshelden* not only through the trials of their youths, but also in facing the questions they continue to ask themselves as thirty- and forty-somethings.¹⁰⁴ These characters, sharing to a great extent the same goals of the very first *Bildungshelden* – namely the meaningful development of their own souls – nonetheless inhabit a far less stable, far more ethically protean world, a world which calls for them to be both self-critical and self-accepting in equal parts.¹⁰⁵ The consummation of that development, the end of that journey, is as pragmatic as it is elusive, namely a self-responsible and productive interaction¹⁰⁶ with the world around them; in its simplest terms, it can be reduced to overcoming the myriad options that are both the boon and bane of our time to find a productive and meaningful path for their (and our) continually evolving selves.

This, then, is the general progression of the *Bildungsroman* from its genesis in the twilight of the eighteenth century: having virtually disappeared in Germany as suddenly as it had appeared, it was replaced by attempts on the part of German authors to reconcile its focus on the self, indeed on human nature, with the genre of the social novel. These experiments with “hybrid” novels took place at roughly the same time the first English interpretations appeared, shifting the focus from the “individual in a vacuum” to the “individual in society” and stressing not only the importance of choice but the opportunity to realistically pursue that choice, and not only the reflective *Bildungsheld* but the active one. As the genre progressed from shore to shore, and from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, English and American authors, while maintaining the initial moralist intent of the genre, adapted their stories to portray the shifting social conditions around them, a world where the social construct of the family often collapsed, Providence was a question mark at best, and where, in the wake of wars and oppression, guiding ideologies and “isms” had grown suspect at best, a world where, as Irving would put it,

¹⁰³ See in this regard Katharina Uhsadel’s *Antonia Byatts Quartett in der Tradition des englischen Bildungsromans* (2005) for an excellent analysis of the female *Bildungsroman* tradition. We will deal with this text at length in chapter five.

¹⁰⁴ Schöneich, pp. 62-67, 93

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 101

we must do our best to live good and meaningful lives, a part of us always keeping in mind the ways “life jumps you from behind.”

Chapter One

The World of Initiation¹⁰⁷: *The World According to Garp*

Prior to *The World According to Garp* (1978, hereafter referred to simply as *Garp*) Irving published three other novels, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968), *The Water Method Man* (1972), and *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974). While each of the three is inarguably valuable in its own right, *Garp* is the book that made Irving a household name, finally bringing in enough money to allow him to write full time, and garnering him the attention of the critics, who alternately praised his originality and lambasted his depiction of the gritty and at times sordid aspects of modern life, what he himself has tongue-in-cheek referred to as an “X-rated soap opera.”¹⁰⁸ As *Garp* is among Irving’s best-selling novels¹⁰⁹ and would set both the tone and benchmark for the many novels that followed, it is a logical starting point for a closer examination of Irving’s works.

Synopsis

Garp begins before Garp. That is to say, the story begins with Jenny Fields, a nurse who, at a fairly young age, decides she wants as little to do with men as possible. Not a lesbian, her concern is more with what she sees as the loss of control over her own life any serious relationship would entail. The difficulty comes for Jenny when she realizes, after having worked in an obstetrics ward, that she very much wants a child of her own.

Ironically, it is the horrors of war that will grant Jenny’s wish. Helping to care for wounded soldiers in a stateside hospital during the Second World War, she encounters one T.S. (Technical Sergeant) Garp, the ball-turret gunner from a B-17 who has suffered injuries that have already reduced him to a mental vegetable, and will ultimately kill him. As he continues to regress, becoming increasingly childlike and unaware of his surroundings, Jenny decides she has found the perfect solution: by using Garp to impregnate herself, she will have the child she wants without the unwanted father / husband. The “experiment,” which Jenny neither enjoys nor repeats, is a success, the result being Jenny’s first and only child, whom she enigmatically names “T.S. Garp” after his father, never bothering to come up with any meaning for the abbreviation; T.S. Garp *is* his full name.

Garp’s childhood and youth, spent mostly at a New England all-boys’ school, are largely uneventful, his major discoveries including his fondness for wrestling and, still later, his interest

¹⁰⁷ Here I am using “initiation” in the broader sense: not as a contrast to the *Bildungsroman*, but with regard to traumatic and formative experiences central to the *Bildungsromane* genre.

¹⁰⁸ *The World According to Garp*, p. 338 Hereafter simply *Garp*.

¹⁰⁹ Here Irving himself has dispelled the common misconception that it is his best-selling novel. In 1998, he clarified that *A Prayer for Owen Meany* was his number one worldwide, *The Cider House Rules* number two, and *Garp* a “distant third.” *The Atlantic Online* (1998), pp. 2-3

in becoming a writer, fuelled in no small measure by his infatuation with Helen Holm, the bookish daughter of his wrestling coach.

Upon graduation, Garp undertakes a journey of initiation in the truest sense when his mother, every bit the avid reader Helen Holm is, decides to spend a year in Vienna to try and write a book of her own and hoping that Garp, too, will find inspiration there. And he certainly does learn a great deal on the topic of lust; in Vienna in the 1960s prostitution is legal, and Garp visits a number of whores during his time there, while at the same time making his first serious efforts at creative writing and sending the results back to the States to hear Helen's opinion on them.

Using one of these short stories, "The Pension Grillparzer" as proof of his potential as a writer, Garp proposes to Helen, who says yes, and upon his return to the States, the two are married at the age of nineteen. Helen begins work as an English professor, while Garp (with financial support from his mother, whose autobiography was an overnight bestseller) devotes his time to writing (or trying to) and being a "househusband." They have their first son Duncan only a year after having married, and their second, Walt, five years later. Aside from an ill-fated experiment in partner-swapping¹¹⁰ with a befriended couple, in the first ten years of their marriage Helen is never unfaithful to Garp; he in contrast cannot seem to get his problems with lust under control, sleeping with two babysitters over the years. Ultimately, however, Helen consents to an affair with one of her graduate students.

Running parallel to the Garps' domestic joys and sorrows is the equally important embroilment of Garp's mother Jenny in the increasingly heated feminism debate. Though she never really considers herself a feminist, and simply believes that women should have the freedom to live their lives as they see fit – as she did –, her book is heralded as the "first feminist autobiography," and practically overnight she becomes an inspiration and (almost against her will) spokeswoman for women's rights.

Jenny comes from a moneyed family, and the success of her book has made her fairly wealthy herself. In the wake of her newfound celebrity, she decides to open her family's huge beachfront estate in Dog's Head Harbor as a sanctuary for women of all kinds, recovering from

¹¹⁰ Helen worked as a university professor. A male colleague named Harrison Fletcher was having an affair with a female student, doing serious harm to his wife Alice, with whom the Garps were also befriended. In an effort to bring the man back to his senses (and back to his wife), Helen proposes the two couples experiment in partner-swapping, so that Harrison can see what it feels like knowing your spouse is sleeping with someone else. Not surprisingly, this ends disastrously, with Harrison convinced he is in love with Helen and Alice desperately wanting Garp, who in turn also feels drawn to her. Ultimately it is Helen, who never enjoyed the venture from the outset, who calls it off. This story arc is very similar to Irving's previous novel *The 158-pound Marriage*, where the foursome "experiment" makes up the entire novel, though it remains unclear if Irving is parodying himself here.

whatever problems they may have, such as violent partners or other abusive relationships, or just to be themselves in peace and quiet.

And the house will become a haven not just to women as, following a car crash in which both Helen and Garp were injured, Duncan lost an eye, and five-year-old Walt was killed, the rest of the family comes back to Dog's Head Harbor, where Jenny, who never lost the habit of wearing her white nurse's uniform, helps them all find their way back to normality. It is here that Garp meets Roberta Muldoon, (formally Robert Muldoon, a professional football player) a transsexual who has appointed herself Jenny's bodyguard, and the so-called "Ellen Jamesians," named for Ellen James, a girl raped by two men at the age of eleven; the men then cut her tongue out so she could never tell anyone what happened. The Ellen Jamesians cut out their own tongues (communicating with notes instead) in protest of what happened to the girl and, by extension, of all crimes perpetrated on women by men.

After a year of convalescence in which the parents heal, both physically and emotionally, and where Duncan can get used to being an eleven-year-old with only one eye, the family takes a trip back to Garp's old stomping grounds, Vienna. Shortly before they are due to return to the States, they receive a call that Jenny was shot and killed at a New Hampshire political rally.

Rushing home, Garp is shocked to hear that, despite his mother's express wishes that there be no funeral, there is indeed going to be one, and on the scale of an *event*, the first "feminist funeral," which no man is allowed to attend. Garp, unwilling to be shut out of a memorial service for his own mother, attends in drag only to be "outed" by a mentally deranged woman named Bainbridge "Pooh" Percy, who recognizes Garp because he and the Percy's played together as children. Surrounded by thousands of women enraged by the sight of a man, any man, at "their" funeral, Garp is punched and kicked, barely escaping in one piece.

Immediately after the funeral, Garp is approached not by an Ellen Jamesian, but by *the* Ellen James herself, who claims she wants to be a writer like him. Moved by the shock of meeting the girl face-to-face, and trying to do what he thought his mother would have done, Garp offers to let her become part of his family; the girl is so elated and relieved, she nearly faints.

Though her death was unexpected, Jenny Fields had taken certain provisions for her son, appointing him the executor of her estate. She left no instructions as to how the money should be spent beyond the cryptic sentence: "I want to leave a place where worthy women can go to collect themselves *and just be themselves, by themselves.*"¹¹¹ Acting on this maxim and using the considerable wealth generated by the sales of her autobiography, not only could the house at Dog's Head Harbor be maintained as a haven for hurt women; the Fields Foundation,

¹¹¹ *Garp*, p. 379

which distributed financial aid (to go back to school, to help move out of an abusive home, etc.) to women in need, was founded, with Garp at the head of the Board of Trustees. In this manner, Garp was never again in a position to wholly ignore the problems faced by women.

Yet other factors would not allow Garp to remain in a purely beneficent role. Due in no small part to Ellen James, who would become like a daughter to him and who remained adamant in her anger towards the Ellen Jamesians, who she felt had used her, Garp now himself becomes entangled in the politics of feminism, writing in Ellen's defense and condemning the Ellen Jamesians as lunatics.

At the same time, Garp and Helen decide to move back to Steering, the school Garp had attended and where he had learned wrestling from Helen's father, Ernie Holm. Garp, in no need of money for the rest of his life and in need of something to do while working through his writer's block, offers to take on the position of wrestling coach without pay. The offer is accepted, and so Helen and Garp return to the place where they first met and fell in love, the Steering School campus.

In the story's final arc, a number of things occur. While Garp is out jogging, an Ellen Jamesian tries to run over him with her car, crashing and killing herself in the process. Garp escapes unscathed, and the Ellen Jamesians claim that it was an isolated act, but was clearly provoked by Garp's "typically male, aggressive, rapist personality."¹¹² For his part Garp, who already regretted his overly zealous defense of Ellen James and attack on the Ellen Jamesians, issues an apology, which falls on deaf ears. Moving on from the debate, which he recognizes was in part only possible because of the misdirected energies he should have been using to write, Garp finds his second wind, diving into his Fields Foundation responsibilities with renewed enthusiasm, spending time with his family, coaching wrestling, and finally writing new material.

In a strange form of history repeating itself, the scene of Garp's murder is the Steering wrestling room. When Helen and Garp were still children, Helen would often sit in the corner of the wrestling room, reading her books while her father coached, and it was here that she first met Jenny Fields, who, in her white nurse's uniform, came to register Garp (who was sick in bed) for wrestling. Once Garp joined the team, he would often wrestle while Helen sat in the corner. Now Garp is the coach, and Helen has brought a book to read while her husband works. Pooh Percy, who had outed Garp at his mother's "feminist funeral," suddenly appears in the wrestling room, also wearing a nurse's dress,¹¹³ and shoots him at point-blank range, killing him almost instantly. Aside from her universal hatred of men, she blamed Garp for the death of her

¹¹² *Garp*, p. 402

¹¹³ This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. During Jenny's meteoric rise to fame in connection with the feminism movement, a fashion designer sold nurse's uniforms with bright red hearts on the left breast, dubbing them Jenny Fields Originals. This is what Pooh Percy was wearing when she murdered Garp.

sister Cushman “Cushie” Percy, who had died in childbirth. Though Garp did sleep with Cushie when they were both teenagers, he was not the father, and her death happened years later. Still, for Pooh, Garp was “the enemy”; as such, at the age of thirty-three, he was shot and killed in the wrestling room he and Helen so loved.

The novel concludes with over twenty pages of epilogue, completing the appropriately-titled “Life After Garp” chapter with breakdowns of what happened to the major characters in the years following Garp’s death.

Dominant Themes

Garp is a lengthy and complex novel, beginning before Garp’s birth and ending years after his death. In attempting to “break down” the heavily interwoven story threads, I have chosen to address six of what I feel to be the most essential themes appearing in the book, namely the worries surrounding children and parenthood; sex in the sense of lust; the “battle” of the two biological sexes; death; the art of writing; and healing.

Children

As has been mentioned earlier in this work, Irving has on many occasions made it clear that his own life has been heavily influenced by the experience of marrying and becoming a father at a fairly early age, while still at college. Above all, the ceaseless worrying about the safety of one’s children is a key element to him, and Garp, arguably better¹¹⁴ than any of his other protagonists, personifies this nearly neurotic worry, its manifestations and its potential consequences.

Throughout the book, we are offered direct access to Garp’s thoughts, which are illustrative of the horrible “what if” scenarios that come into his head – what one could call the curse of the storyteller – when he worries about his children. When his older son Duncan is going to spend a night at a friend’s house and informs his father he’s going by bicycle, Garp tries to talk him out of it:

“Why?” Duncan said, exasperated.

So your spine won’t be severed when a car driven by a crazed teenager, or a drunken man suffering a heart attack, swipes you off the street, Garp thought

¹¹⁴ The only other protagonist who could contend with Garp is the surly but lovable Dr. Wilbur Larch in *The Cider House Rules*. But his love for Homer Wells, who in a sense is the son he never had, is to some extent diluted by the fact that Homer is only one (if also the favorite) of an entire orphanage full of children; as such the ties of blood and of the nuclear family are not present here.

– and your wonderful, warm chest is cracked against the curbstone, your special skull split open when you land on the sidewalk, and some asshole wraps you in an old rug as if you were somebody’s pet discovered in the gutter. Then the dolts from the suburbs come out and guess who owns it (“That green and white house on the corner of Elm and Dodge, I think”). Then someone drives you home, rings the bell and says to me “Uh, sorry”; and pointing to the spillage in the bloody back seat, asks, “Is it yours?” But all Garp said was, “Oh, go ahead, Duncan, *take* the bike. Just be careful!”¹¹⁵

What is just as interesting as this virtual neurosis itself is its contradiction with other behavior. Garp, consumed as he is with looking out for and over his children, and who is otherwise an impeccably safe and responsible driver, cannot help but indulge in a bit of risk-taking behind the wheel of his own car:

For someone who fussed and worried so much about the safety of the children – about reckless drivers, about leaking gas, and so forth – Garp had a way of entering their driveway and garage, after dark, that terrified Helen. The driveway turned sharply off a long downhill road. When Garp knew the children were in bed, asleep, he would cut the engine *and* the lights and coast *up* the black driveway; he would gather enough momentum from leaving the downhill road to roll over the lip at the top of the driveway and down into their dark garage. He said he did it so that the engine and the headlights would not wake up the children. But he had to start the car to turn it around to drive the baby-sitter home, anyway; Helen said his trick was simply for a thrill – it was puerile and dangerous. He was always running over toys left in the blackened driveway, and crashing into bicycles not moved far enough to the rear of the garage.¹¹⁶

This trick, like so many human foibles, is perfectly harmless ... until the one time it isn’t. Upon Garp’s discovery that Helen has been having an affair, he demands that she break it off, which she agrees to do while he takes the boys out to see a movie. Sitting in a parked car outside the family house with her ex-lover and trying in vain to get him to accept the situation and leave, she agrees to perform fellatio on him. While she is doing so Garp, driving home, decides to play the car trick with his two sons along, crashing into the parked car, which he never sees. Garp’s jaw is broken, leaving him unable to speak (and ironically forcing him to use notes as do the Ellen Jamesians); Helen needs to be put in a neck brace but is largely unscathed. The ex-lover is emasculated. Garp’s older son Duncan loses an eye and his younger son, the five-year-old Walt, is killed on impact.

The crash is a key turning point in the novel for a number of reasons. Its immediate effect is to move the surviving family members to return to Jenny Fields’ huge house in Dog’s Head Harbor, the family mansion she has since turned into a haven for women with problems of all kinds. Here Garp, Helen and Duncan will spend a full year in convalescence.

¹¹⁵ *Garp*, pp. 174-75

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 223-24

It is important at this point to consider what brought them here. To be sure, one could argue that it was Garp's carelessness, or simply a one-in-a-million occurrence, that no one was to blame. But to do so rings as false in our ears as it does to the characters. There never could have been an accident if Helen's ex-lover hadn't parked his car there; he never could have done so if he and Helen had never had an illicit affair; and Helen never would have been tempted to have a lover had Garp never been unfaithful to her in the first place.

Sex and Lust

In short, what brought Garp's fragile family to this point was sex, which is depicted in the novel as lust. Jenny Fields, one of the most sexless characters to be found in fiction – who had sex only once in her life, and that simply because the story predated sperm banks – though apparently immune to it herself, is constantly disgusted by what she sees as the unbridled lust in others.

And *Garp* is replete with lust and its consequences, the topic being neither trivialized nor unfairly demonized, but dealt with frankly and in a variegated manner; though Jenny may tar everyone with the same brush, Irving does not. We can see this in Garp's encounters with the Viennese prostitutes, which would not seem particularly harmful for either party. On the other hand, extramarital affairs, primarily Garp's infidelities with babysitters, certainly do leave deep emotional scars. Finally, Irving shows the extremes of depravity that sex can lead to, how sex can ultimately become a weapon, in the form of a child molester, whom we encounter and whom Garp helps to catch early in the novel; and in the case of the previously mentioned Ellen James, who becomes a key character in the novel.

Garp's feelings about these varying degrees and forms of lust would seem to follow the principle of "letting the punishment fit the crime." There is never any indication of shame about his dealings with prostitutes, coming as they did before he and Helen married and never resurfacing.¹¹⁷ His infidelities are few and far between, usually one-night stands with babysitters. Needless to say this does nothing to make them acceptable, and he is very ashamed of them while at the same time recognizing how susceptible he is to such temptations. Garp's true horror, however, is in his encounters with the crimes of child molestation and rape. Jogging in a park, he finds a small girl who's been molested. Helping the police to capture the perpetrator, he is horrified when, only a few months later, he meets him again, now selling tickets at a high school basketball game. The little girl wouldn't or couldn't testify, so he couldn't be charged with a crime.

¹¹⁷ This is especially interesting in that, in Jenny's autobiography, when railing against lust, she makes her son's penchant for whores public knowledge.

As for Ellen James, when Garp hears about the initial crime he is horrified; but when he also learns that an entire “society” has been formed of women calling themselves the Ellen Jamesians, he is less than sympathetic:

“Rape is every woman’s problem,” Jenny said. Garp hated his mother’s “everyone” language most of all. A case, he thought, of carrying democracy to an idiotic extreme.

“It’s every man’s problem, too, Mom. The next time there’s a rape, suppose I cut my *prick* off and wear it around my neck. Would you respect *that*, too?”

“We’re talking about *sincere* gestures,” Jenny said.

“We’re talking about *stupid* gestures,” Garp said.¹¹⁸

Garp’s attitude toward rape is an uneasy one; while he never commits or even considers committing such a crime, he cannot claim to be above sexual urges. As the narrator speculates: “Perhaps rape’s offensiveness to Garp was that it was an act that disgusted him with himself – with his own very male instincts, which were otherwise so unassailable. He never felt like raping anyone; but rape, Garp thought, made men feel guilt by association.”¹¹⁹

Yet these reflections fail to deter him from sleeping with his son’s babysitter – a college student named Cindy, whom he privately thinks of as Little Squab Bones because of her birdlike frailty – while his wife is pregnant with their second child. Settling down to go to sleep with his unsuspecting wife, he realizes that he hopes their next child will also be a boy:

Why? he thought. He recalled the girl in the park, his image of the tongueless Ellen James, his own mother’s difficult decisions. [...] And now [...] Little Squab Bones. Cindy had cried under him, her back bent against a suitcase. A blue vein had pulsed at her temple, which was the translucent temple of a fair-skinned child. And though Cindy still had her tongue, she’d been *unable* to speak to him when he left her.

Garp didn’t want a daughter because of *men*. Because of *bad* men, certainly; but even, he thought, because of men like *me*.¹²⁰

The War of the Sexes

In a 1998 interview, Irving described *Garp* as “a novel about sexual distrust, sexual polarization,” going on to say that it was also “a depiction of a sexual world gone mad; as such, it was a plea for sanity, for common sense.”¹²¹ In *Garp*, sex is a far-reaching topic, ranging from

¹¹⁸ *Garp*, p. 137

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-51

¹²¹ Atlantic (1998), p. 3

the sexual lust that plagues the protagonist to the damages inflicted by sexual predators, but also to the “war of the sexes.” And, though the book has a male protagonist, a great deal of the content focuses on what for lack of a better term may be called women’s issues.

Starting with Jenny Fields herself, we see how a woman who refused to fit the traditional mold of marrying and settling down but who nevertheless wanted a child of her own was viewed with mistrust by both women and men; hence the name of her infamous book, *A Sexual Suspect*. And, of course, it was her political activism that would ultimately get her killed. And sadly, not only women but also girls are subject to male depredations in *Garp*, namely the nine-year-old molested in the park and the eleven-year-old Ellen James, who not only suffers the initial crime, but is then used as a symbol by a “society” she neither asked be created nor supports.

Here, however, it is important to recognize the complexity Irving builds into his characters, even background or secondary characters. While Ellen James is literally scarred for life, she is neither a rabid man-hater nor an antifeminist. Yet she *is* outraged by the fact that she has been appropriated for a cause without her consent. Similarly the Ellen Jamesians, while radical, found their genesis in the response to an act of horrible male aggression. As Irving said in the interview mentioned above, “... Jenny Fields was a likable, even admirable character, but the Ellen Jamesians were neither likable nor admirable. Yet they came into existence in support of a genuine victim of male brutality – don’t forget that.”¹²²

And Garp’s own role in the “war of the sexes” is a variegated one. His mother’s funeral, which is initially a tremendous insult to Garp as no men are allowed, also serves to open his eyes to just how much his mother meant to so many women. He is not only forced to realize how much the women’s movement has lost, or at least feels it has lost, with the death of his mother, in response to which the female gubernatorial candidate Jenny had supported dissolved into tears in the middle of a campaign speech. Still traveling in drag, after barely escaping the funeral he is also treated to a taste of what it’s like to be female firsthand. Taking a taxi to the airport to fly home, he asks the driver about the election:

“You didn’t miss nothin’, sweetie,” the cabby told him. “That broad broke down.”

“Sally Devlin?” said Garp.

“She cracked up, right on TV,” the cabby said. “She was so flipped out over the assassination, she couldn’t control herself. She was givin’ this speech but she couldn’t get through it, you know?”

“She looked like a real idiot to me,” the cabby said. “She couldn’t be no governor if she couldn’t control herself no better than that.”

¹²² Atlantic (1998), p. 3

And Garp saw the pattern of the woman's loss emerging. Perhaps the foul incumbent governor had remarked that Ms. Devlin's inability to control her emotions was "just like a woman." Disgraced by her demonstration of her feelings for Jenny Fields, Sally Devlin was judged not competent enough for whatever dubious work being a governor entailed.

Garp felt ashamed. He felt ashamed of other people.

"In my opinion," the cabby said, "it took something like that shooting to show the people that the woman couldn't handle the job, you know?"

"Shut up and drive," Garp said.

"Look, honey," the cabby said. "I don't have to put up with no *abuse*."

"You're an asshole and a moron," Garp told him, "and if you don't drive me to the airport with your mouth shut, I'll tell a cop you tried to paw me all over."

The cabby floored the accelerator and drove for a while in furious silence, hoping the speed and recklessness of his driving would scare his passenger.

"If you don't slow down," Garp said, "I'll tell a cop you tried to rape me."

"Fucking weirdo," the cabby said, but he slowed down and drove to the airport without another word. Garp put the money for the tip on the taxi's hood and one of the coins rolled into the crack between the hood and fender.

"Fucking *women*," the cabby said.

"Fucking *men*," said Garp, feeling – with mixed feelings – that he had done his duty to ensure that the sex war went on.¹²³

That is not to say, however, that *Garp* ends with such a bleak outlook on the war of the sexes. On the contrary, in *Garp* and following works, Irving shows that, by overcoming and/or abandoning the overly stylized gender roles handed down to us, both men and women can grow together in mutually nurturing roles. As Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson point out:

In this regard, a deepening understanding and interpretation of human nature seems increasingly to inform Irving's vision, an interpretation that recognizes the possibility of – indeed, in the last three novels suggests the necessity for – the integration of the traditionally "feminine" and "masculine" into the coherent whole of the mature self. Apparently utterly sympathetic with the fundamental perspective of feminism, Irving nevertheless savagely exposes its excesses [...] in order to provide a platform for what emerges as a genuinely androgynous vision.¹²⁴

Philip Page would later return to this point, adding that "by the end of the novel, sexual extremism has been devalued and deflated, replaced by a valued group of androgynous or

¹²³ *Garp*, p. 362

¹²⁴ Harter & Thompson, p. 13. Given the time of publication, by "the last three novels," they mean *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *The Cider House Rules*.

sexually benign characters – Roberta Muldoon, Ellen James, Duncan Garp and young Jenny Garp.”¹²⁵ One could certainly take issue with the specific list of examples Page chooses in that, while Roberta, having consciously changed herself from man to woman, may well be said to have “transformed” into an androgynous person of her own volition, Ellen James is – quite understandably – essentially a sexual non-entity; she never marries, the epilogue telling us that she “may have known an occasional man, but more because he was a fellow poet than because he was a man.”¹²⁶ And, significantly, this is effectively an imposed state, a lifelong reaction to an indelible trauma. There is no evidence that Jenny Garp was either “sexually benign” (or malign for that matter) or androgynous, having married, given birth to three children, and remarrying.

Nonetheless, Page’s claim would appear to ring true for Roberta, as said, and for Duncan Garp, who, after a bit of matchmaking on Roberta’s part, would fall in love with and eventually marry a transsexual. Even more than Roberta, this legacy shows the triumph of androgyny, as Garp’s only son to survive past childhood has been raised in an environment that does not insist on clearly delineated masculine or feminine roles; in short, Duncan grows up in a world very different from that of Jenny Fields’ or of his father’s childhood. Roberta embodies androgyny; Duncan embraces it and in so doing ensures its perpetuation.

Death

Despite this glimpse of the “androgynous vision,” antagonism between the sexes is of course a perennial issue, and may very well never completely disappear. Yet in *Garp* we can see what happens when it moves beyond simple “sticks and stones” and becomes deadly serious. Death is as important as life in *The World According to Garp* and, as Josie Campbell has pointed out, each death is followed by new life: the death of Technical Sergeant Garp, the ball turret gunner, is quickly followed by the birth of the protagonist; little Walt’s death is the catalyst for the Garps to conceive again, thus bringing to the world little Jenny Garp.¹²⁷ The cycle of life, then, in its most essential biological sense, continues.

Equally important, deaths can serve as beneficial catalysts. It is only Jenny’s death that moves Garp, a basically good-hearted but ultimately self-serving man, to think beyond the needs of himself and his nuclear family, to invest his energies in the common good:

In the car north, on the dark road to Steering, Ellen James slept like a kitten curled in the back seat. In the rear-view mirror Garp noted that her knee was skinned, and that the girl sucked her thumb while she slept.

¹²⁵ Page, Philip, “Hero Worship and Hermeneutic Dialectics” in Bloom (ed.), p. 115

¹²⁶ *Garp*, p. 420

¹²⁷ Campbell (1998), p. 75

It had been a proper funeral for Jenny Fields, after all; some essential message had passed from mother to son. Here he was, playing nurse to someone. More importantly, Garp finally understood what his mother's talent had been: she had right instincts – *Jenny Fields always did what was right*. Importantly, it was in the car north to Steering, with the real Ellen James asleep and in his care, that T.S. Garp decided he would try to *be* more like his mother, Jenny Fields.

A thought, it occurred to him, that would have pleased his mother greatly if it had only come to him when she was alive.¹²⁸

These reflections on the part of the protagonist and subsequent decision to create the Fields Foundation are a perfect example of how death, while parting us from those we love, can also serve to create legacies. As Garp largely found his mother something of an embarrassment while she was alive, it took the shock of her death to wake him up to the idea of helping others.

Further, not only does Garp start the Foundation, but after his own death it is Roberta, Jenny's transsexual bodyguard and later Garp's closest friend, who takes over the reigns; and when she passes away it is Ellen James, who starts the story as likely the most deserving character of receiving comfort and support, who takes over the job of distributing it.

Parallel to this philanthropic legacy is a vocational one. Ellen James, Garp's "adopted" daughter, while physically unable to speak, nonetheless finds her voice in poetry. Garp's surviving son Duncan, while missing one eye, ultimately becomes a painter. As explained above, though Duncan never wanted children of his own, he was very open to a transsexual like Roberta, forwarding the androgynous vision by marrying a transsexual. And the youngest of the Garp children, Jenny, becomes a doctor; creating art *and* caring for people are thus kept in the family.

Writing

Focusing as it does on a protagonist who grows to become a successful novelist, *Garp* offers us many insights into how Irving views the art of storytelling and the challenges it poses. The young Garp, struggling to develop his storytelling skills during his year in Vienna, realizes that what he needs to find is "An overall scheme of things, a vision all his own."¹²⁹ Later, after having completed the short story "The Pension Grillparzer" – which he used to woo his future wife Helen – as well as two novels, *Procrastination* and *The Second Wind of the Cuckold*, he is faced with arguably the most frequently recurring theme in Irving's metafiction, namely the relation and/or balance between imagination and memory. In a creative slump, he despairs that

¹²⁸ *Garp*, p. 367

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110

the balance of this power in storytelling felt lost to Garp now. His first novel [...] suffered from the pretentious weight of all that fascist history he had taken no real part in. His second novel suffered his failure at imagining *enough* – that is, he felt he had not imagined far enough beyond his own fairly ordinary experience. [...] He felt he was in danger of limiting his ability as a writer in a fairly usual way: writing, essentially, about himself. Yet when he looked very far outside himself, Garp saw there only the invitation to pretention. His imagination was failing him.¹³⁰

Imagination and memory both, in turn, play a part in “truthful” writing, i.e., in crafting stories that ring true to the reader, that strike certain universal chords. In the novel, Garp’s editor has a secret weapon for testing how “true” a new book is, a black cleaning woman named Jillsy Sloper, who expresses the matter very simply but accurately: “A book feels true when you can say, ‘Yeah! That’s just how damn people *behave* all the time.’ *Then* you know it’s true.”¹³¹

Irving, again speaking through the omniscient narrator, makes a point of clarifying that this certainly does not mean autobiographical fact:

It was, in Garp’s opinion, the cheapest reason to read of all. Garp always said that the question he most hated to be asked, about his own work, was how much of it was “true” – how much of it was based on “personal experience.” *True* – not in the good way that Jillsy Sloper used it, but true as in “real life.” Usually, with great patience and restraint, Garp would say that the autobiographical basis – if there even was one – was the least interesting level on which to read a novel. He would always say that the art of fiction was the act of *imagining* truly – was, like any art, a process of selection.¹³²

Yet this ambitious statement does little to solve Garp’s dilemma; it is one thing to declare the lofty goal of “imagining truly,” but finding the creative power to actually deliver on that promise another matter entirely. And the losses in his life – the death of one of his two sons and maiming of the other in an automobile accident, the assassination of his mother – make the matter all the worse, providing additional, at times insurmountable emotional white noise between the writer and his own creative voice, the “overall scheme of things” crowded out by too many sad snapshots.

It would be oversimplifying and a great disservice to Irving’s masterful storytelling, however, to give the impression that these emotional traumas alone were what held Garp back. In the best human(ist) tradition, “what makes Garp tick” is far more complex. Nor have we by any means finished our business with the ties between imagination and memory. At this point, however, it is more fruitful to examine Garp’s writing in relation to the process of healing.

¹³⁰ *Garp*, p. 170

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 325

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 328

Healing

In a 2001 interview, Irving claimed that his books always move from “the comedic to the sad,”¹³³ and in a much earlier (1982) interview he discussed the twists of fate he subjects his characters to:

Basically I always try to place my characters under the most and least favorable circumstances to see how they will react, to test them. In *Garp* this strategy was very self-conscious: I wanted to create characters whom I greatly admired and then bless them with incredibly good fortune in the first half of the novel [...] But in the second half of the novel, I visit all the worst kinds of extreme things on these people to see how they would deal with extremes of adversity, just as earlier they had to cope with success.¹³⁴

Surely the turning point in this regard is the car crash. Until this point in time, Garp and Helen led almost idyllic lives. Upon Garp’s return from Europe the two marry – at the age of nineteen – and Helen, a voracious reader and outstanding student, is readily admitted as a professor of English Literature, while Garp, supported by the money from Jenny’s book sales, can comfortably devote all of his energies to being a writer and househusband. They have two happy and healthy sons and, despite some infidelities, genuinely love one another.

The car crash, however, changes everything. With one child dead and the other maimed, and with the unavoidable (and in Garp’s case, thanks to his wired broken jaw, at first literally unutterable) question of blame, the formerly “perfect” family is thrown into a state of crisis. While they recuperate at the estate in Dog’s Head Harbor, Garp’s mother slips back into her old role as nurse, caring as best she can for her son and his damaged family:

For Duncan and Helen, now, Garp seemed to have an endless reservoir of gentleness; for a year, he spoke softly to them; for a year, he was never impatient with them. They must have grown impatient with his delicacy. Jenny Fields noticed that the three of them needed a year to nurse each other.

In that year, Jenny wondered, what did they do with the *other* feelings human beings have? Helen hid them; Helen was very strong. Duncan saw them only with his missing eye. And Garp? He was strong, but not that strong. He wrote a novel called *The World According to Bensenhaver*, into which all his *other* feelings flew.¹³⁵

¹³³ Observer (2001), p. 2

¹³⁴ McCaffery, Larry. “An Interview with John Irving.” *Contemporary Literature* 23 (Winter 1983): 1-18, here pp. 14-15, cited in Reilly (1991), p. 6, ellipses in Reilly.

¹³⁵ *Garp*, p. 284

The World According to Bensenhaver – which Ellen James would later refer to as “the best rape story I have ever read”¹³⁶ – is by far Garp’s darkest work. In *The World According to Garp*, we are shown the first thirty pages and given a synopsis of the remainder of the story, which begins with a woman being kidnapped and raped; the rapist, a farmboy who has kidnapped Hope Standish,¹³⁷ the female protagonist, drives to a remote country road, where he makes it clear that, once he’s “had” her, he will kill her with a fishing knife. Recognizing her only chance for survival, Hope does her best to “cooperate” with the rape, waiting until he is sufficiently distracted by the sex act that she can slip his knife out of its sheath and stab him to death.

And from that point on, the story does nothing but get *worse*. Though Hope has survived the rape, her husband is never able to overcome his fears for her and for their children, making him paranoid for their safety and, ultimately, also suspicious she might be unfaithful. Near the end of the book he is accidentally shot, and Hope and her children on some level feel better, being finally freed from his smothering fears.

At the same time, back in the “real” world, Helen gives birth to their third child, Jenny Garp, which is what Garp’s mother’s name would have been had she married. During their recovery, Helen and Garp, once they have finally healed enough to be able to talk to each other without mutual accusations, conscious or subconscious, coming between them, decide they should have another child right away in order to “move on.” Here it is significant to note that, for Helen, this new life is – nearly – enough; the only self-flagellation she indulges in is to resign from the university, to deprive herself of her hard-earned post as literature professor. The university did not demand her resignation, and this was to be her first and last affair with a student. Nonetheless, this self-punishment seems to have been as necessary to Helen as it was sufficient; she would not go on punishing herself. As the narrator tells us: “When Jenny Garp was born, Helen said nothing. Helen was grateful; she felt for the first time since the accident that she was delivered from the insanity of grief that had crushed her with the loss of Walt.”¹³⁸

For Garp, however, this new life is not enough. His healing begins with *Bensenhaver*, which the narrator refers to as Garp’s “deliverance from the same insanity.”¹³⁹ It is for him the necessary first step, the purging of the bitterness, blame and self-recriminations festering in him. In essence, while it is certainly true that Garp needs to heal to be able to write again, it is every

¹³⁶ *Garp*, p. 365. Needless to say this was written on a note; since her rape and the removal of her tongue, she is physically unable to speak.

¹³⁷ It is worth considering, especially given Irving’s penchant for name-dropping, if Hope’s name, beyond the obvious correlative, could also be a variation on Faith Cavendish from Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.

¹³⁸ *Garp*, p. 319

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

bit as true that there are certain things he needs to write before he can heal. Tellingly Helen, who has always been Garp's first reader and the one he most wanted to impress with his writing, while she claims to understand his need to write the book, adamantly refuses to read a word of it. While this saddens Garp, it does nothing to deter him from writing the book.

Garp's response to the trauma of the car crash is emblematic of the healing process that continues up until the moment of his death. Though decidedly contemporary in terms of content and tone, not to mention compellingly human, this process of healing and (gradual) growth as a human being can essentially be seen as a series of "two steps forward and one step back," of incremental tidemarks of personal growth in the classic *Bildungsroman* tradition.

If we look at the major events, nearly all of which are traumatic, from the crash on, we can see this pattern clearly. As stated, the crash initially replenished Garp's capacity for kindness and gentleness for his surviving family. It did not, however, put him above needing to vent the bilious thoughts within him surrounding the crash, the loss of a son, and the role his wife's affair had in it all.

Similarly Jenny Fields' assassination and subsequent "feminist" funeral move Garp to effectively adopt Ellen James and to launch the Fields Foundation to help women of all kinds. Yet this newfound philanthropy, while certainly laudable in its own right, also serves to further distract him from his calling as a writer. It is also at this time that Garp offers to take over Helen's father's (who has since passed away) position as wrestling coach at his alma mater, the Steering school, a job he is willing to do free of charge. Here, in an artful metafictional twist, Irving inserts a fictional critic's insights on his fictional protagonist:

Helen was perhaps the only one who knew why he couldn't (at the moment) write. Her theory would later be expressed by the critic A.J. Harms, who claimed that Garp's work was progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history. "As he became more autobiographical, his writing grew narrower; also, he became less comfortable about doing it. It was as if he knew that not only was the work more *personally* painful to him – this memory dredging – but the work was slimmer and less imaginative in every way," Harms wrote. Garp had lost the freedom of *imagining* life truly, which he had so early promised himself, and all of us, with the brilliance of "The Pension Grillparzer." According to Harms, Garp could now be truthful only by *remembering*, and that method – as distinct from imagining – was not only psychologically harmful to him but far less fruitful.¹⁴⁰

In similar vein, Jenny's funeral and Garp's subsequent encounter with Ellen James also spark major changes for the better in his life while leaving other issues unresolved. Ellen essentially becomes a daughter (in addition to their biological daughter, who is now still a toddler) to the Garps; thus Garp continues the family tradition of helping damaged women. At

¹⁴⁰ *Garp*, p. 376

the same time, being in such close quarters with a young woman so damaged by men seems to cure Garp of his own urges: “Garp was happy with Helen. He wasn’t unfaithful to her, anymore. It was perhaps his contact with Ellen James that finally cured him of ever looking at young girls that way.”¹⁴¹ Yet Garp does not become a saint overnight; though he has apparently infinite sympathy for Ellen James, he still considers the Ellen Jamesians ridiculous at best and dangerous at worst, going so far as to vote they be universally banned from receiving financial support from the Fields Foundation. It is only Roberta who can wisely talk him out of this move.

Further, Ellen James herself becomes a source of conflict. Enraged by the continued activities of the Ellen Jamesians, who for years have been trying to speak for her without ever asking *her* what she herself wants, she ultimately writes an essay on “Why I’m Not an Ellen Jamesian.” And, once more, Garp attempts to grow beyond himself: though he privately would love to see the essay published, as the ultimate comeuppance for the Ellen Jamesians, Helen senses not only the moral weakness doing so would entail, but also the potential powder keg it could set off and harm it could ultimately do to Ellen herself. As a result, Garp tries to talk Ellen out of publishing it, but ultimately leaves the decision in her hands.

The next crucial event involves the Fields Foundation, where Garp and the other members of the board of trustees must vote on every application for financial support. As fate would have it the widow of Jenny Fields’ assassin – a hunter named Kenny Truckenmiller who, in turn, was immediately shot to death by other hunters present at the political rally where Jenny was killed – applies to the Foundation and, in an effort to be impartial, Garp himself goes to visit the woman to see if she is worthy of being helped or not. The woman barely makes ends meet with her own small beauty salon, and Garp has her cut his hair, never revealing who he is, to get a feel for her character. The meeting with the woman is fairly uneventful – she is an understandably sorrowful but innocuous widow – but Garp also encounters Dickie, her brother, who had introduced her to Kenny. Garp feels compelled to tell Dickie who he is; in turn Dickie has a revelation of his own:

“I was one of them who shot him,” Dickie said. “You know that?”

“You shot Kenny?” Garp said.

“I was *one* of them who did,” Dickie said. “Kenny was crazy. Somebody had to shoot him.”

“I’m very sorry,” Garp said. Dickie shrugged.

“I liked the guy,” Dickie said. “But he got crazy at Harriet, and he got crazy at your mother. He wouldn’t ever have gotten well, you know,” Dickie said. “He just got sick about women. He got sick for good. You could tell he wasn’t ever going to get over it.”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ *Garp*, p. 378

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 395

Kenny, it seems, had physically and mentally abused his wife and three children for thirteen years before Harriet read Jenny Fields' *A Sexual Suspect*; she divorced Kenny soon after, and he was forced by the courts to pay child support. Not surprisingly, he blamed the book, the woman, and the whole movement he saw behind it all for his troubles.¹⁴³ The meeting is cathartic for Garp; being able to attach a more human face to his mother's murder somehow allows him to let go.

Soon after returning home, Garp learns that Ellen has decided to publish the article despite his and Helen's reservations. This results in the predictable backlash, especially when the Ellen Jamesians discover that Ellen now lives in the same house as T.S. Garp. Consequently Garp, partly in response to the emotional harm this does to Ellen, writes a scathing essay of his own, defending Ellen and once more condemning her would-be spokeswomen; he can forgive the widow of his mother's assassin, but cannot forgive the Ellen Jamesians.

Helen in turn is vehement about Garp's inability to keep out of what is essentially a political debate and turn back to what he *should* be doing, namely writing. She berates him for the myriad tasks he engages in around the house, all of which, just like the Ellen James / Ellen Jamesian debate, distract him from creating new stories; the umbrella phrase Helen coins for this is "fucking around in the garden,"¹⁴⁴ and Garp slowly comes to realize how right she is.

The last major catalyst in Garp's life once more involves the Ellen Jamesians. While Garp is out jogging near his home, a deranged Ellen Jamesian tries to run him down with her car; Garp is able to dodge out of harm's way, but the woman is herself killed when the car crashes. Examining the wreck, Garp finds a note making it perfectly clear that the woman had meant to murder him.

It is at this point that Garp seems to finally let go. Despite *Garp's* omniscient narrator, there is never a black-and-white explanation in the book as to why this ends his feud with the Ellen Jamesians. Fear seems unlikely; Garp remains undaunted and – unlike the rest of his family – is not concerned about further attacks. Whatever the reason may be, he releases a written apology to the Ellen Jamesians, the majority of whom reject it or condemn it as proof of his cowardice; more importantly, he stops "fucking around in the garden" and begins writing the first of three planned new novels, entitled *My Father's Illusions*.

This is where Garp – physically, at least – departs *The World According to Garp*, being assassinated soon after by Pooh Percy right before Helen's eyes. Yet it is essential to recognize

¹⁴³ *Garp*, p. 382

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 389

the distance he has traveled: a man who grew up without a father and with a highly unconventional mother, whose life had been marred by run-ins with lust, betrayal and rape, who suffered both the pain of his own making and that inflicted on him by the world around him is, at journey's end, a far better one. Lust no longer plagues him, nor do moral or political crusades; instead he has overcome a great deal of bitterness while continuing the philanthropic legacy of his mother. Equally importantly, he has returned to his calling, to storytelling, and where we leave him or, better said, where he is taken from us, he is once more engaged in "true" storytelling; no longer indulging in autobiography or in the exorcising of his demons, he has found his way back to his personal vision.

The Literary Response: Garp and the Critics

In turning to the literary response to *Garp*, I would like to examine the respective aspects of themes and content and storytelling technique before addressing issues related to the *Bildungsroman* tradition.

Themes and Content

As a prefatory note, I have no intention of reiterating here the themes I have already discussed above; rather, I feel it important to also consider a number of salient points identified by Irving's critics to date so as to arrive at a more comprehensive "portrait" of the novel.

Violence and Chaos

One of the most essential elements in Irving's works is the rapacity of the world we live in. Harter and Thompson are quick to (quite correctly) point out the error of Marilyn French's observation of what she considers Irving's fixation on "the terrifying contingency of human life."¹⁴⁵ True, his books are replete with deaths and maiming, but Irving hardly considers this unrealistic:

How could anyone who reads the newspapers think it excessive? I think events in American social and political life have borne me out. There have been more assassinations than exist in the novel, certainly more radical and terrorist groups. Perhaps I can be accused of having too sweet a disposition or being too optimistic, but not too violent or excessive.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Harter & Thompson, p. 17

¹⁴⁶ West, Richard. "John Irving's World After *Garp*," *New York Magazine* 14 (17 August 1981), p. 32, cited in Reilly, p. 5

We do live in a world where death can sneak up on us at any minute, and where, quite often, the deaths of those dear to us and of complete strangers have no apparent “cause”: they picked the wrong time to cross the street, or got on the wrong subway. The point here is that the world is full of chaotic elements, elements which are and will ever remain beyond our control. As Irving himself stated in a 2001 interview, “The characters in my novels, from the very first one, are always on some quixotic effort of attempting to control something that is uncontrollable – some element of the world that is essentially random and out of control.”¹⁴⁷ Yet the fact that we cannot control the often-dangerous world we live in is no reason to simply throw in the towel, a topic we will examine in more detail over the course of this work.

Damaged Voices

While we cannot on the one hand control the world around us and, on the other, cannot simply surrender in the face of it, it goes without saying that we as human beings can be damaged by our encounters with the world. For Irving and, by extension, for Garp one of the worst forms of damage is that done by the crime of rape. It has been pointed out¹⁴⁸ that, though the act was essentially benign, Garp’s very conception could be construed as an act of rape. More significantly, two authors have recognized the significance of voice in *Garp*. Raymond J. Wilson III has very astutely identified a recurring motif throughout *Garp*, namely that of lost or impaired voices, which can be seen in countless examples throughout the novel:

Garp’s father had a speech impediment stemming from profound brain damage suffered in war. From then on, the novel contains numerous other instances of impaired speech, depicted either as a temporary or a permanent condition. [...] Ellen James, who was raped and left tongueless by men who did not have the sense to realize that she was old enough to implicate them by writing; the Ellen Jamesians, women who have their tongues removed in sympathy with Ellen [...] Temporarily “struck dumb” were the young girl whose rapist Garp had helped capture, and Garp himself – for a long while after his auto accident and for the few moments he lived after being shot by Pooh Percy. Pooh’s rage, her inarticulate curses from a gaping self-wounded mouth, forms a near-tableau at the end of Garp’s life to match the one at its beginning when his future father’s decreasing level of articulation from “Garp” to “Arp” to “Ar” led Jenny to realize that he was soon to die and spurred her to get on with the business of Garp’s conception.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ barnes&noble.com, p. 2

¹⁴⁸ Harter & Thompson, p. 76; Weiß, p. 48. Here Weiß also sees a parallel between the Ellen Jamesians and the Philomela myth, as did Gabriel Miller before her (Campbell 85).

¹⁴⁹ Raymond J. Wilson III, “The Postmodern Novel: The Examples of Irving’s *The World According to Garp*,” in Bloom (ed.), p. 83

While this is a valuable insight in its own right, it becomes even more relevant when combined with an earlier contribution by Josie P. Campbell, in which she examines the crime of rape in *Garp* as a loss of voice. With reference to *The World According to Bensenhaver*, Garp's darkest story, she states:

Not only is *Bensenhaver* related to Garp's life, but the story is linked to other rapes in Irving's novel, especially to that of Ellen James. The rape of Ellen James is also about cutting, about alienating the victim from her self. The Ellen Jamesians, who are obsessed – mad – with rape, choose a horrifying method of protest: they cut their own tongues out. Garp fails to understand their self-mutilation, that by cutting their tongues out, these women point correctly to the essence of rape. As *Bensenhaver* shows, rape is an act of violating the body of another; rape cuts into, penetrates, the flesh. It destroys the body's wholeness. Garp, as a writer, is understandably disgusted with the Ellen Jamesians' action; he believes they deprive themselves of words, of the ability to tell a story. What Garp fails to understand is that their self-mutilation "speaks" the very subject of rape. The Ellen Jamesians' cut flesh becomes the word for rape – but it does not make for a pretty story.¹⁵⁰

What *Garp* shows us, then, is that our voices can be harmed or changed, can even become lost to us entirely, and the graver or more intrinsic the harm done to us is, the harder it is to regain integrity of voice. The Ellen Jamesians represent an act of desperation in the sense of seeing no hope of ever being able to regain that integrity; they are a (wordless) outcry against a crime they feel can never be undone, can never be fully recovered from. Counterpoint to this, we see the hopeful examples of Garp and Ellen James. Though Garp was never raped, he was traumatized; his voice was not lost to him, but became poisoned and poisonous. Yet he succeeds in purging it and moving on, turning away from *The World According to Bensenhaver* and regaining the voice that told the story of *The Pension Grillparzer*. And Ellen herself, refusing to be silenced in a most poignant way, goes on to become a celebrated poet, the voice that was taken from her resurfacing in another form.

Technique

In terms of technique, portents are used prevalently in many Irving novels, *Garp* among them. For Michael Priestly, Irving's tendency to indulge in this technique is one of *Garp*'s weaknesses:

Two aspects of *The World According to Garp*, however, are problematic: the narrator's penchant for epigrammatic quotations, and his refusal to let the lives

¹⁵⁰ Campbell, pp. 84-85

of his characters end. From the “pre-historic” beginning of the book, before T.S. Garp has seen the light of day, the narrator chides us with supercilious commentary that Garp presumably wrote. [...] Also from the beginning of the story, we find out what will happen later to nearly every character in the book, two- to three-hundred pages before it happens. After all the events have occurred, some of them twice, we find out in a lengthy epilogue what will happen sometime around the year 2000 to everyone who is left.¹⁵¹

While it is certainly true that Irving includes an extended epilogue, something he himself has openly recognized as one of his foibles,¹⁵² in terms of the use of portents we must recall that Irving’s work is inspired and heavily informed by 19th-century conventions, where such techniques are part and parcel of good storytelling. Further, Elke Weiß, who has provided one of the few German examinations of Irving’s novels, sheds a different light on Irving’s starting the novel before Garp’s birth, connecting it to the satirical biographical *ab ovo* storytelling tradition, best evinced by Laurence Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. In the absurd if not completely unbelievable scene of Garp’s conception, she sees Irving reaching back to Sterne, parodying his parody; as she points out, Garp’s unique initials may then be seen as a tip of the hat back to Sterne.¹⁵³

This leads us to a further crucial aspect of Irving’s writing, namely the question of believability. As regards this question, there is an unfortunate tendency to relegate Irving’s work to the “tall tale” tradition; while this may put him in the esteemed company of American authors such as Mark Twain, it is not a wholly accurate representation. On the other hand we have Irving himself, who essentially sees nothing unbelievable in the stories he tells. Here, again, Elke Weiß may be of some help in categorizing how realistic or unrealistic Irving’s writing is:

Wenngleich Irvings narrative Strategien in solchem Sinne wirken und damit eine relativ konsistente Illusionsbildung gewährleisten, kann trotzdem von einer auffälligen „Transformation des Mimetischen“ gesprochen werden: insofern sich nämlich viele der Irving’schen Fiktionen in ihrem oft irrwitzigen Charakter den Kriterien der Ähnlichkeit und der Wahrscheinlichkeit (in Bezug auf eine der Literatur vorausliegende Realität) ein gutes Stück weit entziehen. Die Abweichungen reichen vom schlicht Ungewöhnlichen bis hin zur kalkulierten Unglaublichkeit, es entsteht eine „andere“ Welt, die eigenen und eigentümlichen Gesetzen gehorcht. Solche durch ausufernde Phantasie bedingte „Transformation des Mimetischen“ ist indessen kein „Ausbruch aus der Mimesis“, sondern verweist auf den engen Zusammenhang von Mimesis und Phantasie, den Thomas Metscher in seiner Mimesis-Studie hervorhebt:

¹⁵¹ Priestly, Michael “Structure in the Worlds of John Irving,” in Bloom (ed.), pp. 28-29

¹⁵² Salon Interview (1997), p. 3

¹⁵³ Weiß, pp. 48-49

„In der Kunst ist Phantasie mit der Mimesis in Bunde. *Welt* – Subjekt und Objekt, innere und äußere Welt – bricht sich in der Kunst im Fokus der Phantasie. Diese kann als *Kraft ästhetischer Einbildung* nicht unbegrenzt genug gedacht werden.“¹⁵⁴

Irving never abandons mimesis for pure fantasy; rather he undertakes the far more arduous task of creating entire worlds for his characters to populate. These worlds both are and are not our own; they are “what-if” microcosms that show us small corners of America, of Austria and, in later novels, of Germany, India, Canada, Holland, etc. populated by characters who are nearly always strange and often border on the absurd, yet who – like so many of the “characters” from our own lives – live their lives according to their own unique rules.

An essential question surrounding Irving’s work is to what extent he may be considered a traditionalist and to what extent he utilizes more modern techniques. As Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson succinctly put it, “in much of his fiction Irving seems to experiment with the limits of traditional forms in an attempt to discover how malleable and adaptable they are to a thoroughly modern vision of experience.”¹⁵⁵ Weiß, in turn, takes a similar stance, but fleshes it out in far more detail:

In solcher Überblendung wird dann auch auf herausragende Weise das Phänomen der „Fiktion in der Fiktion“ ermöglicht, das nicht nur die Schriftstellergestalt Garp an Beispielen seines literarischen Schaffens konturiert, sondern das gleichzeitig zu Aussagen über Fiktion führt und somit einen Kommentar zum Roman selbst liefert. Hierbei erinnere man sich auch der eingestreuten literaturtheoretischen Reflexionen, die im Verbund mit den eingelagerten Narrativen eben diese metafiktionale Komponente ausbilden. (Die Art allerdings, wie Metafiktion ihrerseits wiederum ironisch umspielt erscheint, verweist auf ein tiefes Mißtrauen gegenüber avant-gardistischer Besessenheit vom künstlerischen Medium.)¹⁵⁶

While Irving clearly subscribes to nineteenth-century storytelling modes and rejects (to put it mildly) “new fiction” à la John Barth, he nonetheless very openly includes metafictional

¹⁵⁴ Weiß p. 18 This can be translated as: “Though Irving’s narrative strategies do work in this sense and as such ensure a relatively consistent creation of illusion, at the same time they represent a distinctive ‘transformation of the mimetic’: namely because the often absurd character of many pieces of Irving’s fiction allows them to largely escape the criteria of similarity and probability (with regard to a reality preceding the literature). These deviations range from the simply unusual to the calculatedly unbelievable; a ‘different’ world is formed that follows its own peculiar rules. This ‘transformation of the mimetic,’ resulting from an abundance of imagination, is however no ‘breaking out of mimesis,’ but points instead to the close connection between mimesis and imagination as emphasized by Thomas Metscher in his study of mimesis: ‘In the arts, imagination and mimesis are allies. In the arts, the *world* – subject and object, the inner and outer world – fractures in the focus of the imagination. As the *power of aesthetic imagination*, this can hardly be conceived in its boundlessness.’”

¹⁵⁵ Harter & Thompson, p. 9

¹⁵⁶ Weiß, p. 40 This can be translated as: “This cross-fading presents an excellent venue for the phenomenon of “fiction in fiction,” which not only portrays Garp the author through the examples of his literary works, but also links these examples to commentaries on fiction and as such on the novel itself. One need only consider the reflections on literary theory scattered throughout the novel, which, taken together with the embedded narratives, form precisely these metafictional components. (That being said, the way in which metafiction in turn appears to be sardonically caricaturized evinces a deep distrust of the avant garde obsession with the artistic medium.)”

elements in his novels, particularly in *Garp*, causing some critics to scratch their heads. Is Irving a traditionalist, or modern, or an amalgam? Harter and Thompson address this seeming paradox as follows:

Our argument here is not, however, with Barth, the brilliant and obvious successor to Joyce. Rather, it is with those who fail to see that Irving – Dickens' distant heir – also does “what literature is supposed to do” by probing “new methods of perception,” perception about life and art, and does so in unique ways in *Garp*. Irving presents products of Garp's literary output at key points in his artistic career and embeds those examples in a richly textured story. Because Garp is a writer, that story quite naturally focuses on interpretation and discussion of his fiction. Thus, Irving successfully integrates “fiction about fiction” with powerful (and more traditional and universal) human struggles to live life meaningfully.¹⁵⁷

It has been pointed out on more than one occasion that Irving also ridicules the “new fiction” in his novels. Debra Shostak notes that a minor character named Helmbart (a combination of John Barth and Donald Barthelme) appears as a writer in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, where two of the characters agree that he is largely uninteresting and unreadable; and can also be found in *The Water-Method Man*. Shostak continues by claiming that Irving “disparages those writers – mostly unnamed, but clearly associated with metafiction – who prize an aesthetic of difficulty or obscurity, and he instead praises the old-fashioned virtues of readability, entertainment, and catharsis.”¹⁵⁸

While a valid observation, this would also seem somewhat misleading; it cannot be true that Irving wholly rejects the idea of fiction about fiction when he himself has injected it heavily into one of his most significant novels. Elke Weiß draws on one of the earliest secondary works on Irving, Harter and Thompson's *John Irving* (1986), to address this persistent dilemma. Harter and Thomson have recognized that the reflexivity in Irving's novels, which would seem to climax in *Garp*, nevertheless remains distinct from Barth, in that for Barth (but never for Irving) the creative act itself takes center stage. Weiß picks up on this, stating that:

So ist Irvings „Künstlerroman“ zwar deutlich metafiktional geprägt, jedoch nicht in jener letzten – postmodernen – Konsequenz metafiktional, daß etwa die Bedingtheit von dessen Fiktionalität reflektiert und der Leser damit in seinen Wahrnehmungsschema irritiert würde. Anders als in den postmodernen Narrativen eines Pynchon oder Barth wird der Fiktionscharakter unseres jeweiligen Wirklichkeitskonstrukts hier *nicht* hinterfragt.

Die Ironisierung selbstreflexiver Literatur ist Index dafür, daß gerade *das* nicht bezweckt ist. *The World According to Garp* gewährt uns zwar Einsichten in die Verfasstheit des künstlerisch-kreativen Aktes – sowohl „am Beispiel“ (Garp's Werke) als auch „an sich“ (Garp's literaturtheoretischen Reflexionen) – und

¹⁵⁷ Harter & Thompson, pp. 90-91

¹⁵⁸ Shostak, Debra, “The Family Romances of John Irving” in Bloom (ed.), pp. 90-91

demonstriert in prozeßhafter Weise die Kunst des Erzählens selbst; es untergräbt in solchem Tun aber nicht die Ausbildung von nachvollziehbaren Handlungskonnexen. [...] Die Nutzung der metafictionalen Struktur erfolgt hier traditionell sinnkonstitutiv durch die Dramatisierung des Charakters Garp als Literat, und nicht durch Abstrahierungen der Fiktion von der Fiktion.¹⁵⁹

This is an essential point, and one we will return to after having gained the perspective provided by examining further Irving novels. For the time being, it may suffice to say that, while Irving is clearly willing – in *Garp* and in later novels as well – to incorporate metafictional elements, they are always relegated the role of icing on the cake; they are never, and can never become the cake itself. If they embellish the story and intrigue the reader, then all's the better; but the moment they begin to interfere with the accessibility of the story, they have outlived their usefulness.

Garp in the Light of the Bildungsroman Tradition

If we now recall the primary traits of the *Bildungsroman* as established in the first chapter, we can fairly readily see how many elements in *Garp* fit into the tradition. Without question, T.S. Garp develops over the course of the book. Needless to say, he would have to change, since the book begins before his conception, but here we also see a development in Garp as a human being, e.g. from Garp as a teenager, when he married and first began writing, to Garp just before his assassination. We also see a conscious effort on his part to grow as an individual; this is evinced during his stay in Vienna, where he realizes that what he (and his writing) lacks is a personal vision, something we would see glimpses of in *The Pension Grillparzer* and which, after a lengthy absence, had apparently returned to him when he began writing *My Father's Illusions*.

Further, while we are certainly witness to Garp's artistic development, this runs parallel to his development as a person and member of society. Whereas the younger Garp was fairly centered on the well-being of his own family and, after the car accident, if anything became more jaded as to social causes, writing *The World According to Bensenhaver* not only as therapy, but very clearly as a means of providing financial security and, in his own view, by extension a

¹⁵⁹ Weiß, pp. 78-79, Cf. Harter & Thompson, p. 44 This can be translated as: "As such, though Irving's 'artist novel' is clearly shaped by metafiction, this is not true in the final – postmodern – analysis; namely, it does not reflect on the conditionality of its own fictionality, thus jolting the perceptual schema of the reader. Unlike in the postmodern narratives of a Pynchon or a Barth, the fictional character of the construct of reality at hand is *not* called into question. The ironic approach to self-reflective literature is an indication that raising precisely such questions is *not* the goal. *The World According to Garp* certainly provides us insights into the artistic / creative act – both "through examples" (Garp's works) and "in itself" (Gar's reflections on literary theory) – and in a process-like manner demonstrates the art of storytelling itself; yet in so doing it does not undermine the formation of rational plot connections. [...] Here the use of a metafictional structure serves in a traditional manner to portray Garp's character as a man of letters, not to abstract fiction from fiction."

degree of protection for his family from the dangers of the world, shortly before his death he seems to have overcome this insular mentality: he has finally abandoned the mutually antagonistic debate with the Ellen Jamesians, while throwing himself into his duties with the Fields Foundation. As such, he has given up personal vindictiveness for activities that can help his fellow man, or in this case fellow woman.

Garp also satisfies Thomas L. Jeffers' three basic criteria: the sexual, vocational and rumination tests. Garp pursues romantic love and, despite the many stumbling blocks along the way, he and Helen are not only reconciled but happily in love again at the time of his death. To return to the point discussed in the previous paragraph, Garp works selflessly. While it is arguable whether his vocation (as a writer) is truly selfless or not – none of his earlier works being entirely selfless and *Bensehaver* being clearly (emotionally and commercially) self-serving – Garp's activities within the framework of the Fields Foundation, while inspired by his mother's will and testament, were never imposed on him; his role, and the entire Fields Foundation, were his idea and his choice. Finally, as regards rumination, the book is replete with Garp's reflections on his life and works: in his youth, he contemplates his lack of vision, and takes steps to remedy his dearth of real-world experience by accompanying his mother to Vienna; his many encounters with sexual crimes in various forms (the child molester he apprehends, Ellen James and the Ellen Jamesians, etc.) lead him to think very deeply about a crime he himself knows he could never commit, but which nonetheless affects everyone. Tellingly, after what would be Garp's last infidelity with a babysitter, he realizes that, in giving in to lust, in betraying Helen and using the babysitter's infatuation with him solely for meaningless sex, he feels a shared criminality with the rapists and molesters of this world; in finally forcing himself to give up such trespasses, Garp also moves from rumination to informed and mature action.

We should also bear in mind Irving's deep admiration for the works of Dickens, reflected in his opting to use many of the same techniques, such as complex characters and plot, realism mixed with comedy, and an emphasis on the characters' social and psychological realities, as well as his willingness to risk sentimentality in his efforts to convey and evoke emotional depth.¹⁶⁰

Furthermore, it would seem clear that Irving has adopted this style not (or at least not solely) out of his own affection, but also with a moralist goal in mind. As Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack state:

As with Dickens, because Irving loads his own narratives with considerable detail

¹⁶⁰ Campbell, p. 74; Debra Shostak, "The Family Romances of John Irving," in Bloom (ed.), p. 91

and description, he makes it virtually impossible for readers to render facile ethical decisions in the face of so much information about a given character's humanity. Irving self-consciously adopts the literary form of the Dickensian novel – with its multiplicity of characters, its narrative mass, its overt sense of sentimentality, and its generic intersections with such modes as the detective story – as the forum for constructing the fictions that intentionally challenge his readers' value systems. In short, for Irving the choice of the narrative form of the Dickensian novel itself represents an ethical move.¹⁶¹

Just as Dickens was concerned with both plot and character, Irving has strikingly similar priorities. And in portraying his characters, he too goes to great lengths to lavish detail on them; as a result, the reader is hard-pressed to categorize the main characters simply as “good” or “evil” and, having been informed as to their backgrounds and therefore made more sympathetic to their potential motivations, is also slower to pronounce knee-jerk judgments on them. A good case in point is Helen, who at an early age falls in love with and marries T.S. Garp. Initially, Helen would never dream of cheating on her husband, and is appalled to learn that her valued friend Harrison is cheating on his wife. In an effort to try to snap him out of it and teach him to value his marriage, Helen comes up with the unique idea of a partner swap, in which she sleeps with Harrison and Garp sleeps with Harrison's wife Alice. Though this predictably ends in serious emotional harm to everyone but Helen when she breaks it off and returns to her former married life with Garp, it does not render her wholly immune from temptation. Resentful of and wounded by Garp's aforementioned flings with babysitters, she yields to the advances of her student Michael Milton – an affair whose effects we are already familiar with. As such, a clearly morally good character is nonetheless partly responsible for the accident that kills one of her sons and maims the other – just as Garp and Michael Milton are.

These strong ties to Dickens invite an intertextual approach in keeping with Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, something Debra Shostak has attempted. Bloom contends that authors are often connected to their precursors in a quasi-oedipal manner; as such they are simultaneously drawn to mimic their work and compelled to distance themselves from it. This produces works that are informed by but invariably different from those of their predecessors, something Bloom refers to as “misreading” them. As Shostak explains:

[...] Irving attempts to reject his “sonship,” in Bloom's terms, to the arbiters of late twentieth-century values in order to return to the older representatives of traditional Victorian realism. It is a search to supplant the stepfather, as it were, with the absent father, subject to idealization because at greater remove, as an authority in the production of fictive discourse. The search results in part because of Irving's desire for “vision,” [...] but more particularly it might be seen as a nostalgic flight toward the greater certainties of Victorian representation, which in Irving's reading

¹⁶¹ Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, “The Ethics of Storytelling in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*,” in Bloom (ed.), p. 122

seems to presuppose a moral system as the structuring context for narrative. In a sense, one might see the manifestations of metafiction in Irving's work as irruptions from the unconscious of the contemporary epistemology – which defines “reality” as a linguistic construction rather than as transcendental truth – into the more sure epistemologies of Dickensian realism, where actions exist outside language and have predictable moral consequences.¹⁶²

Shostak goes on to point out the pitfalls of this (Irving's) approach, namely that, simply by imitating Dickens, he can of course never duplicate him; further, searching for Dickens will ultimately only make his absence in contemporary literature all the more apparent: not only is Dickens gone, but it is impossible to write Dickensian stories in the early 21st century without deforming their meaning. As she summarizes, “To oversimplify, then, Irving misreads Dickens by incorporating metafictional techniques, which imply non-Victorian epistemologies, and he misreads the metafictionists by rewriting their linguistic centering of narrative.”¹⁶³

Both Bloom's provocative approach and Shostak's application of it to the specific case of John Irving are highly interesting and potentially enlightening. It is undisputed that Irving utilizes Dickensian motifs and techniques, something that the author's own statements and even a cursory examination of his works can confirm. Furthermore, common sense dictates that, regardless of his admiration for Dickens and regardless of how devotedly he might attempt to do so, Irving cannot produce Dickensian works in a contemporary setting and have any hope of them being “truly” Dickensian in any meaningful sense. My only concern with Shostak's interpretation is one of positioning and/or weighting. Shostak leaves the impression that Irving essentially “splits the difference” between the Victorian *Bildungsroman* epitomized by Dickens and the works of modern and postmodern metafictionists. Closer examination reveals, however, that while *Garp* may include both Dickensian and metafictional elements – as do other works examined here – , this claim cannot be made for all Irving novels. While *Garp* and *A Widow for One Year* are replete with metafiction, *The Hotel New Hampshire* and *The Cider House Rules* are nearly devoid of it; Irving's most recent novel examined here, *Until I Find You*, has none whatsoever. Yet the *Bildungsroman* motif remains consistent throughout. As such, in examining the influences on Irving's style, it is more accurate to say that Irving consistently attempts to emulate Dickens and the types of stories he wrote; in so doing, he at times dips into the postmodern bag of tricks to inject metafiction into the novel at hand, while at others he remains truer to his Victorian role model.

If we return to Weiß's analysis of what she considers to be Irving's “fabulatory” technique, we find ourselves on much more stable footing. In *Garp*, Weiß sees an intentional choice on the

¹⁶² Debra Shostak, “The Family Romances of John Irving,” in Bloom (ed.), p. 93

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 93

part of Irving to experiment in the sense of utilizing traditional storytelling techniques in modern or even post-modern ways, a case in point being the narrative voice. As Weiß points out, while the narrator is ostensibly all-knowing and therefore reliable – thus in keeping with traditional narrative technique – it also seems clear (e.g. from the narrator's attitudes towards Garp and Helen) that the narrator is subjective, thus injecting an element of doubt. Further, toward the end of the novel, a character named Donald Whitcomb, who later becomes Garp's official biographer, is introduced, and a number of clues point to the possibility of Whitcomb being the narrator.¹⁶⁴

Yet there is also evidence to the contrary.¹⁶⁵ Similarly, though there would from time to time seem to be indications of partiality on the part of the narrator, this is not consistently the case; as such, it is neither a lionizing voice of praise nor an objective, emotionless one; or better said, it is *both*. Weiß interprets these apparent inconsistencies as an intentional playing with method: traditional (here predominantly 19th-century) methods, such as the use of portents and the omniscient narrator, are revived; however, dealing as they do with contemporary issues and stories, they are accordingly used in unconventional ways. As a result (and here with an eye to the *Bildungsroman* tradition), while Garp is an ultimately life-affirming story, placing it in the Victorian *Bildungsroman* tradition, certain techniques used in the story have been so modified as to introduce elements of contradiction, this intentional contradiction in turn aligning *Garp* with the postmodern.¹⁶⁶

The *Bildungsroman* is also traditionally considered to have three basic phases: childhood, adolescence and adulthood; or separation, initiation and return.¹⁶⁷ Regardless of which triad we choose, *Garp* can be seen to fit the mold. We accompany him through his childhood at the Steering School; his adolescence, which continued there but during which he also underwent significant changes in Vienna; and his adulthood, which can be said to have started with his marriage to Helen. Alternately, following the second pattern, it is worthy of note that Garp's story – at least from his very early childhood – begins and ends at the Steering School; he returns to the place where his story started, with a lengthy initiation in between.

Much has been made of this fact in the various analyses of *Garp* to date. Raymond J. Wilson III, for example, agrees that the story can broadly be broken down into three sections.

¹⁶⁴ Weiß, p. 14, pp. 41-44

¹⁶⁵ *Garp*, pp. 417-18, 422. On these pages of the novel's epilogue, Whitcomb is himself described by the narrator. This could of course be artifice, but it seems much more reasonable to assume that we are in fact dealing with an omniscient narrator, and that Whitcomb, as Garp's biographer, is simply yet another character in the menagerie filling the novel, important solely for his dogged loyalty in respecting Helen Garp's wishes concerning her late husband's legacy.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45, 96

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Weiß, p. 108

According to Wilson only the first of these, however, can be considered a *Bildungsroman* story; the second section is in the style of a mid-century novel of manners, and the third is wholly postmodern, characterized by what he sees as “bizarre violence and black humor, flat characters, and metafiction.”¹⁶⁸ Significantly, he also believes that “...in John Barth’s concept of a literature of exhaustion, imitation of earlier modes is a basic strategy of the postmodern novel. Thus, despite Garp’s shifts of mode, as a contemporary fiction operating in three modes, it must be intrinsically postmodern throughout.”¹⁶⁹

Here I believe we see an example of the risks of hasty classifications. Wilson would seem to be saying that Irving imitates three different genres in succession, but essentially since he is a post-modern author, all he can do is to imitate more traditional modes; imitate them as he might, the end result will be postmodern in character.

Wilson may be right in ascribing a postmodern quality to Irving’s storytelling; after all, we have just seen evidence of this claim in Weiß’s compelling points. Yet a postmodern tinge (and one wonders how Irving would respond to such a label) is something that requires more substantial underpinnings at the very least before it can be taken as a given. More importantly, Wilson’s categorizations do little to reflect the reality of how the book is written. True, we could split it into the three broad sections he suggests, and chronologically (in the sense of which stages of Garp’s life they deal with), they would seem accurate. But, to reiterate, Wilson only sees the first section as (an imitation of) a *Bildungsroman*; the second is a novel of manners, and the third is full of “bizarre violence” and metafiction.

Essentially what this description requires of us is to ignore the actual story developments; there are no such clear delineations in the actual novel. While the second section may very well contain elements of a novel of manners, focusing as it does on Garp and Helen as husband and wife and new parents, it is replete with examples of metafiction; the third section, in turn, while focusing more on Garp’s maturation, never turns away from the central element of the ties between Helen and Garp. What is more, it is highly inaccurate to relegate the *Bildungsroman* aspect only to Garp’s childhood; the poignancy of Garp’s death is largely due to the fact that he only arrives at the goal of becoming a well-balanced and well-adjusted individual, a faithful husband to Helen, and a loving father to Duncan and Ellen James (as, we can surmise, he would have been to young Jenny Garp, only two years old when he was murdered) just before his death. Here we see that blanket concepts such as Barth’s “literature of exhaustion,” while

¹⁶⁸ Wilson III, Raymond J., “The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*,” in Bloom (ed.), p. 73 ff.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

they may provide novel and fruitful approaches to literary analysis, should never be so wholeheartedly accepted as to blind us to the complexities of an author's storytelling.

In sum, then, *Garp* both revives and deviates from established *Bildungsroman* patterns. First of all, in keeping with *Bildungsromane* of both the 19th and 20th centuries, there are strong autobiographical ties between Irving and his protagonist. As regards the specific characteristics of the 20th century *Bildungsroman*, we also see many points where *Garp* continues the tradition: Like many *Bildungshelden* before him, T.S. Garp has no father to raise him. Further, as we see from his initial responses to the feminist movement and the Ellen Jamesians, he is highly distrustful of ideologies and political movements. Spiritually, Garp is largely unanchored, something that simultaneously hinders and inspires his endeavors as a writer.

At the same time, further elements of *Garp* hearken back to the 19th-century model. As Thomas L. Jeffers has pointed out, the protagonists of 20th-century *Bildungsromane*, missing their biological fathers, are forced to turn to surrogates for support, either older males or their mothers. When the latter is the case, the relationships that develop between mother and son (here focusing on male protagonists) are often parasitic.¹⁷⁰ Yet this would hardly seem to be the case with Garp and Jenny. While, due perhaps to Jenny's own tendency to be a loner, Garp would have trouble making many friends, it is also true that while he attended the Steering School Jenny, who as school nurse was allowed to audit classes free of charge, attended countless classes; not only was this a way of educating herself to her liking, it was very much (and very intentionally) also a means of screening the classes, ensuring that young Garp received the best education the school could offer. Similarly, upon Garp's graduation, Jenny suggests that they both go to Vienna together; Jenny feels this will help her to finish her autobiography, and hopes it will provide her aspiring writer son with some much-needed perspective.

This should not be misconstrued as a selfishness or egotism on the part of Jenny; from the very first page of the book and to the eternal shame of her well-to-do family, Jenny was above all an individual, who wanted to be able to live her life as she saw fit. Yet at the same time there is no point in the story where we see her act in a manner that brings her closer to her own goals at the price of Garp's happiness or well-being. Indeed, she went to great lengths to support her son: her class-sampling at Steering, arranging the trip to Vienna, and, after the enormous success of her autobiography, financially supporting her son and his new wife for the first few years of their marriage.

¹⁷⁰ Jeffers, p. 188

The relationship between Jenny and Garp, if at times strained, was ultimately a loving one; far from being parasitic, their bond allowed Garp to grow as he wanted to, and later, after Jenny's death, inspired him to act more in keeping with her generally selfless character.

As a final consideration of Irving's blending the old and new for this chapter, it is certainly worthy of mention that the protagonist marries and has children, along the lines of a David Copperfield. Yet unlike the typical Victorian *Bildungsheld*, whom we leave mature and ready to face life's challenges, Garp is killed. This unique fate for Garp not only serves to embed him the more firmly in our memories (in the way that someone who is irrevocably lost is uniquely dear to us); it also solidifies his story's status as a *Bildungsroman* that cannot be neatly categorized. We are shown neither the modern protagonist, who is ill-equipped to settle down and start a family, nor the Victorian hero, whom we leave comfortably occupying his own happy end, a fitting close to "a life-affirming novel in which everybody dies."¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ John Irving in a 1982 interview with Joyce Renwick, cited in Weiß, p. 22 (FN 55)

Chapter Two

Is Home Really Where the Heart Is?: *The Hotel New Hampshire*

The next book to follow *Garp* chronologically, *The Hotel New Hampshire* is a family saga in its own right, though the emphasis is clearly shifted. In the former, it is T.S. Garp, the father, who is the primary focus, and his interactions with Helen a close second. Though we are treated to an extensive epilogue summarizing their lives after the main story's end, one of Irving's favorite techniques, the actual "story time" we spend with the children is only nominal. In *Hotel*, the focus is nearly reversed; though the parents – here, very much an exception to Irving's rules, we have two – and their actions / choices are crucial to shaping the story, the focus is clearly on the children from the very first page.

The first 30 to 40 pages of the novel, however, deal with events preceding the children's births, namely with how Win Berry and Mary Bates met and fell in love. As teenagers, the boy and girl, who were both from the small town of Dairy, New Hampshire, happened to find summer work at the same hotel, the Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea, in Maine, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. Here we see Irving's penchant for and skill in creating uniquely colorful characters, as well as his tendency to bring in the pseudo-mystical notion of prescience, all of these factors combining in the young couple's encounter with the enigmatic Freud, a Viennese Jew, handyman and entertainer at the hotel. Win and Mary have fallen in love with one another and befriended Freud, who suddenly has to leave. With no prior arrangements or explanation, Freud proceeds to perform a "ritual" of sorts for the young lovers:

[...] he took my mother's and father's hands, and joined them together. "You're only teenagers," he told them, "so listen to me: you are in love. We start from this assumption, *ja?*"

And although my mother and father had never admitted any such thing to each other, they both nodded while Freud held their hands. "Okay," Freud said. "Now, three things from this follow. You promise me you will agree to these three things?"

"I promise," said my father.

"So do I," Mother said.

"Okay," said Freud. "Here's number one: you get married, right away, before some clods and whores change your minds. Got it? You get married, even though it will cost you."

"Yes," my parents agreed.

"Here's number two," Freud said, looking only at my father. "You *go* to Harvard – you promise me – even though it will cost you."

"But I'll already be married," my father said.

"I said it will cost you, didn't I?" Freud said. "You promise me: you'll go to Harvard. You take every opportunity given you in this world, even if you have too many opportunities. One day the opportunities stop, you know?"

[...]

“We’re up to number three,” Freud said. “You ready?” And he turned to my mother; he dropped my father’s hand, he even shoved it away from him so that he was holding Mother’s hand all alone. “Forgive him,” Freud told her, “even though it will cost you.”

“Forgive me for what?” Father said.

“Just forgive him,” Freud said, looking only at my mother. She shrugged.¹⁷²

In the years that follow their fateful meeting with him, Win and Mary uphold their promises to the cryptic Freud: they marry soon after, and Win does attend Harvard. And we are soon given an indication of what Freud meant Mary should forgive her husband for as, from 1939 – 1941, he is barely home at all; with the help of a trained bear named Earl he bought from Freud upon the latter’s departure back to Europe, he travels from town to town along the East Coast to make enough money to support his fledgling family and put himself through Harvard, never staying long at home:

He [Father] was in Texas in the spring of 1940 when Frank was born [...] and it cost Father some more of his earnings to drive all the way East to welcome his first child into the world.

[...]

Father stayed with my mother in Dairy only long enough to get her pregnant again.

[...]

My mother was quite pregnant, this time with Franny, when Father left for the winter season in the fall of 1940.

[...]

That was shortly before Franny was born [...] Father was not home for this birth, and Franny never forgave him for it.

[...]

It was the summer of '41 before Father was back in Dairy again; he promptly impregnated my mother with me.¹⁷³

Our narrator’s rather dry, borderline acerbic depiction of this time makes it clear that the Berry family children were well aware of their father’s absence. From the outset, we are guided through the narrative by the young John Berry¹⁷⁴, who has several siblings including an older brother Frank, an older sister Franny, a younger sister Lilly, and an improbably named younger brother, Egg, who is only a baby when the story begins.

The strains of Father’s absence are in turn exacerbated by his volunteering for (thankfully uneventful) military service overseas with the Air Force, combined with the fact that, once he returns, he still needs to complete his studies at Harvard. Throughout these years, however, he

¹⁷² *The Hotel New Hampshire*, hereafter simply *Hotel*, pp. 29-30

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 33-36

¹⁷⁴ The similarity to Irving’s own given name, John Wallace Blunt, and to his adopted name, John Winslow Irving, respectively, is a recurring theme for his protagonists and other characters. Here we have John Berry, in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the protagonist is Johnny Wheelwright, and in *Until I Find You* we follow the young Jack Burns from early childhood to adulthood. In *Hotel* note, too, the family’s father, often referred to simply as Father, is actually named Winslow Berry.

and Mary remain faithful to one another, and there is no indication that she suffers overly from his repeated absences. And we should recall that, assenting blindly as they did to the three pledges Freud exacted from them, each is in turn keeping his or her promises.

Needless to say, these promises affect but do not apply to the children. And, as in the majority¹⁷⁵ of Irving novels, the effects of adult actions on children are of central importance. As John Berry tells us succinctly:

Lilly was born in 1946, when Frank was six, Franny was five, and I was four. We suddenly had a father – as if for the first time, really; he had been at war, at school, and on the road with Earl all our lives, so far. He was a stranger to us.¹⁷⁶

Though he may at first seem a stranger to the children, the only apparent source of friction between Win and Mary, and with Iowa Bob (or Coach Bob, as Win's father, a former linebacker and the football coach at the local Dairy school where Win teaches and which the children attend, is known), is that, even though he has now been physically reunited with his family, his thoughts would seem to always be elsewhere.

Coach Bob was angry with my father, again – for the same old thing, it seemed: for never being satisfied, as Bob put it, for living in the future. For always making plans for the *next* year instead of just *living*, moment by moment.

"But he can't help it," my mother was saying; she always defended my father from Coach Bob.

[...]

"But if you just spent more time with the kids *now*," Mother said, quietly, "and worried a little less about where they're all going to be in a few *years*."

"The *future* again" said Iowa Bob. "He *lives* in the future! First it was all the traveling – all so he could go to Harvard. So he went to Harvard, then, as fast as he could – so he could be *through* with it. For what? For this job, which he's done nothing but complain about.

Why doesn't he *enjoy* it?"¹⁷⁷

While Father is busy living in and for the future, his children have their hands full with the present. The Dairy school, in an effort to reward the retiring Coach Bob, buys him a number of ringers for the football team. Unfortunately these ringers also terrorize their fellow students at the school, and the Berry children are no exception. One afternoon Franny and John, walking through the woods behind the school, find their brother Frank, whose homosexuality is an open secret, being tortured by the football players; having pulled his pants down and knocked him

¹⁷⁵ Irving's first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, certainly does not fit this pattern, nor do the second or third, *The Water Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage*. From *Garp* on, however, six of the remaining seven deal heavily with children, the sole exception here being *The Fourth Hand*.

¹⁷⁶ *Hotel*, p. 40

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 55-56

down in a large mud puddle, they keep pressing down on him and letting him up with their cleats, essentially forcing him to stick his privates in mud, which is what they associate with his sexual orientation.

Franny and John are able to distract the football players long enough for Frank to make good his escape, but in the process Franny, too, is put in harm's way. Fascinated by the quarterback, Chipper Dove, she offers to go off alone with him, just to talk. John gets a terrible feeling about the situation and runs off to catch up with Frank, whom he eventually talks into going back with him to save Franny. When they find her nothing has happened, but it seems clear that Chipper was going to try to force her to have sex with him. Before Chipper realizes they are there, Frank hits him in the face with a cymbal (the instrument he plays in the school band) and John tackles him; Franny seizes the opportunity to grab him by the testicles, thus putting him out of action long enough for them all to get away. None of the children tells anyone what happened; they are simply grateful to each other for their mutual rescue.

Soon afterwards Father, returning with his children to the Arbutnot-by-the-Sea, the place where he and Mary fell in love and his notion of what a good hotel should be, is horrified to see it has gone out of business and is now little more than an abandoned wreck of a building. Rather than dashing his hopes of running a hotel of his own (an inspiration from his and Mary's run-in with the "man in white," the dashing and enigmatic owner of the Arbutnot-by-the-Sea), it makes him all the more determined to do so. Biding his time and saving his money from working as a teacher in Dairy, he ultimately decides to buy the Thompson Female Seminary, a defunct all-girls school that Mary once attended, and to transform it into a hotel. This will necessitate a substantial investment – to make it remotely resemble a hotel – and the sale of their family home; from now on they will live in what would be the first Hotel New Hampshire. As dubious of the idea's success as she may be, Mary, ever the dutiful wife, acquiesces, and the children are essentially dragged along for the ride.

Before they can move into their new home, however, the family is rocked by trauma. On their first night in the Hotel New Hampshire, Halloween 1956, Franny and John have to go through the woods behind the school again, trying to get help for a man who's had a heart attack (as their new home does not yet have a working telephone). This time they run into half of the football team, who have stolen one of the school's soccer nets and are using it as a "spider web" to catch and terrorize the local trick-or-treaters. With John tied up in the net, the quarterback Chipper Dove, having hardly forgotten his recent humiliation, takes Franny off into the woods, with two other players in tow.

Realizing what's going on, and that (aged fourteen) he can do nothing to help, John talks the player holding him in the net, a black athlete named Harold Swallow, into letting him go and

helping him find Junior Jones, a fellow black athlete whose sister was raped. They manage to find Junior, who has his own militia (the “Black Arm of the Law”), and they get back to the woods in time to catch two of the three players who have in the meantime gang-raped Franny – Chipper Dove having cleverly left in a timely manner. The two players are brought before the dean of the school, and Junior carries Franny to the school nurse, but Franny claims that she was merely “beaten up” and immediately wants to take a bath, thus wiping out any medical evidence that could have been used. All three players are expelled, but no charges are pressed. Out of loyalty, her siblings back up Franny’s version of events, as a result of which their father never knows she was raped.

The family won’t stay long in the first Hotel New Hampshire; on New Year’s Eve of the same year they receive a letter from Freud, who’s now in Vienna, announcing that he has a hotel there and wants Father to help him run it. Faced with his hotel’s lack of financial success, and always susceptible to Freud’s schemes, Father begins the necessary preparations, and in the winter of 1957 the family sells their hotel (to a circus) and prepares to head to Vienna.

In an ironic twist well at home in an Irving novel, the family opts to take two different flights in the unlikely event that there should be an accident; Mother and Egg take a later flight, their plane going down over the Atlantic. Thus, even before the Berry family can settle in to their new home, they have a new tragedy to overcome.

And their new home is nothing if not colorful: nearly half of the hotel is constantly rented by a handful of whores (prostitution being tolerated if not perfectly legal in Vienna at the time), as well as half a dozen political radicals – the so-called Symposium on East-West Relations – who occupy the top floor, constantly tapping away at their typewriters. Rounding out the menagerie is Susie the bear, actually an American woman in a bear suit who convincingly portrays a real bear and serves both as a type of “Seeing Eye bear” for Freud, who is now blind,¹⁷⁸ and as a general bouncer for the entire hotel, especially the prostitutes’ patrons. Father seems to be just as blind as Freud; grieved though he is by the loss of his wife and son, he hardly stops to reconsider the wisdom of allowing his four surviving children, aged 12 to 18, to grow up in a hotel surrounded by political radicals, prostitutes and a woman pretending to be a bear. This being the case, the children are forced to take matters into their own hands. Franny, always the heart of the family, is the first to react:

“From now on, I’m mainly a *mother*,” Franny said. “I’m going to take care of you fuckers – you, you and you,” Franny said, pointing to Frank and Lilly and me. “Because Mother’s not here to do it – and Iowa Bob is gone. The shit detectors are gone,” Franny said, “so I’m left to detect it. I point out the shit – that’s my role.

¹⁷⁸ Significantly, the Jewish Freud is blind as a result of experiments made on him in a concentration camp.

Father doesn't know what's going on," Franny said, and we nodded – Frank, Lilly and I; even Susie the bear nodded. We knew this was true: Father was blind, or he soon would be.¹⁷⁹

For better or worse, then, the Berry family children have to try to adapt to their new surroundings while still fighting to overcome old sorrows: John is amazed to learn that Franny has been sending letters to Chipper Dove, something Susie the bear, herself a rape victim, takes as further evidence that Franny, though she may talk a good fight, has by no means moved past what was done to her. At the same time, John is increasingly forced to recognize and admit (to himself, at least) his own incestuous feelings for Franny.

The Berry family goes on to spend a total of seven years in the second Hotel New Hampshire. During this time Lilly, who has always been small and is ultimately diagnosed as a dwarf, becomes an aspiring writer; John continues the obsession with weightlifting he developed in the first Hotel New Hampshire in response to his feelings of helplessness when Franny was raped. As for Franny, she sends letters to both Chipper Dove (who never answers) and to Junior Jones, her black rescuer. At the same time she begins to develop a certain fascination with one of the Austrian radicals, who simply goes by the name of Ernst and who bears a certain resemblance to Chipper Dove. In an effort to protect Franny from what they are sure is a mistake – Ernst is not only a radical, but also a pornographer – they ask Susie to look out for Franny; instead the two women become lovers.

In addition to Franny's odd relationship with Susie – Franny claims that she's not a lesbian, though the relationship is clearly sexual – and the whores, who except for the nature of their work are fairly uninteresting; there are still the radicals left in the equation. All of the radicals (whose political goal, beyond creating a "new world," is never explained in greater detail) go by codenames, and though two of the women, Schwanger and Fehlgeburt, are very close to the children, things come to a head when the children realize just what the radicals have planned: to blow up the Vienna State Opera House and take the Berry family hostage; the explosion (to occur during a full house) is to demonstrate that they mean business, while taking an entire American family hostage will guarantee them international attention.

Complicating matters further, shortly before the terrorists go through with their plan, John and Franny run into each other outside of the Hotel New Hampshire. Despite his infatuation with Franny, John has just slept with Fehlgeburt – the radical who had previously broken down and told the children what was going to happen – , whom he had had a crush on, a depressing and wholly unfulfilling experience. Franny, who was worried sick about where he was, takes him in her arms.

¹⁷⁹ *Hotel*, p. 243

Franny put her arms around me and kissed me. She meant to kiss me on the cheek (like a sister), but I turned toward her, though I was trying to turn away, and our lips met.

And that was it, that was all it took. That was the end of the summer of 1964; suddenly it was autumn. I was twenty-two, Franny was twenty-three. We kissed a long time. There was nothing to say. She was not a lesbian, she still wrote to Junior Jones – and to Chipper Dove – and I had never been happy with another woman; not ever; not yet. [...] I walked Franny up to the Kärtnerstrasse, and down to the Opera.

[...]

“They’re going to blow it up,” I whispered to my sister. “The Opera – they’re going to blow it up.” She let me hold her. “I love you terribly much,” I told her.

“I love you too, *damn it*,” Franny said.

Although the weather was feeling like fall, it was possible for us to stand there, guarding the Opera, until the light came up and real people came out to go to work. There was no place we could go, anyway – and absolutely nothing, we knew, that we should do.¹⁸⁰

When the radicals finally decide to put their plan into action, the Berry family is forced to defend itself. Father, taking the baseball bat the blind Freud uses in lieu of a cane, hits Ernst one solid blow, square in the forehead, killing him on the spot; after this the surviving terrorists regain the upper hand, holding Freud and the family at gunpoint. They proceed to explain that, since the Berry family is to serve as their hostages, Freud is the one who is to ride along in a car, which is in reality a bomb on wheels, to the opera house, where the bomb will trigger another, larger one inside. Freud seems to accept his imminent death, and goes from person to person, telling them goodbye. In the process he whispers to John to grab one of the terrorists when he hears the explosion, then proceeds to leave the hotel, letting one of the terrorists lead him to the car. Proud as they are of the bomb they have created, the radicals explain that it will go off if the front license plate is depressed. Freud, pretending to feel his way around the outside of the car, proceeds to swing away with the Louisville Slugger. Father, realizing the blind Freud’s plan, shouts instructions to him; as a result the car explodes right outside the hotel, killing Freud and most of the radicals, the light and flying glass permanently blinding Father. John, doing as Freud asked, grabs and holds the radical Arbeiter so tightly that he accidentally crushes him to death. Aside from Freud and Father, the family is unharmed.

The failed terrorist attack changes everything for the Berry family. Suddenly household names, they leave Vienna and, not ever wanting to see Dairy, New Hampshire again, opt for New York City as neutral ground. Susie the bear, now only befriended with Franny, joins them, finding an apartment in Greenwich Village. Lilly, who has written a best-selling novel about growing up in the second Hotel New Hampshire and the family’s run-in with the terrorists, entitled simply *Trying to Grow*, becomes an overnight literary success. Frank becomes her

¹⁸⁰ *Hotel*, pp. 298-99

agent, Franny becomes interested in acting, and John is initially content to look after their now-blind father.

The return to the United States solves their financial woes (neither *Hotel New Hampshire* having been a commercial success), but other problems present themselves. Lilly's book is such a success that it is immediately opted into a film, for which she has to write the screenplay, all the while her thoughts on writing a second, bigger and better book. Father, financially liquid for the first time in his life, is suddenly directionless; beyond getting himself a Seeing Eye dog, he has no idea what to do with his life.

As for John and Franny, they may have recognized the problem of their incestuous attraction to one another (after which they both go to great lengths to avoid being alone together), but are no closer to finding a solution to it. Ultimately, though, Franny does find the answer for them. As the narrator tells us, "When Franny would finally sleep with me, she would engineer it. She would know exactly why she was doing it, too – as a fulfillment of the promise she had made to *mother* us children now that Mother was gone; as the only way to take care of us; as the only way to save us."¹⁸¹ Essentially the solution Franny finds is for them to *purge* one another of their mutual desire. She calls John up and tells him to come to her apartment, where they sleep with one another over and over, until both are physically hurt and absolutely drained, intentionally taking love-making to its extremes, until it is torment, her hope being that this "trial by fire" will rid them both of their longing for each other, will free them to lead ordinary lives. And this shock therapy seems to work. John leaves the encounter physically sore, but emotionally well; he reflects that "...it was just as she had planned, of course: we would feel the pain of our lovemaking for days. And that pain would keep us sane; the pain would convince us both that awaiting us in this particular pursuit of each other was our certain self-destruction."¹⁸²

John and Franny's joy at their mutual release, however, is terribly short-lived: walking home to his apartment, John stops to look at the Christmas decorations on Times Square, where he runs into Chipper Dove, who tells him he'd like to see Franny again. A few days later Chipper actually calls Franny (John unthinkingly told him what hotel they were staying in), who is rendered speechless. The news that Chipper is there, that he lives in New York, and therefore theoretically she could run into him at any time, makes her terrified to even leave her apartment.

Franny's salvation comes thanks to Lilly, who dreams up a complex, nightmarish scene to exact revenge on Chipper Dove and keep him out of all of their lives for good. In a scenario involving all of the Berry children and Susie, Chipper is first led to believe that Franny has gone insane and is on medication, and then that the group intends to let the bear (Susie's costume

¹⁸¹ *Hotel*, p. 342

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 351

having since been upgraded to be far more realistic) rape him. Chipper is reduced to pleading in the end, at which point Franny – leaving the script behind – reveals that she is quite sane, and Susie removes her bear’s head. Though it is impossible to tell whether this will change anything about his behavior, it seems clear that Chipper, who wets himself in the course of events, will at least leave Franny in peace and quiet.

Having finally exorcised the two greatest demons threatening the family, for most things begin to get much better. Franny becomes a sudden Hollywood success starring as herself in the film adaptation of Lilly’s book; Frank now serves as her agent, too. Father decides to restore the Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea, to make it the third Hotel New Hampshire. John first admires, then falls in love with Susie, and the two marry, as do Franny and Junior Jones, who soon conceive. Apparently not ready for a child of her own, Franny asks John and Susie to adopt it, an offer they gladly accept.

The only bitter note at novel’s end is Lilly’s suicide. Unable to overcome her Weltschmerz, and equally incapable of being satisfied with any of her accomplishments, she takes her own life. This loss is balanced, however, by the addition of new life to the family in the form of Franny and Junior’s baby, which John and Susie agree to raise as their own. Further, both John and Susie find a new direction in life, transforming Father’s new hotel, without his knowledge, into a rape crisis center. Father’s blindness, once the bane of the family, is now a boon, and has been supplanted by the visions of his children.

Dominant Themes

Family

From the very first pages, it becomes clear that *Hotel* revolves around family, specifically around the Berry family. As the narrator John relates:

And so it’s up to me – the middle child, and the least opinionated – to set the record straight, or nearly straight. We were a family whose favorite story was the story of my mother and father’s romance: how Father bought the bear, how Mother and Father fell in love and had, in rapid succession, Frank, Franny, and me (“Bang, bang, bang!” as Franny would say); and, after a brief rest, how they then had Lilly and Egg (“Pop and Fizzle,” Franny says).¹⁸³

Frank and Franny would seem to be near-opposites; Frank is very serious and private, due in part to his closet homosexuality, whereas Franny is very open and outgoing. Lilly, though

¹⁸³ *Hotel*, pp. 1-2

both the second-youngest child and doomed to remain physically small her entire life, is a close second to Frank in her serious-mindedness; they also share a love of language and sense of propriety at odds with their freewheeling and foulmouthed sister. The oddly named Egg, the youngest, is the only one to truly still be a child in the story, in that he is still completely within his own world, his greatest concerns being what toys he has and what costume to wear – at home, at least, he is never to be seen without a costume or combination of various costumes. Egg is also hard of hearing at times, a malady his siblings suspect he chooses when to turn on and off. Our narrator John is arguably the most “neutral” of the children in the sense that he is neither as serious as Frank nor as vivacious as Franny; like Lilly, he worries about growing up fast enough, though this concern is also tainted by his desire not to be separated from his older sister, with whom he spends nearly all of his time.

What can be noted first of all regarding the Berry family is a strong feeling of solidarity; though the children are very different, and while they often get into fights with one another, they ultimately also stick together, as can be seen by Franny and John rescuing Frank, and Frank and John in turn rescuing Franny, from the football players. Further, their various individual quirks, as in the closest of families, do not trouble them at all:

“You see,” Franny would explain, years later, “we *aren’t* eccentric, we’re *not* bizarre. To each other,” Franny would say, “we’re as common as rain.” And she was right; to each other, we were as normal and nice as the smell of bread, we were just a family. In a family, even exaggerations make perfect sense; they are always *logical* exaggerations, nothing more.¹⁸⁴

If we now have some idea of what type of behavior to expect from the various children, we have yet to address the parents in greater detail. Yet, in the case of Win Berry, or Father, there is little more to tell as regards his life in America, hallmarked as it is by his constant pursuit of dreams, something that initially kept him on the road, traveling with his bear Earl to support his family, and which later landed him and his family in the first Hotel New Hampshire, a major adjustment for the children that was never a commercially successful venture.

Yet none of this would have been possible without Mary Bates, or Mother. Her character is somewhat of a conundrum in that, on the one hand, it would certainly seem to be flat; nowhere during her short-lived appearance do we see any development in Mother. On the other is the fact that she largely serves as a facilitator, if not indeed an enabler in the psychological sense, i.e., Mary would seem largely to be there only to enable Win to pursue his fantasies. It is she who waits patiently at home, bearing him three children, while he is out on the road. It is she

¹⁸⁴ *Hotel*, p. 161

who consents to selling her family house so that they can afford the run-down school they remake into the first Hotel New Hampshire. Finally and, for her and Egg, fatally, it is she who agrees to the whole family moving to Vienna.

While this would seem to be a largely secondary and nearly mechanical role, it should not be underestimated. As mentioned in the synopsis, following the deaths of Mother and Egg, Franny opts to become the family's surrogate mother, and is accepted as such. This is tellingly demonstrated when the children – before Franny's relationship with Susie the bear had started, and before being told of the radicals' plan – approach their father, asking him to take them back to America. Here it is Franny, in lieu of her deceased mother, whom Father turns to for approval:

Father looked at Franny. It reminded me of the looks he occasionally gave Mother; he was looking into the future, again, and he was looking for forgiveness – in advance. He wanted to be excused for everything that *would* happen. It was as if the power of his daydreaming was so vivid that he felt compelled to simply act out whatever future he imagined – and we were being asked to tolerate his absence from reality, and maybe his absence from our lives, for a while. That is what “pure love” is: the future. And that's the look Father gave to Franny.¹⁸⁵

Surprisingly, Franny is the one who decides they should stay on a bit longer, to give the second Hotel New Hampshire another chance, thus supporting her father's dream. And her siblings, just as in the case of her rape, dutifully follow her, come what may. Two observations are of particular significance here: firstly, though according to her own statements Franny takes over Mother's role, she does not do so at the cost of her own voice. Whereas Mother rarely voiced the reservations she must surely have had with regard to her husband's many schemes, Franny remains as outspoken as ever; she maintains her previous role as the voice of authority¹⁸⁶ in the family.

Secondly, while there is certainly merit in considering the Mary Bates character a flat one, her flatness is surely equaled by that of Win Berry. In an intriguing storytelling twist, we are provided far more insights into Father's character than into Mother's, yet it is arguable which of the two we can say to “know” better by story's end. The narrator's own reflections on his father border on the metafictional:

Our father seemed to have lost his *character* when our mother was lost to him. In seven years, I believe, he grew to be more of a presence and less of a person – for us children. He was affectionate; he could even be sentimental. But he seemed as lost to us (as a father) as Mother and Egg, and I think we sensed that he would

¹⁸⁵ *Hotel*, p. 253

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200

need to endure some more concrete suffering before he would gain his character back – before he could actually *become* a character again: in the way Egg had been a character, in the way Iowa Bob had been one. I sometimes thought that Father was even less of a character than Freud. For seven years we missed our father, as if he had been on that plane.¹⁸⁷

As this statement makes clear, Win Berry becomes so emotionally distant from his children that, to them, he seems to have lost all distinguishing characteristics. He has become little more than a flat character, a plot device; and while the children know that he loves them, he is nonetheless oblivious to their lives. Shortly before the radicals make their move, John and his father have a heart to heart in a nearby cafe:

“Now it’s back to the land of the free” [...] “And no more hotels,” he said softly. “I’m going to have to get a *job*.”
He said it the way someone might have said that he was going to have an *operation*. I hated to see reality hemming him in.
“And you kids are going to have to go to school,” he said. “To college,” he added dreamily.
I reminded him that we had all *been* to school and to college. Frank and Franny and I even had finished our university degrees [...] “Oh,” he said. “Well, maybe we’ll *all* have to get jobs.”¹⁸⁸

While this exchange obviously stretches the limits of credibility, it also illustrates what unbelievable microcosms families are. As Josie P. Campbell has recognized, Father is like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby¹⁸⁹ in that he never truly grows up; he is the family’s motivating dreamer, whereas Mother (and later Franny in her stead) is the approbating authority; for much of the story, Franny leads the family. After Lilly’s overnight commercial success, Frank manages the family, serving first as Lilly’s and later also as Franny’s agent, though we must keep in mind that, at least initially, Lilly is the greatest breadwinner of them all.

This in turn leads us to an examination of how the book approaches traditional gender roles within the framework of the family. The story could almost be considered traditional in the sense that the father is the driving force behind the major events in the family’s lives; his decisions are the ones that count. And though Mother and Franny each in turn assume the Victorian role of the family’s moral guardian, neither of the two ever counters Father; while having opinions of their own, there is no instance where they reject his plans outright.

At the same time, however, there are very clear indications of a reversal of “typical” power relations, both concretely and as sensed by the characters themselves. After their return to America, Lilly earns a tremendous amount of money from her novel and screenplay; Franny

¹⁸⁷ *Hotel*, p. 287

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312

¹⁸⁹ Campbell, pp. 97-98

becomes a Hollywood star. Frank, too, becomes modestly wealthy, but solely as the agent for his two sisters, whereas John invests his energies into buying and transforming the old Arbutnot-by-the-Sea into the third Hotel New Hampshire, something he could never consider without his sisters' financial successes.

Not only are women the ones who more often than not bring home the bacon in the Berry family, the men of the family are quite conscious of the power their counterparts hold. As John ponders:

Why were the women in our family either wise, like Mother, or an "old sixteen" – as Junior Jones said of Franny – or like Lilly: small and soft, but bright beyond her years? Why should *they* get all the brains? I wondered, thinking of Father; although Mother and Father were both thirty-seven, Father seemed ten years younger to me – "and ten years dumber," Franny said. And what was *I*? I wondered, because Franny – and even Lilly – made me feel I would be fifteen forever. And Egg was immature – a seven-year-old with five-year-old habits. And Frank was Frank, the King of Mice, [...] able to master a foreign language, and able to put the oddities of history to his personal use; but in spite of his obvious abilities, I felt that Frank – in many other categories – was operating with a mental age of four.¹⁹⁰

Continuing the list of successes the women of the family can claim is Lilly's theatrical masterpiece, the ensemble revenge scene on Chipper Dove, which, though it likely does little to change Dove's character, allows the members of the Berry family, and especially Franny, to be freed from his specter, and to a great extent from that of Franny's rape.

Nor should we necessarily stop with Franny and Lilly. As Susie becomes first Franny's lover and later friend, and eventually marries John, it would seem only fair to also consider her part of the family. As such, she surely helps Franny to come to terms with her rape, both in terms of offering her a non-threatening sexual relationship and by confronting her with the fact of just how far she had *not* come in dealing with what had been done to her. Susie is instrumental in the revenge on Chipper Dove, and it is she who, together with John, conceives the third Hotel New Hampshire as a rape crisis center.

This should not give the impression, however, that the women in *Hotel* are infallible. Though Lilly's imagination was enough to create the dramatic revenge scene, it was never great enough for her own standards; breaking on her own expectations of herself, Lilly is the only member of the Berry family to succumb to despair. And though the third Hotel New Hampshire seems to be making a positive contribution by novel's end, it is only possible due to Susie's experience with a previous rape crisis center, which she claims she ran into the ground. Further, when the family first encounters Susie, the reason she wears the bear suit, beyond her dubious

¹⁹⁰ *Hotel*, p. 207

work for Freud, is that she herself was raped by two men who put a bag over her head so they wouldn't have to see her face; when the Berry's meet Susie, she is a woman so deeply convinced of her own ugliness that she feels more comfortable not being a person at all.¹⁹¹

The point here is of course not to create a score card for the respective genders, but rather to emphasize their interdependency. In keeping with the androgynous model touched on in discussing *Garp*, again we see how men and women can damage or nurture each other. Here the model can also be said to be extended, as same-sex relationships are also explored: though the relationship between Susie and Franny is a transitory one for both women, it helps both of them to regain their confidence and, to judge by the further development of the novel, ultimately empowers them to pursue lasting heterosexual relationships. And John and Susie would appear to save one another. John continues with what Franny had begun, namely convincing Susie of her own beauty and self-worth, while in turn it is Susie who helps John to find a purpose in life: by actually making the third Hotel New Hampshire into a rape crisis center but withholding that information from Father, who steadfastly believes he is finally running the kind of hotel he had always hoped to, John and Susie are able to keep John's father's dreams alive, while marrying them to a pragmatic solution to help heal damaged women.

In turning briefly to what the secondary literature has to say regarding the family aspect of *Hotel*, not surprisingly many have recognized it as being at the heart of the novel. Interestingly, Elke Weiß further points out that, in *Hotel*, the family represents a haven for non-conformity.¹⁹² Here we need only consider Frank's siblings' acceptance of and maintaining the secret of his homosexuality, or of the tacit agreement to support Franny's claim that she was merely "beaten up" on Halloween. Similarly, over the course of the novel it becomes clear that Frank, Lilly and Susie are all aware of, yet also keep the secret of, John and Franny's mutual attraction.¹⁹³ Like the best of families, they may fight, but they also look out for one another and give each other space to grow.

A last comment on the familial aspects of *Hotel* is also quite useful, though I feel it requires some qualification. Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson claim that

Employing something like the Dickensian mode of creating archetypal structures to organize a fictional world teeming with characters (many of whom are abstractions or two-dimensional, virtually emblematic characters or psychological types), Irving develops a hermetic universe of often bizarre, sometimes mutilated, frequently amoral or immoral characters whose actions inevitably impinge upon or work to

¹⁹¹ *Hotel*, pp. 399-400

¹⁹² Weiß, p. 134

¹⁹³ *Hotel*, pp. 305-6, 337-8

sabotage the essentially wholesome, albeit eccentric, domestic world of the Berry family.¹⁹⁴

While it is certainly true that outside forces, such as Chipper Dove and his fellow football players or, later, the radicals, endanger the Berry's, this would seem to conveniently ignore the all-too-prevalent threats to the family from within. While it is debatable as to whether the Berry's are "essentially wholesome" or not, the previous sections have made it abundantly clear that a number of threats to the family – chief among them Win Berry's blindly chasing his dreams, dragging his family in tow – come from within its own ranks. And, aside from Father's blindness, many threats to the Berry family have to do with sexuality.

Sexuality

The issue of Frank's homosexuality is nearly a non-issue in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Though it is certainly something Frank initially tries to keep a secret, and which his siblings dutifully keep a secret from their father, beyond his suffering at the hands of the football players (from whom Franny and John saved him), Frank's sexual orientation is hardly an "issue" at all.

Significantly more complex are the feelings between John and Franny, or, perhaps more correctly, in the triangle made up by John, Franny and Susie. Even as small children, Franny and John felt closer to one another than to any of their other siblings, and spent much of their time with only each other as company. Yet these feelings are never more closely defined or explored; the two of them simply like one another more than the rest of the family.¹⁹⁵

As time goes on, however, these feelings grow stronger, especially after Franny's rape and the move to Vienna, and especially for John. Ironically, in trying to protect Franny from her infatuation with the radical Ernst, John, Frank and Lilly push her into Susie's arms. Yet Franny makes it clear that, though she sleeps with Susie, she is not a lesbian:

"It's not like that," she whispered. "Frank is *convinced*. I'm not convinced of anything – except, maybe, that this is easier for me. Right now. I mean, it's easier to love someone of your own sex. There's not quite so much to commit yourself to, there's not so much to risk," she said. "I feel *safer* with Susie," she whispered. "That's all, I think. Men are so *different*," Franny said.¹⁹⁶

Susie, then, would seem only to be a phase for Franny. This is further evinced by the fact that, after Franny and John's fateful encounter and kiss, Franny explains to Susie that she

¹⁹⁴ Harter & Thompson, p. 105

¹⁹⁵ *Hotel*, pp. 49, 52

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260

just wants to be her friend, essentially jilting her lesbian lover as a result of romantic feelings for her own brother. This could of course easily be misconstrued as a fascination with or even glorification of sordid relationships. Making such an assumption, however, means disregarding the novel's depth and honesty in the face of human emotions. Never during this time do John and Franny sleep together, or even kiss again after that initial evening; in fact, they go to great lengths to avoid being alone with one another, out of fear of what might happen. As regards breaking up, of course it was painful for Susie, but it was surely also the most honest choice available to Franny, and infinitely better than maintaining the relationship once she had realized for whom she truly had romantic feelings.

Needless to say, incest is generally considered immoral and/or unnatural. John and Franny are also severely disturbed by their feelings for one another, suspecting and, it would seem, hoping they are nothing more than an overblown physical attraction:

"I love you," I told Franny, with my head down, "but what are we going to *do*?"
"We're going to love each other," Franny said. "But we're not going to *do* anything."
"Not *ever*, Franny?" I asked her.
"Not now, anyway," Franny said, but her hand trailed across her lap, across her tight-together knees, and into my lap – where she squeezed my thigh so hard I jumped. "Not *here*, anyway," she whispered, fiercely, then let me go. "Maybe it's just *desire*," she added. "Want to try the desire on someone else and see if the thing between us goes away?"¹⁹⁷

Following this strategy, soon afterwards John sleeps with one of the hotel's prostitutes, while Franny sleeps with Ernst. But these empty pursuits do nothing to change their feelings for one another. On the same night, the radicals launch their plan to blow up the State Opera House, thus leaving the issue unresolved for the remainder of the Berry family's stay in Vienna. It is only the pain of their mutual purging that frees both John and Franny from their attraction, and both of them recognize the purpose of the ritual as such, though it is again essential to keep in mind that Franny is the one in charge:

"You and me need saving, kid," Franny said. "But especially you need it. You think we're in love, and maybe I think so, too. It's time to show you that I'm not so special. It's time to prick the bubble before it bursts," Franny told me.¹⁹⁸

"[...] If you stop, I'll kill you," Franny told me. She *would* have, too, I realized later. In a way – if I had *stayed* in love with her – she would have been the death of me; we would have been the death of each other. But she simply overdid it; she knew exactly what she was doing."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ *Hotel*, p. 303

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 342-3

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 347

And, as their marathon is nearly ended: “After this,” she told me, “we’re both finished with it. This is the last time, my love. Just imagine trying to live every day like this,” Franny said, pressing against me, taking my last breath away. “We’d go crazy,” Franny said. “There’s no living with this,” she whispered.²⁰⁰

As explained in the synopsis, the purging seems to work: Both Franny and John are freed from their desire for one another; their tryst is never repeated and, though they will always share a unique bond, they are never again tempted to become more than brother and sister to one another. In fact, prior to John’s chance encounter with Chipper Dove, he reflects that he feels safe for the first time in his life.²⁰¹

Here it is especially interesting that the characters’ sexual and romantic energies, which once threatened the unity of the family, are harnessed in such a way as to strengthen and even propagate that very unity: Franny, having outgrown the necessary “safe phase” with Susie and having cleansed herself of her feelings for her brother, is freed to move on, eventually marrying Junior Jones, the only character – as Franny is not truly a lesbian – in the ensemble to offer the prospect of a healthy and loving relationship. Susie, too, ultimately seems only to have needed a safe partner following her rape, as she eventually falls in love with and marries John. Though hardly conventional in its structure, we nevertheless witness human nurturing: Susie made Franny feel safe; Franny helped her gain more confidence in her appearance. As such, both were set on the road to recovery, toward being capable of leading healthy and emotionally honest relationships; without the transitional phases between Franny and Susie, and between John and Franny, neither of the two healthy marriages at novel’s end would have been possible.

Rape as Loss of Self

What the novel makes painfully clear is that rape can – in the case of Franny and even more so in that of Susie – lead to a regressive transformation of self, indeed to a loss of the self. This idea is touched on immediately following Franny’s gang rape, when Junior Jones tries to comfort her by assuring her:

“[...] When someone touches you and you don’t *want* to be touched, that’s not really *being* touched – you got to believe me. It’s not *you* they touch when they touch you that way; they don’t really *get* you, you understand. You’ve still got *you* inside you. Nobody’s touched you – not really. You’re a really good girl, you believe me? You’ve still got *you* inside you, you believe that?”

²⁰⁰ *Hotel*, p. 349

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 351

"I don't know," Franny whispered, and went on crying.²⁰²

Turning for a moment to the critical response, I take great issue with the superficial analysis of Robert Towers in this regard in his essay on *The Hotel New Hampshire*, entitled "Reservations," in which he asks:

Are we to assume that the rape of defenseless young girls, especially if accompanied by mutilation, has some special poignancy for Irving, arousing some private guilt for which repeated fictional atonement must be made? Presumably not – though both Garp and John Berry are made to go on at length about their abhorrence of the crime. It seems more likely that he is playing an elaborate literary game, teasing the reader with hints of profound continuities underlying metamorphosis – Ellen Jamison [sic] is, after all, a reincarnation of the mythic Philomela and so, in thicker disguise, is Sabrina. Meanwhile, the multiplication of rapes has furnished no further insight into the nature – or the consequences – of sexual abuse.²⁰³

Though Towers also levels a number of justified criticisms at the novel, here I feel that he very much misses the mark. Far from "teasing" with "hints of profound continuities underlying metamorphosis," in populating the fictional world of *The Hotel New Hampshire* with three different rape victims – Franny, Susie, and Sabrina Jones (the sister of Junior) – Irving shows how the three women have reacted to what was done to them. Though we are given little information on Sabrina, aside from the fact that she has to wear false teeth because the men who raped her knocked her teeth out with a pipe, by the time she enters the story she would appear to have come to terms with it; we simply do not know how she got to this point.

Susie would seem to represent an extremely inward-looking response to rape, perhaps because it destroyed her self-esteem. When the Berry children first meet Susie, having just arrived at their new home, she jokes about how ugly she is; later "Franny had told me that Susie's little joke about being the original not-bad-if-you-put-a-bag-over-her-head girl was not so funny; the two men who had raped her *had* put a bag over her head – 'So we don't have to look at you,' they told her..."²⁰⁴ Susie is so damaged that, initially at least, the only metamorphosis she would appear to undergo is a very regressive one; in her role as Susie the bear, she is generally actually believed to be a trained bear by the prostitutes' patrons; as for the prostitutes and radicals themselves, they certainly do know her true nature, yet Susie rarely takes off her bear's head to deal with them person-to-person; her transformation into a virtual "non-person"

²⁰² *Hotel*, pp. 106-7

²⁰³ Towers, Robert, "Reservations" in Bloom (ed.), p. 36. It is perhaps indicative of Towers' level of research that he not only misspells the name of Ellen James, one of the most essential figures in *Garp*, but also only sees fit to invest six pages on reviewing the entirety of *Hotel*.

²⁰⁴ *Hotel*, p. 320

represents a refuge, and her short-lived relationship with Franny a safe “middle step” for both women.

As for Franny’s recovery, it is demonstrative of what a long and winding road such healing can entail. Thanks to Irving’s masterful storytelling, Franny’s feelings regarding the rape are amazingly believable²⁰⁵ in their complexity. The fact that it was a crime, and a horrible, brutalizing one, is never in doubt; yet the remaining elements of its depiction are anything but black and white. It is also especially tragic that the gang-rape committed by Chipper Dove and two other football players was Franny’s first sexual experience. Shortly before this, she and John had talked about the importance of “the first time”; when John asked her why she thought it was so important, she answered that “It just is,” [...] “It’s *the first time*, that’s why. It stays with you forever.”²⁰⁶

It is not necessary to go into every detail of Franny’s rape and gradual recovery, yet it is certainly worthwhile to investigate how the crime perpetrated against her resulted in a loss of self, which can most clearly be seen in her delusional behavior, which in an ironic way plays off two of the novel’s principal motifs, blindness and dreams. Whereas Father and to some extent Freud are blinded by their dreams, a condition (not to be confused with the literal blindness both men would in turn suffer) that would seem self-inflicted, the harm done to Franny is of a very different kind: as her first sexual experience was a traumatic and violent one, her dreams of what the first time and, by extension, of what sexual relations should be like, are marred if not wholly destroyed. This is evinced by John and Franny coincidentally overhearing their parents making love, something John finds amusing, but to which Franny responds quite differently:

“God!” Franny said. “They really *love* each other – they really *do!*” And I wondered why I had taken such a thing for granted, and why it seemed to surprise my sister so much.

Franny dropped my hand and wrapped her arms around herself; she hugged herself, as if she were trying to wake herself up, or get warm. “What am I going to do?” she said.

“What’s it going to be like? What happens next?” she asked.²⁰⁷

Franny’s words are cryptic, and John has no idea what she means; he simply assumes she’s lost her train of thought, and she doesn’t elaborate. Yet, if we take them together with later passages, a pattern becomes apparent.

²⁰⁵ Here it is of interest to note that, in the acknowledgments, Irving expresses his gratitude to the Sonoma County Rape Crisis Center in Santa Rosa, California.

²⁰⁶ *Hotel*, p. 91

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132

From the outset, Franny responds to what has been done to her with blatant lies – namely, as has been said, that she was “beaten up” by the football players, and a number of very uncertain claims. Her statements bear a touch of both fatalism and wish fulfillment:

“Of course I knew what he was going to do,” Franny told me, much later. “I was prepared for him, I’d even imagined it – with him. I always knew it would be him – the first time – somehow. But I never thought he’d let the others even see me with him. I even *told him* that they didn’t have to force me, that I’d let *him*. But when he *left* me with them – I wasn’t prepared for that at all. I never even imagined that.”²⁰⁸

And later, in Vienna, John asks Franny why she never slept with Junior Jones, who was clearly romantically interested in her. Here her statements are even more telling:

[...] I don’t exactly have a lot of experience, but it seems that once someone – or some people – get to have you, you don’t ever hear from them again.”
Now, it seemed to me, she *had* to be talking about her rape; I was confused. I said, “Who do you mean, Franny?” And she bit her lip awhile.
Then she said, “It surprises me that I have not heard one word – not a single word – from Chipper Dove. Can you imagine that?” she asked. “All this time and not one word.”
Now I was *really* confused; it seemed amazing to me that she would have thought she’d *ever* hear from *him*. I couldn’t think of anything to say, except a stupid joke, so I said, “Well, Franny, I don’t suppose you’ve written to him, either.”
“Twice,” Franny said. “I think that’s enough.”

John is understandably amazed, and can’t understand why:

“I was in love with him,” she said, keeping her back to me. “You don’t understand. I was *in love* – and maybe I still am,” she said.²⁰⁹

When John points out that Chipper Dove surely never loved her, her response is perplexing:

“Don’t tell me,” Franny said. “Don’t tell me that he didn’t love *me*. I think I know. But do you know what?” she asked me. “One day,” Franny said, “Chipper Dove might fall in love with me. And you know what?” she asked.
“No,” I said.
“Maybe if that happens, *if* he falls in love with me,” Franny said, “maybe – by then – I won’t love him anymore. And then I’ll *really* get him, won’t I?” she asked me. I just stared at her; she was, as Junior Jones had observed, a very *old* sixteen indeed.²¹⁰

While there is evidence in the novel²¹¹ to suggest a prior romantic interest in Chipper Dove on Franny’s part, this would seem to have been done away with at the latest when Frank and John saved her from him; as such, it smacks more of rationalization when Franny speaks of

²⁰⁸ *Hotel*, p. 104

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 78

being “in love” with him. Further, the very idea that Dove might some day fall in love with his rape victim, who could in turn jilt him and break his heart, assumes a reciprocal emotional bond that clearly seems to have never existed; it is wish fulfillment as palliative.

Franny is to some extent shaken out of her protective illusions when the children first encounter Susie, who bluntly rejects Franny’s approach of not “dealing with” her rape:

[...] Those thugs didn’t just want to *fuck* you, honey, they wanted to take your strength away, and you let them. Any woman who accepts a violation of herself so *passively* [...] how can you actually say that you knew, somehow, Chip Dove would be ‘the first.’

Sweetheart! You have *minimized the enormity* of what has happened to you – just to make it a little easier to take.”

“Whose rape is it?” Franny asked Susie the bear. “I mean, you’ve got yours, I’ve got mine. If I say nobody got the me in me, then nobody got it. You think they get it every time?”

“You bet your sweet ass, honey,” Susie said. “A rapist is using his prick as a weapon. Nobody uses a weapon on you without *getting* you. For example,” said Susie the bear, “how’s your sex life these days?”

“She’s only sixteen,” I said. “She’s not supposed to have such a great sex life – at sixteen.”

“I’m not confused,” Franny said. “There’s sex and then there’s rape,” she said.

“Day and night.”

“Then how come you keep saying Chipper Dove was ‘the first,’ Franny?” I asked her quietly.

“You bet your ass – that’s the point,” said Susie the bear.²¹²

Insofar as Franny’s letters to Chipper Dove are concerned, Susie later confides what she thinks of them to John:

“She’s afraid of him,” Susie said. “She’s actually terrified of ever seeing him again. It’s *fear* that makes her do it – write to him all the time. Because if she can address him, in a normal voice – if she can *pretend* that she’s having a normal relationship with him – well [...] then he’s no rapist, then he never did actually *do it* to her, and she doesn’t want to *deal* with the fact that he *did*. Because,” Susie said, “she’s afraid that Dove or someone like him will rape her *again*.”

I thought about that. Susie the bear might not have been the smart bear Freud had in mind, but she was a smart bear on her own terms.²¹³

This valuable insight on the part of Susie helps us to better grasp the nature and scope of what has been done to Franny, and to how lost she has become as a result. Showing poignantly the horrible costs of rape, Irving selects a virgin as victim; rape is a scarring and dehumanizing experience for anyone, but for a young girl for whom it is her first sexual experience, it can taint the sexual and romantic experiences of the rest of her life. And indeed, in Franny’s case this would seem to create a painful “triangle” of traumata, consisting of her (now corrupted) dreams of what the “first time” should be like; her sense of rejection at the

²¹² *Hotel*, p. 225

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 274

hands of someone who in reality clearly never cared for her; and of fear that she will be raped again. As a result of what was done to her, it is as though her dreams of how love and sex “work” have been corrupted; while she still holds on to them like a lifebuoy, they don’t and can’t jibe with her own emotional experience. As such, whatever dreams Franny may have had before the rape have been lost to her; as John thinks to himself: “Franny was in limbo. She was taking it easy, marking time with Susie the bear [...]”²¹⁴ Franny, then, for the duration of her stay in Vienna, is essentially lost to herself, and to the others. Or, to use the most common motif in the novel, in the sense of losing her way in life, she became blind.

Extremism

Continuing the theme of blindness in its many forms, *Hotel* is the second of Irving’s novels (the first being *Garp*) to deal directly with the topic of extremism. Whereas, in *Garp*, the Ellen Jamesians were essentially a protest movement specifically in response to rape, and more broadly against the many injustices to women, the radicals pursue the more grandiose but also far more nebulous goal of creating “a new world.” Just what this world is to look like is never specified, and the reader is indeed led to doubt whether the radicals themselves know.

More disquieting, however, than their lack of clearly defined goals is the apparent fact that considerations such as people’s lives hold little weight in their calculations, an observation not lost on Susie or the Berry children:

“But what *are* their politics?” Frank asked.
“To change fucking everything,” Susie said. “To start again. They want to wipe the slate clean. They want a whole new ball game.”
“So do I,” Frank said. “That sounds like a good idea.”
“They’re scary,” said Lilly. “They look right over you, and they don’t see you when they’re looking right at you.”
“Well, you’re pretty short,” said Susie the bear. “They sure look at *me*, a lot.”
“And one of them looks at Franny a lot,” I said.
“That’s not what I mean,” said Lilly. “I mean they don’t see *people* when they look at you.”
“That’s because they’re thinking about how everything could be different,” Frank said.
“People, too, Frank?” Franny asked. “Do they think *people* could be different? Do *you*?”
“Yeah,” said Susie the bear. “Like we could all be dead.”²¹⁵

This touches on the true dangers of extremism, one of which is the risk of seeing human lives as “expendable” in the name of a lofty cause. Further, the same dialectical, black-and-

²¹⁴ *Hotel*, p. 286

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230

white thinking demonstrated by the Ellen Jamesians appears here in even purer form, as the radicals' clearly negative but hardly elaborated notions of the United States, explained by Arbeiter, show:

"If you'll forgive me," he added, "your country is the ultimate triumph of corporate creativity, which means it is a country controlled by the *group*-thinking of corporations. These corporations are without humanity because there is no one personally responsible for their use of power; a corporation is like a computer with profit as its source of energy – and profit as its necessary fuel. The United States is – you'll forgive me – quite the worst country in the world for a humanist to live in, I think."

"Fuck what you think," Franny said. "You raving asshole," she said. "You *sound* like a computer."

"You think like a transmission," Frank told Arbeiter. "Four forward gears – at pre-determined speeds. One speed for reverse."

Arbeiter stared. His English was a little plodding – his mind, it would occur to me, later, was about as versatile as a lawn mower.²¹⁶

These vacuous statements would seem par for the course for the radicals. Their new world, to be launched by blowing up the Vienna State Opera House and holding an American family hostage, is as ill-defined as it is unattainable. And, if this were the be-all and end-all of Irving's portrayal of extremism, it would hardly be worth further consideration.

Yet, just as Irving showed the risk of "becoming the enemy"²¹⁷ in T.S. Garp's ongoing feud with the Ellen Jamesians, so, too, does he in *Hotel* show how ordinary people can be lured into the same kind of thinking as radicals. Masterfully, in a book that goes to great lengths to sensitize readers to the plight of rape victims, we are also shown how Susie, likely the most embittered rape victim in the story, nearly becomes a "radical" in her own right, a danger that becomes evident from her first encounter with the Berry children, after which John as the narrator comments:

[...] in college she'd joined a kind of club of women who'd all been raped, and they had agreed among themselves *exactly* what it was like, and what were the *exactly* correct responses to have to it. Even before she started talking to Franny, I could see how desperately important this woman's private unhappiness was to her, and how – in her mind – the only credible reaction to the event of rape was *hers*. That someone else might have responded differently to a similar abuse only meant to her that the abuse couldn't possibly have been the same.

"People are like that," Iowa Bob would have said. "They need to make their own worst experiences universal. It gives them a kind of support."

And who can blame them? It is just infuriating to argue with someone like that; because of an experience that has denied them their humanity, they go around

²¹⁶ *Hotel*, p. 244

²¹⁷ Note that both Garp and Ellen James were at risk in this regard. This tendency to universalize individual experience is also touched on in *Garp* (pp. 386, 387-8) and can also be seen as a perversion of the conventional *Bildungsroman* progression; instead of reaching beyond him- or herself, the *Bildungsheld* attempts to subsume the experiences of others into the narrow framework of his or her own.

denying another kind of humanity in others, which is the truth of human variety – it stands alongside our sameness. Too bad for her.²¹⁸

Ultimately, Susie herself sees the error of her ways, recognizing that, though she may share in a trauma perpetrated on countless other women, no one has the authority to create “rules” about such intimate harm. In the literature from the rape crisis center Susie and John would later run, Susie advises her counselors:

It is essential to understand that there is no one way that victims respond and adjust to this crisis. Any one victim might exhibit all, none, or any combination of the usual symptoms: guilt, denial, anger, confusion, fear, or something quite different. And problems might occur within a week, a year, ten years, or never.²¹⁹

Having come to this realization not only makes Susie a better rape counselor, and thus better able to help her fellow woman, but also seems to release her to some extent; from a woman so damaged, and so convinced of her own unattractiveness that she quite literally hides behind a mask, and from a woman who, like Franny, appears to have first sought shelter with other women, she moves on to a healthy relationship with John, even to marriage. She keeps her conviction, and makes it her daily work to help other women in need, yet she helps each individual on their own terms, adapting her message to the victim, and not vice versa.

Hopelessness and Hope: Happy Fatalism

Following his penchant for the absurd in storytelling, Irving takes an essentially meaningless figure from the novel, Sorrow, the foul-smelling and flatulent family dog, and makes of it a symbol. The dog smelled so bad that Father decided to have it put to sleep without telling Franny, who loved it most, the night of Franny’s rape. Frank, whose odd hobbies as a teenager include taxidermy, later stuffs the dog in a frightening-looking pose, hiding it in a closet so that he can give it to Franny as a Christmas present to cheer her up. When Iowa Bob accidentally knocks the closet door open, the “attacking” Sorrow pops out, literally scaring the old man to death. Frank later succeeds in reshaping Sorrow into a much warmer, curled-up, sleeping position, much the way the children remembered it, and Egg, the youngest child, grows very attached to it, so much so that he insists on taking it with him on the plane to Vienna. When Mother and Egg’s flight crashes into the Atlantic, it is Sorrow that floats to the surface.

²¹⁸ *Hotel*, pp. 224-5

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226

The previously mentioned Robert Towers rightly asks: “How often can one be expected to respond to the play on the name Sorrow, which runs through much of the book?”²²⁰ The narrator speaks of “the many poses of Sorrow,” “bringing Sorrow back from the grave,” points out the contradiction of “nice sorrow” and observes that “Sorrow floats.”²²¹ It is made painfully clear that Sorrow represents the greater concept of sorrow in its many forms. The significance of the sorrow concept, however, is not in its overly generous application throughout the book; rather, sorrow serves as the catalyst that necessitates the philosophy outlined by Iowa Bob and later adopted by the Berry children, namely that of “happy fatalism,” the main premise of which states that “the way the world worked – which was badly – was just a strong incentive to live purposefully, and to be determined about living well.”²²² While the family is preparing for the trip to Vienna, they receive various telegrams from Freud, in one of which he tells them about a Viennese street performer who one day committed suicide by jumping out an open window; “keep passing the open windows,” initially a joke among the children, comes to be their mantra not to give in to despair. And it is this philosophy that will accompany the Berry children through their seven years in Vienna and beyond.

Each of the children has his or her burden to bear: Franny is still haunted by her rape; Frank, always the outsider, though he keeps passing the open windows, adopts an almost universal pessimism. John seems unable to grasp just where he fits in, other than at his sister’s side; Lilly, who only pretends not to care about her dwarfism, invests all of her energies into becoming a writer. They all have to face the fact that Egg and Mother are gone forever. And, of course, it should be kept in mind that the children spend seven formative years in a place none of them actually want to be, in a foreign city, living in a hotel shared with prostitutes and extremists, bereft of their mother and youngest brother, and with a father they hardly know how to turn to.

In short, all of them have ample reason to despair. The key question, perhaps, is where and why they finally make the turn from hopelessness to hopefulness. Here a number of events come into play. Father’s role in foiling the radicals’ bomb plot, in which he singlehandedly kills Ernst with a baseball bat, restores him in the eyes of his children. Yet, following the family’s return to the States, he is directionless for months. It is only with the opening of the third Hotel New Hampshire, which he believes is the successful hotel he’d always dreamed of, that he truly becomes positive about life again.

²²⁰ Towers in Bloom (ed.), pp. 36-7

²²¹ See e.g. *Hotel*, pp. 147, 157, 172, 216

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 157

As regards the “triangle” between Franny, John and Susie, certain rituals²²³ must be performed before they can all be free. First there is the previously mentioned purging ritual between John and Franny, which the latter orchestrates so as to save them both from an attraction that can only bring them pain. Secondly, there is the revenge on Chipper Dove, which has liberating effects first and foremost for Franny, but also for John, who had been unable to save her from Dove before, and surely, though this is not discussed in the novel, for Susie, who played a pivotal role not only in the revenge on a sexual predator, but also in the healing of his victim.

For Franny, this would seem to be enough. The confrontation with her tormenter restores her to her old self (as nearly as possible after such a trauma), and she pursues a successful Hollywood career and ultimately marries Junior Jones. As for Susie and John, they restore each other’s hope through their mutual love and dedication to keep helping women like Franny. In serving as havens for each other, and in creating a haven for damaged women – while at the same time keeping Win Berry’s dream alive – they find mutual strength, fulfillment and hope. And, upon adopting Franny and Junior’s child, they begin a family of their own.

It would, however, be misleading to only consider the “happy ends” prevalent in the book; one of the Berry children, Lilly, is unable to find or regain her hope. Unlike the other figures, Lilly never finds a way to come to terms with herself. This is all the more ironic when we take into account the fact that it was Lilly’s writing, her creative talent, that not only made revenge on Chipper Dove possible, but was also indispensable in providing for the family’s financial wellbeing. Yet, to Lilly, each success brings with it new and greater challenges: the book she writes about her family is a huge success, yet she can only ever think of the next book. And, when she invariably reaches her creative limits, there is nowhere for her to go; rather than accept that she is only a moderately skilled storyteller, or simply give herself time and space to try again, she succumbs to despair, jumping from a hotel window to her death.

Even in the fairy tale world Irving creates for *Hotel*, there is always a pound of flesh to be paid. It is miraculous enough that the majority of the Berry children – not to mention Susie the bear – end up with fairly normal, happy and healthy lives. Father explains the simple idea that John and the others ultimately adopt, but Lilly can never accept:

“Human beings are remarkable – at what we can learn to live with,” Father told me. “If we couldn’t get strong from what we lose, and what we miss, and what we want and can’t have,” Father said, “then we couldn’t ever get strong *enough*, could we? What else makes us strong?” Father asked.²²⁴

²²³ For more information on this aspect of the novel, see Campbell, pp. 102-6 and the section on “Transformation” in this chapter.

²²⁴ *Hotel*, p. 313

The Critical Response to The Hotel New Hampshire

Transformation

As has been shown, there are a number of dominant themes in *Hotel*. The family is prevalent, as are extremism and the importance (and dangers) of dreams. Yet the salient secondary literature also touches on further important issues.

Scholars such as Josie P. Campbell and Elke Weiß have recognized that the key theme in *Hotel*, as regards overcoming loss, bitterness, and despair is a form of metamorphosis, which Campbell refers to as “transformation,” whereas Weiß herself sees it more as “exorcism”; there are compelling arguments for both points of view, but for our current purposes, Campbell is somewhat more central. As she points out, both John and Franny’s one night together and the revenge on Chipper Dove are highly ritualized situations, the goal of which is transformation. The first ritual would seem to be a complete success, as there are no “relapses” into incestuous thoughts or acts, nor any expression of a desire to do so. As for the second, Campbell writes that

The drama [...] is not so much to take revenge on Chipper as it is to transform Franny. Along the way, John, Frank, and Susie will also be transformed. Through the play Lilly provides, they not only can keep passing the open windows, they can move beyond one of the most awful events in their lives – that of rape. Though Lilly writes the play, directs it (Franny, out of fear, loses much of her leadership role here), and acts in it, she, unfortunately, will not be transformed.²²⁵

As we see, then, rituals can be transformative in *Hotel*; they liberate Franny and John, and ultimately Susie and Frank as well. Nor should we forget that, conceivably, the children owe their very existence to ritual: it was, after all, Freud’s ritualistic exacting of three promises from Father and Mother that moved them to marry and gave Win the impetus to spend his life chasing his elusive dreams.

Vengeance

Much has been said as regards the grandiose revenge scene in *Hotel*, and the opinions vary greatly. Harter and Thompson, for example, see the revenge scene as emblematic of the

²²⁵ Campbell, pp. 104-5

novel's greater failure (addressed in the section on technique below) to combine the disparate modes of romance and polemic:

Indeed, when Irving does try to integrate the socially relevant themes he explores with the romantic mode – as he does in the absurd punishment of Franny's rapist, Chipper Dove – he fails both as artist and as concerned humanist: the result in this scene (and in several others) is a simultaneous trivialization of romance *and* polemic.²²⁶

On the other hand, Josie P. Campbell defends the scene:

Critics who see this scene as misdirected, as silly, and even as trivializing rape (Harter and Thompson; Miller; Reilly) totally miss the point. Irving is underscoring the awfulness of rape. John points out that if the revenge "*had* been as awful" as the rape, "it would have been too much" (403). Going beyond the boundary Franny sets would have been to kill Dove. For Franny and her siblings (excluding Lilly but including Susie), ritualizing the threat of rape has been transformative.²²⁷

In addressing the question of the scene's relative merit, it is perhaps best to consider, on the one hand, what the characters in the novel hoped to accomplish and, on the other, what Irving himself hoped to show. While Campbell believes that Franny and her siblings hoped to transform Chipper Dove by means of the ritual, this is only an assumption. It seems far more certain that Franny et al. wanted to do their best to keep him out of their lives, and to allow Franny to live without fear of another attack. This appears to have been successful.

Insofar as Irving's intentions are concerned, he has essentially confirmed Campbell's claim as to the severity of the punishment,²²⁸ i.e., the only thing that could have been worse than what Dove himself did would have been to kill him, and that would have been too much. This does not mean that Irving principally objects to revenge, or that he trivializes rape. On the contrary, he has elsewhere²²⁹ made it quite clear that he supports the idea of revenge; what he clearly shows here is that there *is* no sufficient punishment. Death is too much, *lex talionis* unthinkable; as such, the scope of rape's brutality is underscored, as it can never truly be counterbalanced by punishment.

Technique

²²⁶ Harter & Thompson, p. 124

²²⁷ Campbell, p. 106

²²⁸ de Coppet, Laura, "An Interview with John Irving," *Interview* 11 (October 1981), pp. 42-44, cited in Reilly, p. 86

²²⁹ BookBrowse (2000), p. 4

In a 1981 interview, Irving explained that he was so fond of *Hotel* because “when I say it’s the most fairy tale to me and I’m therefore the most pleased with it, what I mean is that it seems to me the most complete unto itself – that is, it is the most of itself an entered and then left world. You enter it ... and while you’re in it, its rules apply, yours don’t.”²³⁰ This element has been recognized in the secondary literature as well; Benjamin DeMott keenly points out that events in the book resonate greatly with the genre of the fairy tale, “the only literary form that has ever satisfactorily tamed the horrible. Half-magical attachments between human and animal creatures (men and bears) hold our attention from the start.” He goes on to say that “[G]uided by the narrator, we intuit that this work (when the grotesque heaves into sight) is not only about the unbearable but about our instinct for refusing the unbearable – not only about the worst of life but about our capacity for willing away the worst. That intuition does much, throughout, to soothe our unease with contortions and contrarities.”²³¹

This is a significant point in that in *Hotel*, even more so than in *Garp*, the story unfolds in a fictional world that is simultaneously mimetic (as it generally “behaves” in the same way as the real world) and fantastic (as it includes elements that stretch the limits of credibility). The effect is magnified by the fact that the majority of what transpires is within the immediate environment of the family; families, as has been discussed earlier in the chapter, have their own rules, and what might seem wholly absurd when observed from without is hardly an issue when seen from within.²³² Harter & Thompson²³³ and later Elke Weiß²³⁴ also see Irving’s “fairy tale” as a continuation of the American romantic tradition, which, as defined by Richard Chase, itself allows for departures from both verisimilitude and moral questions.

A final question on the issue of *Hotel*’s “fairy tale” status (a status the narrator himself mentions at more than one point in the novel²³⁵) has been brought forward by Elke Weiß, namely how to reconcile certain elements in the novel with the fairy tale tradition, e.g. Frank’s homosexuality or Franny and John’s incestuous feelings for one another:

Das Märchen als genuine Kindergeschichte impliziert, trotz aller Einwirkungen von Bösem und Gewalt, eine kindliche Unschuld und folgt Regeln, die diese letztlich nicht irritieren; in der Romanwelt von *The Hotel New Hampshire* hingegen wird solche Unschuld augenfällig und drastisch in ihr Gegenteil verkehrt – durch Vergewaltigung, Inzest, Prostitution u.a.m. Die Inversion von Unschuld erscheint besonders auf dem Hintergrund der anzitierten *fairy tale* umso deutlicher [...] Das solchermaßen abweichende Verfahren vermag indes zu unterschiedlichen, ja,

²³⁰ Miller, Gabriel, *John Irving* (1981), p. 193, cited in Harter and Thompson, p. 103

²³¹ DeMott, Benjamin, *Domesticated Madness*, in Bloom (ed.), p. 15

²³² Suggestive of this very technique, the narrator tells us that: “In a family, even exaggerations make perfect sense; they are always *logical* exaggerations, nothing more.” *Hotel*, p. 161

²³³ Harter & Thompson, pp. 103-04

²³⁴ Weiß, pp. 110-11

²³⁵ *Hotel*, pp. 112, 418

sogar gegenläufigen Wirkungen zu führen: Es kann natürlich einmal angesichts des unterlegten Märchendiskurses schockieren, es kann aber auch – und dies liegt hier insbesondere angesichts des positiven Grundtenors, der optimistischen Erzählstimme nahe – durch die Rückkoppelung an die kindgerechte Welt der *fairy tale* die Harmlosigkeit solcher Inversion von Unschuld suggerieren und damit eine gegenteilige, nämlich entschärfende Funktion ausüben und gerade dadurch verblüffen.²³⁶

Restated, the fairy tale setting and the morally murky aspects of the novel play off one another. The dark and grotesque factors (John and Franny's unnatural feelings for one another and the crime perpetrated on her, respectively) serve to ground the fairy tale and bring it far closer to the world we know and inhabit. Yet at the same time the intuition that the world we are exploring is not our own, and revolves solely around the Berry family, greatly leavens events (such as the deaths of Mother and Egg) to a point where they become acceptable: without being robbed of their meaning, they are relativized to an extent that makes it possible to accept them without yielding to despair, very much in keeping with the novel's ultimately life-affirming tone.

The novel also shows parallels – including direct references – to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the most apparent being that between Father and Jay Gatsby; Lilly even despairs that "he's a Gatsby."²³⁷ And in his role as the eternal dreamer of the family, we can certainly see the resemblance. What is of greater interest, however, is how the narrator John fits into this pattern. Harter and Thompson have recognized in John the Nick Carraway to his father's Gatsby in two significant senses: first that he is the (more if not purely) objective recorder of the protagonist's deeds; and secondly that on two separate occasions John himself has a hand in keeping his father's dreams alive. The first such instance is on the family's last New Year's Eve in the first Hotel New Hampshire, when John intercepts a telegram from Freud inviting Win to take his family and help him run his hotel in Vienna. John deliberates, but ultimately passes the telegram on to his father, though he dreads what will come of it. The second instance is in his helping to create the illusionary hotel that is the third Hotel New Hampshire. While the second case would seem a harmless one, and surely a great comfort to the many women the rape crisis

²³⁶ Weiß, p. 110 This can be translated as: "The fairy tale as a genuine children's story implies, despite the influences of evil and violence, a childlike innocence and follows rules that are ultimately in accordance with that innocence; in contrast, in the world of *The Hotel New Hampshire* this innocence is clearly and drastically transformed into its opposite – through rape, incest, prostitution, etc. This inversion of innocence becomes all the clearer before the backdrop of the fairy tale [...] However, this deviating method can produce various and even contradictory effects: Given the underlying fairy tale discourse, it can of course shock readers; but it can also – and this would seem plausible, particularly in light of the positive overall tone and the optimistic narration – suggest the harmlessness of this inversion of innocence by referring back to the child-friendly world of the fairy tale, impressively serving just the opposite function, namely a defusing function."

²³⁷ *Hotel*, p. 240

center helps, one can only speculate how the family's fates would have been different, had John simply decided to throw the telegram in the trash.²³⁸

Elke Weiß also points out John's significance as the story's narrator. While he certainly is the more objective voice in the story, there is nevertheless throughout a subjective filter to how he reports on the events of his family's lives, attributable both to emotional attachment and the benefits of hindsight; as it is clear that, though the story begins in his early childhood, it is John the adult and husband who is telling us the story. Even more so than in *Garp*, we can sense the narrator as someone involved in and affected by what transpires; as such, to a much greater extent than in its predecessor, in *Hotel* we are aware of the potential polysemy of what we are reading, necessitating, as Weiß rightly points out, a far greater amount of reception work on the part of the reader.²³⁹

The Hotel New Hampshire in the Light of the Bildungsroman Tradition

If we now consider *Hotel* from the perspective of the *Bildungsroman*, we can see a number of aspects that uphold its tradition. In keeping with the roots of the tradition, or very near to them at least, we begin the story with a child, a true innocent, and observe his growth throughout the novel. While the father is never wholly absent, it is equally true to say that, for the most significant years in the story, neither is he ever wholly "there." John Berry (here bearing in mind Irving's connection to Dickens) also follows the pattern of the 19th-century *Bildungsheld* in that he ultimately settles down and marries, while coming closer to its 20th-century counterpart in his constantly unanchored feeling and deep distrust of ideologies of all kinds.

At the same time, it is significant that, unlike T.S. Garp or other protagonists, there seems no clear autobiographical connection between John Irving and John Berry. Further, though Win Berry, the father of the family, is often lost in his own dreams and therefore inaccessible to his children, the telltale parasitic ties between child and mother as surrogate father identified by Jeffers cannot be detected here.

As Edward C. Reilly has pointed out, *Hotel* certainly fits the *Bildungsroman* mold in that we are told the story through the eyes of a child; not only do we have a personal, first-person narrative, but are also privy to the narrator's maturation and attendant changing perspectives throughout the novel. *Hotel* also displays the trademark circularity: it ends where it began, the Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea hotel where Win Berry and Mary Bates met and fell in love now

²³⁸ Harter & Thompson, pp. 113-16

²³⁹ Weiß, pp. 101, 229-231

transformed into a haven for broken and healing women.²⁴⁰ The novel also progresses in three phases, namely childhood and the first Hotel New Hampshire; Vienna and the second; and Maine and the third, the first representing the children's microcosm, the second their place of initiation, and the third a haven which John and Susie (with the help of Father) manage and maintain.²⁴¹

A significant aspect to keep in mind, however, is that while the novel certainly centers on John, Irving also takes the important step of testing the waters in a new direction: whereas *Garp* and Irving's previous novels all focus on male protagonists – and only on them, in *Hotel* the main character is inextricably linked to his siblings, most notably to his sisters. This represents an essential change in that, while *Garp* introduced us to Irving's extraordinary ability to create diverse, colorful and yet convincing arrays of characters, the main growth in the novel was solely focused on T.S. Garp; yet in *Hotel* we have not only one child to raise, as it were, but four – John, Frank, Franny and Lilly. In this sense, *Hotel* represents a “plural *Bildungsroman*,” in that we the readers can observe the growth (or lack thereof) of several *Bildungshelden* and *Bildungsheldinnen*.

Yet the novel is equally important in a further and more central form of experimentation on Irving's part; though the steps may be somewhat tentative, *Hotel* also represents the author's first foray²⁴² into the growth and development of female protagonists, the three protagonists being Franny, Susie and Lilly. As *Uhsadel* has so aptly pointed out, female *Bildungsromane* tend to make essential deviations from the otherwise male-dominated genre. One key difference that can be very clearly recognized in *Hotel* is the nature of female protagonists' growth; whereas progress in males tends to be a gradual and to some extent invisible process, *Bildungsheldinnen* are more prone to “eruptive”²⁴³ growth in response to key events. This is above all evinced by Franny, whose life would seem a constant response to catastrophe: firstly, to her own rape; later, to the loss of her mother; and finally, to the revenge scene. Each traumatic or emotionally jarring event causes clearly visible changes in Franny's character, the first leading her to become emotionally numb and increasingly disillusioned with regard to her chances of ever experiencing love and happiness. The loss of her mother in turn seemed if anything to restore Franny, if not wholly, then at least in the sense of giving her a new purpose, as she declares her new goal to being a replacement mother to her siblings. Finally, the

²⁴⁰ Reilly, p. 85

²⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 92-3, 98

²⁴² Irving would go on to revisit this with great success and alacrity in *A Widow for One Year*, as examined in detail in chapter 5.

²⁴³ Here I am using Uhsadel's excellent choice of terminology.

revenge scene essentially frees Franny overnight from the paralyzing fear she'd lived in for years as a result of her gang rape.

John, the novel's main protagonist, also shares in these experiences, yet his responses are fundamentally different in character. Though he takes decisive action – in trying to save his sister from being raped, and later in stopping the terrorists' scheme – his growth is never as sudden or as clear as that of his sister; while John is undoubtedly far more mature by novel's end, his progression is a far more gradual and quiet one.

Uhsadel also posits that a role reversal can be seen in modern female *Bildungsromane*, as a result of which it is the male characters who become more introspective, while the females become more adventurous, a pattern surely present in *Hotel*. Though John constantly works out, eventually shaping his body into a paragon of male strength, he cannot match the adventurousness displayed by nearly every female in his vicinity. Not only is Franny the more daring of the two siblings from her early childhood one, and – after overcoming her rape – later becomes a Hollywood star, Lilly, too, is adventurous in finding the courage to become a novelist; though she breaks on the pressures she herself has created, her brief life is an undoubtedly dynamic one. Lastly, by the time the Berry family encountered Susie the bear, she had already tried running and eventually abandoned a rape crisis center. Following years of regression, in which she hid in her bear suit, she reemerges to not only help Franny exact her revenge on Chipper Dove, but to engage in the far more demanding task of launching a new rape crisis center together with John, Susie's transformation representing perhaps the best example of symbiosis in the book in a double sense: her chance encounter with John, Franny and the rest shook her out of her lethargy, and, in seeking to care for a fellow rape victim, her own passion and desire to help were rekindled. Lastly, in an excellent illustration of what Irving has time and again portrayed as the beneficial communion of the genders, John and Susie save one another, his love giving her the confidence to try again, and her vision giving his life the direction it had lacked.

A few final points should certainly be returned to briefly here, one of which is the family as it applies to the growth and development of the *Bildungsheld*. While Elke Weiß, in her closing remarks, makes a point of emphasizing the significance of family as a bulwark against the contingency of the world,²⁴⁴ she is nonetheless cognizant of the fact that, in *Hotel*, family plays a very ambiguous role in the development of John and his siblings. Indeed, the novel seems to be a family drama where, though (at least initially) there are two happily wed parents, the children largely raise themselves. This is not solely due to Mother's premature death; though she sporadically made her presence felt – on which occasions she showed a surprising awareness

²⁴⁴ Weiß, p. 234, FN 22

of what was going on in the children's lives and an equally surprising understanding of what they needed to hear from her – for the most part she is nearly as transparent as is Father. If anything, Mother's death – here we should bear in mind Franny's decision to become the new "mother" of the family promptly thereafter – served more as a wakeup call to the fact that the only semblance of parental guidance available to them was now gone forever. Weiß correctly identifies the loss of Mother as a harbinger of the trials to follow in the Vienna phase of the novel²⁴⁵; it also marks the point in time from which the children, with Susie's help, begin raising one another.

Once the Berry's survive the moral and physical ordeals of their time in Vienna and return to America, the predominantly negative forces within the family – Father's perennial distance, John and Franny's mutual attraction, and Frank's eternal pessimism – are largely supplanted by more positive energies. Here, again, we should remember that, excepting Father's physical heroism in Vienna (which, together with Freud's sacrifice, may very well have saved all their lives), it is again the children who save one another: first Franny and John, then Lilly's orchestrated revenge on Chipper Dove. The process comes full circle when John, who has certainly matured but, unlike his siblings, has yet to find a clear purpose, dedicates himself to caring for his now-blind father. This, for John, puts his own life on the right path, though it is not in itself enough to fulfill him; in a self-deprecating manner (and in what would seem one of very few autobiographical nods), he reflects that

"I knew that an American literature degree from an Austrian university didn't qualify *me* for very much, but what did I *have* to do but look after my father – but lift what weight I could off my brother and my sisters, whenever the weight needed lifting?"²⁴⁶

And later, in similar vein:

"But in my first few years of looking after Father at the third Hotel New Hampshire, that is rather what I felt like much of the time: a kind of weight-lifting maiden aunt. With a degree in American literature from Vienna, I could do worse than become the caretaker of my father's illusions."²⁴⁷

It is significant that, at the time of the second statement, John has not yet decided to make the hotel into a rape crisis center: with the profits from Lilly's book and Franny's acting career, the "hotel" doesn't need to make any profits; its sole purpose is to give Father the illusion

²⁴⁵ Weiß, p. 127

²⁴⁶ *Hotel*, p. 376

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 388. Note too the intertextual reference to the book planned by T.S. Garp, but which he never had the chance to write: "My Father's Illusions."

that his own dream has finally come true. It is only after John develops a romantic interest in Susie and convinces her to come and stay in the hotel with him that he hits on the idea of using her experience with counseling and the huge amount of space offered by the building to create a shelter for abused women. Susie agrees, and the pair eventually marry and adopt²⁴⁸ Franny and Junior Jones' baby. As such, despite the many convolutions, John's ultimate fate is in keeping with that of the 19th-century *Bildungsheld*: namely settling down and starting a family of his own.

Weiß notes that, though the family unit provides shelter, each of the three surviving Berry children must in his or her own way leave it to move forward in life²⁴⁹, another facet in keeping with tradition: the family must nurture until maturity, then (albeit not wholly) be left behind, enabling the protagonist to start a life and family of his or her own. Lilly, sadly, gives up on life before she can ever reach this point. Yet for the others, despite their many hardships, and despite their never-truly-there father and the loss of their mother, or perhaps because of these very factors, they do not "let go" before having saved one another. Frank, ever the outsider, pessimistic and awkward, seems to have found a home and life for himself as an agent (for Franny among others) in New York City. Franny, who has suffered the most of all the children, and whose damages led her to unhealthy and misguided relationships, is ultimately restored as a healthy sister and wife. Not ready to be a mother herself, she instead helps her brother and his new wife – Susie in many senses having been a member of the family long before the marriage – to become parents themselves. And John and Susie not only fulfill one another but, in a meaningful incarnation of the *Bildungsroman* progression from the individual to the universal, create a place of healing for the countless women sharing the suffering endured by Franny and Susie, and which touched the whole family. Thus pain is transformed into progress, and the humanitarian aspect of the *Bildungsroman* redeemed.

²⁴⁸ It is worth bearing in mind that, even in the novel's very last pages, we see Irving create yet another instance in which a female character exerts a very specific control over her life and the question of motherhood, a recurring theme to be found as early as *The Water-Method Man* (1972) and which plays a central role in *The Cider House Rules*, the next novel to be examined.

²⁴⁹ Weiß, p. 131

Chapter Three

Choice and Cost: *The Cider House Rules*

Following four years after *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Cider House Rules*, from the outset, takes a very different approach; namely, while its predecessor focused heavily on the family and its inherent advantages and disadvantages, *Rules* concerns itself with a protagonist, Homer Wells, who is born and grows to near-adulthood without any family in the conventional sense. Reminiscent of Dickensian protagonists such as David Copperfield or Oliver Twist, both of whom knew childhoods dominated by danger and poverty, *Rules* focuses on an orphan.

Or, more precisely, the two most central characters in the novel are the orphan Homer Wells and the surgeon and director of the orphanage where he is raised, Dr. Wilbur Larch. Before we get to know Homer, we are introduced to Larch and his orphanage in the dreary and God-forsaken town of St. Cloud's. Practically buried in the Maine woods, the orphanage and what's left of the old logging town of St. Cloud's, now largely abandoned houses and saloons, is a dreary place, subject to stifling heat, mosquitoes and dust in the summer, and to sleet and freezing snow in the winter.

The man who answered the call to run the orphanage there was a young doctor, himself born in Maine, by the name of Wilbur Larch. Very early in the novel, we are made to understand Larch's views on abortion. Larch, who is almost daily confronted with the consequences of people giving birth to children they clearly don't want, is dumbfounded by

the great ambiguity in the feelings people had for children. There was the human body, which was so clearly designed to *want* babies – and then there was the human mind, which was so confused about the matter. Sometimes the mind didn't want the babies, but sometimes the mind was so perverse that it made other people have babies they knew they didn't want. For whom was this insisting done? Dr. Larch wondered. For whom did some minds insist that babies, even clearly unwanted ones, *must* be brought, screaming, into the world?

[...]

If you had an ounce of sanity, you would not speak against abortion to Dr. Wilbur Larch [...]. He was an obstetrician, but when he was asked – and when it was safe – he was an abortionist, too.²⁵⁰

As for Homer, he was nearly thirteen before Larch was able to find a fourth and, as it would turn out, last foster family for him, at which time Larch was already very worried that Homer, who had spent so much of his formative years at St. Cloud's, would never be able to feel at home anywhere else and would therefore remain an orphan forever. Though he endeavors to find Homer a more fitting home, the never-religious doctor despairs: "God (or whoever) forgive

²⁵⁰ *The Cider House Rules*, pp. 10-11 (hereafter *Rules*)

me. I have made an orphan; his name is Homer Wells and he will belong to St. Cloud's forever."²⁵¹

The fourth family to try adopting Homer was a very athletic and outgoing couple, Grant and Billy (a woman) Winkle. Born rich themselves, they offered safaris and whitewater rafting trips to other rich couples bored with their lives. Their first outing with Homer is to the State Forest, where they intend to do some moose watching and perhaps some rafting. The first day and night are uneventful; on the second the Winkles decide on an invigorating start to the day by swimming in the turbulent waters of the river that runs through the forest. Homer, who never learned to swim, is content to watch from the shore. Then, in what Homer first takes to be an earthquake, a log drive of several hundred telephone-pole-sized logs comes thundering downriver. Before the Winkles can get to the shore, they are swept away.

It is at this point that Larch becomes resigned to Homer's always being at St. Cloud's, telling him:

"Well, then, Homer, I expect you to be of use."

For Homer Wells, this was easy. *Of use*, he felt, was all that an orphan was born to be.²⁵²

The following chapter backtracks to focus exclusively on Dr. Larch's background. Born in Portland, Maine, in the 1860s, Larch very early decides on and is accepted into medical school. His father, a drunkard, is so proud that, in a misguided act of devotion, he buys his son a Portland whore, one Mrs. Eames. When Larch wakes and prepares to leave after sleeping with Mrs. Eames, he realizes that her teenage daughter is also sitting in the room, calmly smoking a cigar; anything but shocked by the scene, she merely informs him that he could have had her for less. This brief liaison, Larch's first sexual experience, has the direct effect of infecting him with gonorrhea (this was before the advent of penicillin), and the indirect effect of his developing a mild addiction to ether, which he finds dulls the pain of his months-long infection excellently.

Larch begins work at the Boston Lying-In Hospital,²⁵³ where he is often confronted with prostitutes and other blunt reminders of the consequences of sex. In a strange coincidence Mrs. Eames, the very prostitute Larch had had his sole sexual encounter with, arrives as an emergency patient. Though Larch does his best to save her, removing a stillborn child and eventually having to remove her entire uterus as well, her internal organs are inexplicably fragile and, after several days, she dies.

²⁵¹ *Rules*, p. 23

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 35

²⁵³ Note that this is the same hospital where John Irving's own grandfather practiced medicine, *Boston Globe* (2005), p. 2

The very next day Mrs. Eames' daughter arrives at the hospital, claiming Larch is her family doctor. Her arrival presents Larch with both an explanation and a new dilemma: she shows him the bottle of aborticide – so-called “French Lunar Solution” – her mother had taken, and which had eventually killed her from the inside out. At the same time Mrs. Eames' daughter informs Larch that she, too, is pregnant, though not “quick,” and wants him to give her an abortion:

Wilbur Larch sniffed the bottle in his hand, he knew what “quick” meant. If a fetus was quick it meant the mother had felt it move, it meant the mother was about half through her gestation period, usually in her fourth or fifth month; to some doctors, with religion, when a fetus was quick it meant it had a soul. Wilbur Larch didn't think anyone had a soul, but until the middle of the nineteenth century, the common law's attitude toward abortion was simple and (to Wilbur Larch) sensible: before “quickening” – before the first, felt movement of the fetus – abortion was legal. More important, to the doctor in Wilbur Larch, it was not dangerous to the mother to perform an abortion before the fetus was quick. After the third month, whether the fetus was quick or not, Wilbur Larch knew it had a grip on the uterus that required more force to break.²⁵⁴

Larch had also heard of the dangerous and common abortions provided illegally in Boston, on nearly the same street (Harrison Street) as the hospital. Not only were the methods employed “off Harrison” more dangerous and the conditions unsafe; since the “practitioners” charged nearly five hundred dollars for their services, women who were unable to pay often became whores to work off their debt.

The younger Eames knows them too, and has come to Larch specifically to avoid subjecting herself to such conditions. Noting his hesitation, she yells at him to “shit or get off the pot!”, but the prospect makes Larch, a young doctor, too nervous; he adamantly refuses.

A week later she returns, or rather is brought in unconscious, a note with the same words pinned to her dress. Before Larch can operate on her, she dies from the treatment she received “off Harrison,” the autopsy revealing that, just as she had said, the fetus was not yet quick. Moved to see firsthand just how these illegal abortionists work, Larch goes there himself. Appalled by the conditions, he also talks with one of the people waiting to be seen, a thirteen-year-old girl accompanied by her mother who finally admits that her pregnancy is the result of her own father raping her. Larch takes the girl and her mother back to the hospital with him, fabricating a story that this was the girl's third pregnancy (it was her first) as a result of rape, and was also life-threatening given her delicate health (it was not), and gives her an abortion.

Larch quickly develops a reputation on the street as a legitimate doctor who nonetheless provides abortions; desperate women constantly seek him out. Initially fleeing back to Maine to escape the seemingly endless flow of women who want his help, Larch finds no rest there,

²⁵⁴ *Rules*, p. 47

either, his reputation having preceded him. Realizing that it is his calling to provide abortions to those who need them, Larch takes the assignment the state board gives him to the orphanage at St. Cloud's, where he can do the work he feels he needs to do.

As for Homer, his young life takes its first fateful turn when, at the age of thirteen, he discovers an aborted fetus that had fallen out of one of the wastebaskets he was carrying to the incinerator. Not knowing what it is, he takes it to Dr. Larch, who decides that it's time to let Homer know that both deliveries and abortions are performed at St. Cloud's. At the same time, he begins to slowly give Homer more responsibility. Larch had previously given a nightly reading of Dickens to the boys' division before they went to sleep (the girls did not enjoy the same privilege); first Homer is given the task of reading to the boys, for which he shows a real talent, and then to the girls – who receive Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in place of Dickens – as well.

Homer's teenage years are predominantly shaped by two major forces – the tutelage of Dr. Larch, who provides him his old notebooks and study materials from medical school, and his desperate and loveless relationship with the oldest female orphan at St. Cloud's, a large, thuggish girl named Melony, who introduces Homer to sex and who exacts a promise from him, namely that he will never leave without her. By the time he is nineteen, Homer is an accomplished midwife and has been Larch's assistant in many abortions; yet it is agreed by both that Homer needs some exposure to society (something St. Cloud's could never offer) in order to make the informed decision as to whether he ever wants to perform an abortion himself.

It is at this time that the two most important people besides Larch enter Homer's life, though under less than ideal circumstances. Wally Worthington and Candy (Candace) Kendall, a picture-perfect young couple who intend to get married after Wally has finished college, have managed to get pregnant and, though Wally insists that they can keep the baby if they want to, Candy ultimately decides on an abortion. From one of the workers at Wally's family's apple orchard, they learn about St. Cloud's and drive there, hoping to keep the whole affair a secret.

When they arrive at St. Cloud's, the entire orphanage is turned on its head: the well-meaning but naïve Wally having brought jars of apple jelly and honey from the orchard, and all of the children agog at the beautiful couple. Homer is similarly dazzled, both by the beautiful Candy, who is his own age, and the amiable Wally, who is just three years older. When Wally suggests returning to the orphanage with a load of sapling apple trees to plant there, Larch – though it breaks his heart – encourages Homer to go with the young couple, and to do his best to try to stay there longer, perhaps as a summer worker in the orchard. Homer seizes the chance, not even taking the time to tell Melony goodbye.

Though Homer is to be gone for only "a few days," both he and Larch simultaneously hope and dread that it will be much longer. And in fact, Homer is so swept away by his new life

working at the orchard that he doesn't even write back to the orphanage for six weeks. At Ocean View, he comes to know Wally's parents and Candy's father (her mother having died in childbirth), shares Wally's bedroom, and spends nearly all of his time with Candy and Wally. And both Wally's parents and Candy's father quickly grow so attached to Homer that Olive, Wally's mother, asks him to stay on after Wally goes back to college in the fall, an offer he gladly accepts. Though Larch wants Homer to return more than he would like to admit, he supports his staying in his newfound home.

Olive arranges for Homer to attend the local high school, and a girl from the orchard, Debra Pettigrew, introduces him to the world of dating; though Homer is enthralled with Candy from the first time he sees her, his respect and love for Wally initially keep him from pursuing anything more than friendship with her. After several months, however, Candy discovers how he feels about her, and surprises him by telling him that she is in love with both him and Wally, but can't decide between the two.

Matters become decidedly more difficult when Wally, eager to try himself, enlists in the Army Air Corps, against the wishes of Candy, his mother, and Homer, to become a bomber pilot. For over a year, Wally trains to be a strategic bomber pilot while Homer and Candy, doing their part for the growing war effort, volunteer as nurse's aides at the local hospital. Yet despite their growing feelings for one another, both are determined not to betray Wally.

In June of the following year, Wally's bomber is shot down over Burma. While his crew, after a harrowing journey, manages to make its way back to friendly China, Wally is the last to abandon ship, and is therefore listed as missing and generally assumed to be dead. If Wally is dead, then the whole conflict over which of the two she should be with is lifted off of Candy's shoulders. Though she isn't wholly convinced, after Wally has been missing for a month she can no longer resist, and she and Homer finally sleep together.

Homer, despite his intimate knowledge of the female reproductive system, is still a young man who's finally made love to the girl of his dreams: while he thinks to use a condom, he is not equally careful when withdrawing from their embrace; as a result, a few months later they both know Candy is pregnant. Homer wants more than anything to marry Candy and keep the baby; Candy herself also wants to marry him, but is terribly afraid of what Olive, who is still convinced her son is alive, would think of her if she did, that she would think Candy hadn't had enough faith that Wally still lived. After much debate, they decide to go back to St. Cloud's to have the baby; after it is born they plan to either return and tell the truth or (more likely) to initially claim they adopted a baby at the orphanage, at least until Olive has finally accepted Wally's death.

After the harvest, then, they drive to St. Cloud's, where they are warmly received by the old nurses who looked after Homer as a child, and less warmly by Dr. Larch, who nonetheless

skillfully delivers their baby boy Angel, the first *wanted* child born at St. Cloud's in recent history. After Angel has been safely brought into the world, Homer and Candy spend the next month essentially living as man and wife in the seclusion of St. Cloud's, putting off the future confrontation with their lives in Ocean View for another day.

Then, against all hope, they receive a telegram from Olive that Wally is indeed alive, though he was shot down ten months earlier; he will have to spend another few months in recuperation before the Army is willing to risk transporting him, and his ordeal in Burma has left him paralyzed from the waist down. While this should be joyous news, it represents a crisis for Homer and Candy; none of their plans had taken into account Wally possibly still being alive. And, for Candy, this reopens the whole question of whom she loves more, combined with questions (for both her and Homer) of loyalty to Wally and Olive. In an unhappy compromise, Homer and Candy agree to return to Ocean View and claim that, during their stay at St. Cloud's, Homer decided to adopt a baby boy, and Candy was helping him to raise the child. The two privately agree to always share their child, no matter what the future brings.

Upon their return to Ocean View, they both quickly sense that neither Olive (who only a year before had lost her husband to Alzheimer's) nor Candy's father Ray is fooled by their version of events. And before Wally can make it home, Olive – always a chain smoker – dies of cancer. If Candy were to leave Wally now, she would be leaving him crippled and (in a sense) orphaned. A month after his return, Candy and Wally are married.

If we turn our attention away from the main love triangle for a moment, we can consider what is going on “in other parts of the world,” as Larch is fond of saying. At St. Cloud's Dr. Larch, who we must recall has been giving abortions at St. Cloud's illegally for over forty years, comes to recognize that he has a new and dangerous enemy: the orphanage's board of trustees becomes very suspicious of just what goes on there, and question the nearly 80-year-old Larch's competence to continue running it.

It is at this point that Wilbur Larch, an amateur historian, begins crafting his greatest fiction, rewriting the history of a recently deceased orphan – a little boy with poorly developed lungs named Fuzzy Stone,²⁵⁵ for whom Larch had constructed a special breathing apparatus, but who could ultimately not be saved. Creating a role he very much hopes Homer will one day assume, he crafts (through his annals, fabricated letters, etc.) a very different fate for Fuzzy; not dying, he is adopted and even goes on to attend medical school. His experiences at St. Cloud's,

²⁵⁵ The exotic names of many of the orphans are due to the fact that they are all named by one or the other of Larch's trusted nurses, Nurse Edna or Nurse Angela, one of whom has a tendency – emphasizing the absurdity and distance from society prevalent at St. Cloud's – to name the baby boys for cats she has or once had; producing such unusual first names as Curly, Smoky and Snowy. The same nurse also chooses solid-sounding surnames, such as Stone (in the case of Fuzzy), Fields and Meadows.

though they left him with a great feeling of indebtedness to Dr. Larch, also convinced him that what Larch was doing was wrong. Becoming an obstetrician himself, he vows never to perform an abortion, and in his “letters” to Dr. Larch even implies that he may have to turn him in.

As for Melony, the third and final plot thread, she never gets over Homer’s leaving and breaking his promise to her. Though Larch struggles to find more interesting and challenging work for her at St. Cloud’s, to make her happier there, she soon runs away, her goal being to find Ocean View orchards, to find Homer Wells. During the first year she and Homer are away from St. Cloud’s, she travels from orchard to orchard as a picker, trying to find anyone who has heard of Ocean View. When, by winter, she has had no luck, she takes a factory job in the town of Bath (less than an hour away from Ocean View) and befriends Lorna, a fellow factory worker who has had her share of bad relationships with men. In the spring she resumes her search for Homer Wells, again without luck, returning to Bath and Lorna in the same winter Candy and Homer spend at St. Cloud’s. In the following spring, when Candy, Homer and Angel return to Ocean View, Melony finally abandons her quest, she and Lorna becoming lovers.

The next chapter, simply entitled “Fifteen Years,” summarizes what happens in this timeframe for Homer, Candy and Wally; Dr. Larch and St. Cloud’s; and Melony. Melony, having found comfort in the arms of Lorna, fully abandons her search, until fifteen years later Lorna reveals she is pregnant. Wounded by this new betrayal, Melony kicks her out of their shared apartment and sends her to St. Cloud’s for an abortion. Digging out an article she had kept for fifteen years on Wally’s miraculous survival, she decides it’s finally time to pay Homer a visit.

As for Dr. Larch, he essentially spends the fifteen years husbanding his strength to keep going. Now in his nineties, he finishes his masterful fabrication, the biography of Dr. Fuzzy Stone, complete with falsified transcripts and diplomas. He knows that he and his tired nurses (who are themselves in their seventies) must continue the Lord’s work²⁵⁶ long enough for Dr. Stone to complete his education, and – Larch’s only hope – for Homer Wells to return and be of use.

For fifteen years Homer, Candy and Wally live together with Angel in the Worthington family house, Candy and the wheelchair-bound Wally living downstairs as husband and wife, and Homer and Angel sharing Wally’s old bedroom upstairs. Homer effectively runs the orchard, while continuing to volunteer at the local hospital. Angel is raised to believe that Homer adopted him as a baby, and sees Candy as practically his mother and Wally as his very close “uncle.” Though very careful to never be caught, Homer and Candy still sleep together. And, as they eventually discover that the same illness contracted in Burma that left Wally paralyzed from the

²⁵⁶ This is the euphemism Larch and his nurses use for performing both deliveries and abortions. Cf. *Rules*, p. 67. This point is also discussed in the “Choice” section of this chapter.

waist down also left him impotent (though still able to have sexual relations), Candy forces Homer to promise her that, should she ever become pregnant, he will give her an abortion.

Appropriately, the catalyst that brings things to a boil is the appearance of Melony at the orchard, under the pretense of seeking seasonal work. Though she immediately sees that Angel is Homer and Candy's son, she only shares her insights with Homer himself; confronting him with the truth of his situation and far more disappointed than vengeful, she leaves as suddenly as she came. But, for Homer at least, the damage is done. For years, he and Candy have suspected Wally knows everything, and now Homer wants to finally tell him and his own son the whole truth. Candy reluctantly consents to this, though she convinces him to wait a few more months.

It is at this time that Angel, now almost sixteen, falls in love with the daughter of the black picking crew chief, Mr. Rose. Though Rose Rose is nearly the same age as Angel, she already has a baby girl of her own. Although she does not seem averse to Angel's advances, it becomes clear that her father does not approve: she soon appears at work with a black eye. Ultimately, the horrible truth comes out: While Rose Rose's little girl is from another man, her own father sleeps with her, and she is now pregnant with his child.²⁵⁷

Events begin to accelerate. Homer, Candy and Wally decide they have to rescue Rose Rose from her father, and Homer hopes that Larch, who has since made it very clear that he hopes Homer will succeed him, will give her an abortion. But the aged Larch, who often uses ether to help fall asleep, dies of an accidental overdose; if someone is going to abort Rose Rose's child, Homer will have to be the one to do it. In deciding to do so, to save Rose Rose, Homer is finally able to identify with Larch's stance: by intervening for the sake of the girl, he is playing God, and if he is willing to do so for her (and indirectly for the sake of his son), how can he withhold such help from others?

Now Homer tells Angel the whole truth about his heritage, while Candy tells Wally everything that's happened between her and Homer. Soon afterwards Homer adopts the fictitious mantle of Dr. Fuzzy Stone, dazzling the board of trustees in his interview – thanks to the identity Larch had so carefully fabricated for him as a former St. Cloud's orphan who became a doctor and staunch anti-abortionist in his own right – and returns to St. Cloud's to take up the Lord's work. Wally and Candy stay together at Ocean View, as does Angel, though every Christmas Wally and Candy visit St. Cloud's and Angel, once he has his driver's license, does so

²⁵⁷ Here it is certainly worth noting that the circumstances moving Homer to perform his first abortion are extremely similar to those that convinced Larch so long ago; and that in both cases the person most clearly in need of help, i.e., the most black-and-white argument for the necessity of abortions, is a molested child.

often. After more than fifteen years, Homer returns to his point of origin, where he presumably will stay.

Dominant Themes

Interestingly, the actual list of rules posted in the cider house – i.e., the literal cider house rules – ranged from the sensible (asking the migrant workers not to smoke in bed) to the patronizing (as it was common practice for the migrant workers to climb up and sit on the roof of the house at night, usually to drink, they were asked to refrain from climbing if they'd been drinking, especially at night). It is only after they have been posting and re-posting the rules for over fifteen years that Homer and Wally determine that, with the exception of Mr. Rose, all of the migrant workers had always been illiterate, making the list of rules incomprehensible to them.²⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, in light of the many iterations of rules and conventions touched on in the novel (regarding the sanctity of life, fidelity and adultery, etc.), one of the most commonly discussed themes in the secondary literature on *The Cider House Rules* is the very notion of rules and their limitations.²⁵⁹ While certainly a valid point in its own right, it would hardly seem lucrative to examine the issue yet again. Instead what I wish to explore here is a complex consisting of four closely interrelated elements, namely: choice; playing God; propriety versus decency; and utilitarianism.

Choice

A novel such as *Rules*, dealing as intimately as it does with the abortion issue, is inherently entwined with the question of personal choice. Josie P. Campbell, one of the few Irving scholars to not become overly mired in the issue of “rules,” proposes examining the novel from a dialogic (as elaborated by Bakhtin) point of view:

The novel, with its attention to the shifting of rules, invites us into dialogues and negotiates meaning with us. It does this by drawing us into the issue of “choice” throughout the novel. Choice is at the foundation of abortion, but the characters also make important choices, as well as rules, about other issues, too: “The larger significance of ‘choice’ involves the tension between freedom and restraint in a whole range of human situations, and Irving would appear to have set out to examine the ‘rules’ that result from that tension, the abortion law being one” (Harter and Thompson 137). The dialogue in *Cider House*, then, is comprised of the “voices” from many different discourses, as well as the participation of the reader’s own life-“voice.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ *Rules*, pp. 281-82, 577

²⁵⁹ Cf. Reilly, pp. 105, 111-114; Campbell, p. 117; Davis & Womack in Bloom (ed.), pp. 128, 133; Weiß, p. 177.

²⁶⁰ Campbell, p. 121

This passage is valuable in that it first of all points us in the direction of a dialogic or multi-voiced approach to the novel, and secondly in that, while still focused on rules, it also (building on Harter & Thompson) shifts the focus somewhat to include the conflict between freedom and restraint. Thus exploring *Rules* from the perspective of two male voices and one female voice, from the perspective of the choices they make and (equally importantly) how free they are or *are not* to make them, may prove fruitful.

For much of the novel, it is Larch who makes the most significant choices, and those with the greatest repercussions. Here it is essential to note that, with regard to performing abortions, Larch does not decide overnight that he is morally obligated to perform them. The double blow (following within just a few days) of both Mrs. Eames and her daughter dying as a result of desperate and illegal attempts to end their pregnancies prompts Larch to see for himself just what goes on “off Harrison,” which in turn is enough to move him to perform his first abortion.

Larch’s initial choice to perform abortions has three short-term consequences. First of all, news quickly spreads on the street of a legitimate doctor willing to provide abortions in safe and sanitary conditions; Larch is inundated with desperate women, all claiming he is “their doctor.” Secondly, though never an open word is spoken, Larch senses the “chilling effect” his (he had hoped) private choice has on his image among his colleagues; though Larch is following his conscience, his choice goes against the grain of convention, making him an outcast. Thirdly and most importantly, proof that “Saint Larch,” as his nurses at St. Cloud’s would later affectionately refer to him, is only human after all, he becomes overwhelmed by the seemingly endless flow of women in need of abortions in Boston, and flees home to Portland, Maine, where he was raised and where he hopes to escape them.

Yet Portland offers no refuge. While waiting for the Maine State board of medical examiners to find him a new and hopefully less taxing assignment close to home, he is pleasantly surprised to receive an invitation to a very high-class party; a moneyed Boston family that spends its summers at its coastal property near Portland requests the pleasure of his company. Larch, wholly unfamiliar with this class of society, imagines a day of casual social mingling, perhaps even the chance to go sailing. Instead, what he quickly realizes is that the Boston rich, too, have heard of his reputation, and the invitation is only a sham: after dinner, he is led to a makeshift operating room where it becomes clear he is expected to perform the abortion on the spot, which he does. Disgusted and disheartened, Larch prepares to leave, only to find a huge envelope of money in his coat; wanting nothing to do with this “blood money,” he travels from room to room in the mansion, dispensing it to the cooks, waiters and other hired help.

When Larch returns home from the “party” to find a letter from the board assigning him to St. Cloud’s, he is eager to leave, his experiences in Boston and in Portland having galvanized his resolve: “By the time he got back to Portland, he had worked the matter out. He was an obstetrician; he delivered babies into the world. His colleagues called this ‘the Lord’s work.’ And he was an abortionist; he delivered mothers, too. His colleagues called this ‘the Devil’s work,’ but it was *all* the Lord’s work to Wilbur Larch.”²⁶¹

As such, Larch’s conversion is not an epiphany; far more human and consequently far more convincing, it is much more a moment of clarity (in Boston) followed by retreat (to Portland) and eventual resolve (to do the Lord’s work in St. Cloud’s). And, unlike his prior wavering, Larch – surely realizing no one else will do the job – commits himself to St. Cloud’s for life, his only “break” being the years he served in France in the First World War, during which time his replacement adamantly refuses to perform abortions of any kind. Having now recognized his own calling, Larch dedicates himself entirely.

While Larch’s devotion to the cause of the orphan is never in doubt, and while his background sheds invaluable light on how he arrived at his stance, his choices with regard to Homer Wells are less clear. After Larch’s repeated endeavors to find Homer a family of his own, both must face the fact that Homer seems to belong to and at St. Cloud’s. And, since the tutors at St. Cloud’s and local one-room schoolhouse offer little education beyond the sixth grade, Larch sees it as his responsibility to continue Homer’s education the only way he knows how: by teaching him medicine, and by telling him about and explaining to him how babies are delivered and aborted. Though he sees no better alternative to offer Homer, Larch is nonetheless from the outset plagued by doubts as to the effects on his young charge. In his memoirs Larch, who is becoming increasingly attached to Homer, writes:

How I resent fatherhood! The feelings it gives one: they completely ruin one’s objectivity, they wreck one’s sense of fair play. I worry that I have caused Homer Wells to skip his childhood – I worry that he has absolutely skipped being a child! But many orphans find it easier to skip childhood altogether than to indulge themselves as children when they are orphans. If I helped Homer Wells to skip his childhood, did I help him skip a bad thing? Damn the confusion of feeling like a father! Loving someone as a parent can produce a cloud that conceals from one’s vision what correct behavior is.²⁶²

The problems inherent in Larch’s deciding *for* Homer that he should be taught all about childbirth and abortion soon become apparent. Though Larch also feels that Homer should ideally have a chance to leave St. Cloud’s and experience society firsthand (as an orphanage

²⁶¹ *Rules*, p. 67

²⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12

has no society in any meaningful sense) before deciding for himself whether or not to provide abortions, it seems the damage is already done. After a time Homer, not wanting to hurt Dr. Larch's feelings, carefully explains that, while he certainly does not disapprove of Larch, he does disapprove of the practice of abortion, a stance Larch initially accepts. Further, Homer does not want to assist or watch them being performed, a request the doctor ponders but ultimately denies, his argument ostensibly being that acquiring the knowledge of how to perform abortions is part of Homer's making himself "of use."

"I *want* to be of use," Homer began, but Dr. Larch wouldn't listen.

"Then you are not permitted to hide," Larch said. "You are not permitted to look away. It was you who told me, correctly, that if you were going to be of use, if you were going to participate at all, you had to know everything. Nothing could be kept from you. I learned that from *you*! Well, you're right," Larch said. "You *were* right," he added.

"It's alive," said Homer Wells. "That's the only thing."

"You are involved in a process," said Dr. Larch. "Birth, on occasion, and interrupting it – on other occasions. Your disapproval is noted. It is legitimate. You are welcome to disapprove. But you are not welcome to be ignorant, to be *unable* to perform – should you change your mind."²⁶³

Here we see the delicate balancing act between the doctor and his "apprentice"; each cares for the other very much, and Larch has done his best to impart Homer with all the knowledge and guidance he can give him; to be a father to him. Yet it becomes increasingly clear that Homer, though he understands both the mechanics of the procedure and Larch's compelling reasons for performing it, never wants to do so himself. Over fifteen years later, when Homer is still at Ocean View and Larch is more and more feeling time slip away from him, the latter presses his argument once more:

"If abortions were legal, you could refuse – in fact, given your beliefs, you *should* refuse. But as long as they're against the law, how can you refuse? How can you allow yourself a choice in the matter when there are so many women who haven't the freedom to make the choice themselves? The women have no choice. I know you know that's not right, but how can you – you of all people, knowing what you know – HOW CAN YOU FEEL FREE TO CHOOSE NOT TO HELP PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT FREE TO GET OTHER HELP?"

[...]

"Here is the trap you are in," Dr. Larch wrote to Homer. "And it's not my trap – I haven't trapped you. Because abortions are illegal, women who need and want them have no choice in the matter, and you – because you know how to perform them – have no choice, either. What has been violated here is your freedom of choice, and every woman's freedom of choice, too. If abortion was legal, a woman would have a choice – and so would you. You could feel free not to do it because someone else would. But the way it is, you're trapped. Women are trapped. Women are victims, and so are you."²⁶⁴

²⁶³ *Rules*, p. 188

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 518, emphasis in original.

Here Larch makes it clear that, in his view, it is the “system,” i.e., the government, the state, the law, that has taken away both women’s freedom of choice and Homer’s. Yet, ethically compelling as Larch’s stance may be, it ultimately is not and cannot be sound. The trap he speaks of applies only to Larch himself; he chose for himself to study medicine, and to specialize in obstetrics; as such, he chose to learn about dilatation and curettage (the procedure he uses to abort unwanted babies). It is that knowledge, knowledge he *chose* to acquire, that placed him in the same trap he feels women have been caught in. Yet Larch incontrovertibly decided of his own accord that Homer should learn medicine, and further, that he should not only learn how to bring children into the world but also how to abort them. As such, though it is clear throughout the book just who Larch is doing all of this for, namely the unwanted orphans he is faced with every day, Larch robs Homer of his freedom of choice with regard to an essential and life-changing decision.²⁶⁵

As for Homer himself, it is more rewarding for the present to concentrate on his choices beyond whether or not to perform abortions, i.e., those choices where he has a freer hand. Aside from his connection to Dr. Larch, his relationships with Candy and Wally are doubtless the most pivotal in his life. These relationships are also essential in that they yield us the best insights into Homer’s nature. For example, though Homer is in love with Candy from the first time he lays eyes on her, he will not permit himself to make any advances out of loyalty to Wally; it is only when his feelings become obvious to Candy that he is forced to admit what he feels. This is both honest and honorable behavior.

When Wally is shot down and presumed dead, matters very realistically become anything but clear. Though Homer truly loved Wally as a friend, his apparent death finally clears the way for an open and honest relationship with Candy. Yet after Wally has been missing for a month, Candy herself is still not convinced he’s dead; it is Homer who makes the decision for them both, making love to Candy in the cider house, which ultimately results in Candy’s giving birth to their son Angel. Once they realize Candy is pregnant, this presents the young couple with a new and very serious dilemma:

“You want me to have the baby?” Candy asked him.

“I want you to have our baby,” said Homer Wells. “And after the baby’s born, and you’re both recovered, we’ll come back here. We’ll tell your dad, and Olive – or we’ll write them – that we’ve fallen in love, and that we’ve gotten married.”

“And that we conceived a child before we did any of that?” Candy asked.

“[...] We’ll say the baby is adopted,” he said. “We’ll say we felt a further obligation – to the orphanage. I do feel that, in a way, anyway,” he said.

²⁶⁵ Elke Weiß comes to the same conclusion, though she feels the true problem is not Larch’s influence but Homer’s fundamental ambivalence on the issue. Cf. Weiß, p. 155

"Our baby is adopted?" Candy asked. "So we have a baby who thinks it's an orphan?"

"No," Homer said. "We have our own baby, and it knows it's all ours. We just say it's adopted – just for Olive's sake, and just for a while."

"That's lying," Candy said.

"Right," said Homer Wells. "That's lying for a while."

"Maybe – when we came back, with the baby – maybe we wouldn't have to say it was adopted. Maybe we could tell the truth, then," Candy said.

"Maybe," Homer said.²⁶⁶

This exchange is revealing in that, first of all, it shows the motivations for Candy's and Homer's willingness to lie to ostensibly be their concern for Wally's mother, while in reality they (and Candy in particular) simply can't imagine telling Olive, who in the meantime is also practically a mother to both of them, the truth. It further shows that Homer, like his mentor Larch, has few qualms about lying for what he sees as a good cause. He reflects:

What is all this worrying about lying? he wondered [...] Was it true that Wilbur Larch had no memory of Homer's mother? Was it true that Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna had no memory of his mother, either? Maybe it was true, but Homer Wells would never have blamed them if they had lied; they would have lied only to protect him.

[...]

If Homer Wells had been an amateur historian, he would have been as much of a revisionist as Wilbur Larch – he would have tried to make everything come out all right in the end. Homer Wells, who always said to Wilbur Larch that *he* (Larch) was the doctor, was more of a doctor than he knew.²⁶⁷

Homer's further decisions after Wally's miraculous return seem similarly tainted: unable to tell Olive or Candy's father Ray the truth, he claims that he chose to adopt a baby boy, and Candy had volunteered to help him raise it. And when Wally returns and, barely a month later, he and Candy are married, neither Homer nor Candy is strong enough to either reveal the truth or to stop being lovers. In the *Bildungsroman* tradition of the protagonist's growth through and despite setbacks, we can see the fifteen years he spends lying to his child, betraying his best friend, and being Candy's lover, as a setback of tremendous proportions.

Lest we be too quick to judge Homer, we should recall that he was sharing a house with the woman he loved and the mother of his child. Also, in renegeing on his and Candy's vow that their child should never think it is adopted, he is hardly being selfish. Larch, whom he writes to

²⁶⁶ *Rules*, pp. 408-09

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 409. Here Irving refers to the fictional life stories of the orphans at St. Cloud's that Larch occasionally writes, discussed under the theme "Playing God" below. Irving also skillfully injects a play on words here; while Homer and Larch often do dispute whether Homer is to become a doctor or not – "who is the doctor" – , when our narrator claims that Homer is "more of a doctor than he knew," he is of course referring to the verb "to doctor" in the sense of "to manipulate," as for example "spin doctors" do in the realm of politics. Both Larch and Homer would seem adept at this form of "doctoring."

for advice, correctly points out that, if Homer tells Angel he isn't adopted, he will be doing it for his own sake, not for his son's. Homer takes this to heart, and remains silent.

Further, Melony's arrival at the orchard seems to bring Homer back to his senses; while he may have comforted himself for the last decade-and-a-half that what he and Candy were doing was what was best for everyone, Melony sums it up succinctly:

"I somehow thought you'd end up doin' somethin' better than ballin' a poor cripple's wife and pretendin' your child ain't your own," Melony said to Homer Wells. "You of all people – an orphan," she reminded him.

"It's not quite like that," he started to tell her, but she shook her huge head and looked away from him.

"I got eyes," Melony said. "I can see what it's like – and it's *shit*. It's ordinary, middle-class shit – bein' unfaithful and lyin' to the kids. You of all people!" Melony said.²⁶⁸

Melony's words confront Homer with the basic dishonesty of what he and Candy are doing; he tries to convince Candy they need to tell everyone the truth about everything. Far from the equivocation of the past fifteen years, we see a new frankness in his language:

"I love you, but we're becoming bad people," he said.

She [Candy] stamped her foot. "We're *not* bad people!" she cried. "We're trying to do the right thing, we're trying not to hurt anybody!"

"We're doing the wrong thing," said Homer Wells. "It's time to do everything right."²⁶⁹

The discovery of Rose Rose's incestuous pregnancy and Larch's death, following in rapid succession, serve as further impetus for Homer to break out of the lie he's been living. Granted, by assuming the fictional identity of Dr. Fuzzy Stone, Homer is switching from one lie to another, yet the two untruths are nearly diametrically opposed in their motivations and effects: Homer and Candy have lived a lie for years, initially for the sake of Wally's mother, but later – after both Olive and Ray have passed away – simply because they can no longer imagine telling Wally the truth. Their lie, and their secret liaisons, are ultimately for their own protection and gratification. Yet the fiction spun for Homer Wells by Wilbur Larch is a wholly selfless one; it is a lie told for the sake of countless orphans and desperate women with nowhere else to go. While the convergence of events allowing Homer to "simply" change identities does stretch the imagination, Elke Weiß does not give the story arc due credit when she calls it a *deus ex*

²⁶⁸ *Rules*, p. 497

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 501

machina that wipes away all troubles²⁷⁰; in fact, she is wrong on both counts. This was no spontaneous act of God, but rather represents the fruits of the diligent, methodical and yearlong efforts of a mere mortal, Dr. Wilbur Larch. And though the choice to ultimately “do the right thing” may be predictable, it is no less impressive in its scope: Homer’s choosing *for* St. Cloud’s means choosing *against* a life in Ocean View, a life with Candy and their son; in effect it means following in the grim and thankless footsteps of his progenitor. And, as Larch surely realized before him, taking on the mantle of “the doctor” at St. Cloud’s, as very few people can be entrusted to do *all* of the Lord’s work there, means a commitment for life. Cognizant of this fact, Homer nonetheless chooses a life of duty.

In turning to Candy, it should be emphasized from the outset that Irving creates her as not only a natural beauty but also a truly good young woman: open, friendly, not arrogant and (thanks largely to the influence of her tinkerer father) not afraid of hard work. At the point she enters the story she is a loving and devoted girlfriend to Wally, whom she very much intends to marry when they’re both ready, and a caring daughter both to her own father and, in a sense, to Olive; no doubt Candy’s growing up without a mother of her own further complicates her feelings towards the woman who everyone fully expects to become her mother-in-law.

That being said, Candy would not seem to make the same development to be seen with regard to Homer; it is very nearly the case that she regresses. When we meet Wally and Candy, the two young lovers are in an unfortunate situation, Candy’s pregnancy threatening to throw a wrench in their plans: Wally would finish college, and Candy could also finish college if she chose to, before they married; a baby conceived out of wedlock was not part of the plan. Yet both know they want to marry, and neither of the two either desperately needs their education – as they both plan to continue working at the Worthington family orchard – or lacks the means to care for a baby, both Candy’s father and Wally’s family being comfortably affluent. Yet when, even after they’ve driven all the way to St. Cloud’s, Wally emphasizes to Candy that they do *not* have to go through with the abortion if she doesn’t want to, Candy decides to have it, as it is “not the time for us to have a baby,” the narrator adding that Candy “was more practical than Wally Worthington, and she had her father’s stubbornness when her mind was made up; she was no waffler.”²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Weiß, p. 172. Likely what bothers Weiß is how little commentary there is on this pivotal life choice; it is massively downplayed. Yet this carries on a tradition for Irving; if we go back to *The Hotel New Hampshire* and to *Garp*, we note that very little is “said” (= written) about tragedies, and there is comparatively little mourning. Yet this lack of mourning has a reverse effect of internalizing the loss on the part of the reader, likely a subconscious need to compensate.

²⁷¹ *Rules*, p. 184

If we take this statement at face value, then choosing between Wally and Homer must have represented the most difficult decision of Candy's life, as time and again she is unable to do so, telling Homer only that they must "wait and see." She still has made no choice when Wally goes off to the war; and when he has been shot down and is missing, a part of her wants to believe he is still alive, while another is increasingly convinced he is dead: she is torn, and it is Homer who decides for the both of them to move on and allow themselves to make love.

When she finds she is pregnant with Homer's baby, Candy lets him decide what to do, her role largely a passive one. And, when they receive the news that Wally is alive and Homer wants to know how Candy feels, she tells him:

"I won't know until I see him," Candy said honestly.

"What will you know then?" Homer asked.

"If I love him, or you, or both of you," she said. "Or else I won't know any more than I know now."

"It's always wait and see, isn't it?" Homer asked.²⁷²

To some extent, Candy's constant indecision is mitigated by contingency. Wally is already coming home a cripple, and in a letter to her he makes it plain he hopes she'll still want to marry him. And before Wally is strong enough to be transported home, his mother dies of cancer; given that his father had died of Alzheimer's only three years earlier, had Candy left him for Homer, Wally would have essentially been left an orphan and a cripple.

At the same time, however, contingency is also damning as regards Candy and Homer's concealing the truth for the next fifteen years. Though losing his mother was surely a great blow to Wally, her death, coupled with the accidental death of Ray Kendall in the same year, surely could have also freed them to tell the truth; as Angel was still a baby, ultimately it was only Wally to whom they had to tell the truth. But Candy loves both Wally and Homer, and doesn't want to lose either of them, or risk being parted from her son.

It is fascinating that, in a novel so clearly focused on the choices women are *not* allowed to make for themselves and the freedoms they do *not* possess, the female character with arguably the most freedom of choice (certainly in comparison with Melony or, even more extremely, with Rose Rose²⁷³) is the least decisive. Even more so, she feels free to dictate her own rules to Homer: that, whether she ends up with him or Wally, she and Homer will always

²⁷² *Rules*, p. 440

²⁷³ Indeed, the financially poor orphan Melony has the initiative and determination to run away from the orphanage, hitchhike, steal and scrape her way through life before acquiring a steady job and (for her part) living loyally with a steady partner. Rose Rose, poor, black and uneducated, finds the courage to kill her own abusive father before running away (with a baby girl in tow) to make it on her own. These examples of female courage, far more in keeping with Irving's depictions of women, put Candy in a comparatively poor light.

share their son; and later, once she's married Wally, that they will immediately stop making love if they are ever caught, and that, should she ever become pregnant, Homer will give her an abortion. And, following Melony's spontaneous appearance at the orchard, it is Homer who finally forces Candy's hand; it is he who decides they will *both* tell the truth. Though Candy does much to redeem her character by displaying the courage and determination to help rescue Rose Rose and her baby – Candy goes to the cider house alone to take them away from Rose's father – it can only provide so much ballast to her general pattern of indecision and compromise.

Playing God

In his amateur history of the town of St. Cloud's, which we are provided excerpts from throughout the novel, Wilbur Larch quite candidly states:

"Here in St. Cloud's," Dr. Larch wrote, "I have been given the choice of playing God or leaving practically everything up to chance. It is my experience that practically everything is left up to chance much of the time; men who believe in good and evil, and who believe that good should win, should watch for those moments where it is possible to play God – we should seize those moments. There won't be many."²⁷⁴

Over the course of the story, not only Wilbur Larch but also Homer, Candy, and even Mr. Rose play God to greater and lesser extents. Though Larch and Homer play God in the very tangible form of providing abortions, which is to say utilizing a venue which is normally the preserve of doctors, all of the characters mentioned above play God by telling lies, or, if you will, by creating *fictions*.

Clearly the grandmaster of spinning fictions in *Rules* is Dr. Wilbur Larch. Here it is interesting to see that, in the very rare cases where an orphan dies (as Fuzzy Stone does), the otherwise impeccable Larch indulges in writing out happy ends for them and including them in his *A Brief History of St. Cloud's*; this is not done with any ulterior motive beyond writing out the lives beyond the orphanage he wishes they had had. In the specific case of Homer Wells and his ties to (ultimately Dr.) Fuzzy Stone, we can see that Larch's fictions can have effects that are as calculated as they are concrete.

Having himself served in World War One and quite aware of the risks wars of all kinds pose for young men, Larch takes great pains to include in his annals – rewriting entire sections so as to create a plausible patient history dating back to Homer's earliest childhood – mention of the "fact" that Homer has a weak heart, thus making him ineligible for military service of any kind. He never tells Homer about his "condition," both for fear of *truly* harming his heart by

²⁷⁴ *Rules*, p. 97

making him worry about a non-existent defect and because, given the medical and anatomical expertise Larch himself has passed on to him, Homer is practically impossible to fool. Though it is never expressly stated in the text, it goes without saying that Homer, who was of the right age, might easily have been drafted to serve in World War Two and, had this come to pass, Larch's fiction might very well have saved him from a fate similar to or even worse than that of Wally (who, it should be recalled, volunteered to serve).

As for Homer's endeavors at creating fictions of his own – or more correctly, his reasons for doing so –, they, like his general sense of morality, of right and wrong, seem clear at first, are later diluted and debased by worries about propriety, and are finally redeemed. When the young Homer is the first to realize Fuzzy Stone is missing, Larch explains that Fuzzy's lungs just weren't strong enough, and he finally died:

“What are you going to tell the little ones?” Homer asked Dr. Larch.

Wilbur Larch looked at Homer; God, how he loved what he saw! [...] “What do you think I should say, Homer?” Dr. Larch asked.

It was Homer's first decision as an adult. He thought about it very carefully. In 193_, he was almost sixteen. He was beginning the process of learning how to be a doctor at a time when most boys his age were learning how to drive a car. Homer had not yet learned how to drive a car; Wilbur Larch had never learned how to drive a car.

“I think,” said Homer Wells, “that you should tell the little ones what you usually tell them. You should tell them that Fuzzy has been adopted.”²⁷⁵

As such, Homer's first fiction, just as his mentor's²⁷⁶, is a benevolent and selfless act. Unfortunately the fictions he and Candy later create to hide the truth of Angel's conception are hardly so noble, and certainly do harm to others: Olive Worthington, Ray Kendall and Wally, each in his or her own way, drop hints to Candy and Homer that they know more than they've been told, and resent their dishonesty. When the young Angel, afraid that Rose Rose's father may be beating her, comes to Wally, Homer and Candy for advice, Wally remarks: “‘Good thing we got all that straightened out,’ ... ‘Good thing we're all such experts at the truth,’ he said as Candy got up from the table to clear her dishes. Homer Wells kept sitting where he was.”²⁷⁷ Perhaps even more painful are Olive's words to Homer shortly before her death. On heavy medication for the cancer that would claim her, she mistakes Homer for Wally (whom she won't live long enough to see return):

²⁷⁵ *Rules*, p. 111 Here Homer is referring to Larch's tradition of announcing to all of the children, just before bedtime, when someone has (truly) been adopted. Note as well that Irving, throughout the story, never sets fixed years, only decades.

²⁷⁶ Larch's first fiction was also his first abortion, namely the young girl who had been raped by her own father, and whom Larch rescued from “off Harrison.”

²⁷⁷ *Rules*, p. 541

To Homer, Olive said, "He's an orphan."

"Who is?" Homer asked.

"He is," she said. "Don't you forget how needy an orphan is. He'll take everything. He's come from having nothing – once he sees what he can have, he'll take everything he sees. My son," Olive said, "don't blame anyone. Blame will kill you."²⁷⁸

Mr. Rose, who indeed not only beats, but also cuts and rapes his own daughter, creates a fiction of his own. Following shortly after the abortion Rose Rose receives from Homer Wells, she stabs her father in the stomach, a wound that will slowly kill him without medical attention, which Mr. Rose does not seek. Instead he dips his own knife blade in the blood and instructs Homer and his picking crew what to tell the police: that he was so distraught at his daughter running away from home that he committed suicide.

By including Mr. Rose's fiction close to novel's end, Irving would seem to complete a balanced portrayal of both the potential power of playing God which deftly avoids the pitfalls of easy categorization: everyone plays God to a greater or lesser extent, and for noble or ignoble reasons. Larch's manipulations, his lies about Homer's heart and about "Doctor" Fuzzy Stone's career and Homer's untimely demise, are all "told" with the good of others in mind. Homer, who showed such promise at St. Cloud's, falls into the more convenient (and more selfish) fictions prevalent in "polite society"; it is only by subscribing to Larch's grand fabrication, at a terrible cost to his own freedom, that Homer regains or first truly develops²⁷⁹ his own noble character. The lies he and Candy perpetuate for over fifteen years are proof that even basically good and true people can become trapped by the lies they surround themselves with; while the reprehensible Mr. Rose, who has visited monstrous acts on his own daughter for who knows how many years, nonetheless finds a way to add at least a spark of decency to his death, perhaps as a gesture of atonement for the wrong he knows he has done.

Propriety vs. Decency

Though the word is not mentioned once in the entire novel, propriety is clearly an underlying and prevalent theme. The first clue to its importance for the novel comes even before the first page, where Irving includes two short epigraphs, the first of which reads:

²⁷⁸ *Rules*, p. 465

²⁷⁹ For more on this development, please refer to the discussion of Homer's progression as *Bildungsheld* in the *Bildungsroman* section of this chapter.

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last.

– Charlotte Brontë, 1847

Before addressing the significance of propriety for *Rules*, it is imperative to distinguish between propriety and decency. The former is a deceitful guide, largely because it is intertwined with the dictates of (the respective) society's mores, and as such can change with time and tide. Further, when it proves irreconcilable with social realities, this construct can result in immoral choices being made so as not to break taboos; when this occurs, we may speak of propriety as "faux decency." The fate of Mrs. Eames, Wilbur Larch's first and last sexual partner, is demonstrative of faux decency's power and reach: though Mrs. Eames is prepared to prostitute her body, she does so in a city other than the one she lives in, so as to avoid social stigmatization. And, when she discovers she is pregnant and can find no safe means of acquiring an abortion, she drinks an ultimately lethal amount of "French Lunar Solution," itself a poison and aborticide euphemistically labeled so as to be legally available over the counter. Considerations of what his fellow doctors would think of him, i.e., of the expectations of his immediate social surroundings, keep Larch from helping Mrs. Eames' daughter; forced to resort to other means to end her pregnancy, she, too, dies from the resultant damage done to her body.

Nor are such problems the sole province of "fallen women"; Candy's decision to ultimately go through with her abortion is essentially due to her not wanting to spoil her and Wally's "perfect" plans, i.e., not wanting to have to admit they conceived a child out of wedlock and to marry sooner than planned. When comparing Candy's indecision and readiness to enter immoral and dishonest compromises to the straightforward behavior of Melony and Rose Rose, we see that "decency" in the form of convention and expectations bind her far more than her two counterparts. If we consider the further example of the fabrication surrounding Angel's provenance and the *ménage à trois* it creates and propagates for fifteen years, we see that the faux decency necessitated by "keeping up appearances" results in a willingness to accept immoral acts, developments and situations (sometimes for years on end) and an unwillingness to admit uncomfortable truths. It is especially interesting to note that Homer, who grew up outside of society, seems to have had the most noble instincts *before* entering it, which he rediscovers upon his decision to effectively leave it, his encounters with the notion of "propriety" having distanced him from true decency.

To turn for a moment to the other side of the coin, where in the novel do we see true decency? While it has been claimed²⁸⁰ that *Rules* is not as life-affirming as is Irving's wont, there is ample evidence of decency, in some cases from the most unlikely sources. Whether one supports the pro-choice stance or not, it is clear that Wilbur Larch and the two nurses who support him are *motivated by* an extraordinary sense of decency, engaging themselves in a lonely, thankless and dangerous occupation, for decades, for the sake of both mothers and children. Carrying their torch, not only Homer Wells *cum* Fuzzy Stone but also Nurse Caroline, whom Homer and Candy befriended as nurse's aides, come to St. Cloud's to continue the Lord's work.

Olive Worthington shows a tremendous capacity for decency in the form of both charity and forgiveness in effectively adopting Homer, and in never demanding the truth from him or Candy. The thuggish Melony, who could never hope to compete with Candy for Homer's heart, nonetheless displays her inner greatness both by not revealing Homer's secret, so obvious to her, and at the same time by confronting him in no uncertain terms with the lie he has been living. Finally, Mr. Rose, though he surely perpetrated crimes that damaged his daughter for life, was not wholly without decency, covering up his stabbing as a suicide so that at least his death would not do her further harm.

Rules shows the shortcomings of propriety as a guide for our actions, bound as it invariably is by conflicting obligations and mixed motivations, e.g. covering up the truth about Angel, ostensibly done so as to ensure no one was hurt, ultimately seems to have been done much more for the benefit of Homer and Candy, who never had to admit their all too human behavior and its consequences. Had they done so, their lives and that of their son inarguably would have been very different ones, whether better or worse. The decency that drives Larch and finally Homer is, in contrast, not bound by social conventions or muddled attempts to live up to what they believe others expect of them; it is an unalloyed, personal choice to do the right thing, often at great personal cost, and based solely on what *they* expect of themselves.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism²⁸¹ walks hand in hand with true decency, and is often a guide to arriving at it. In asking what we should do, we need only first know what we *can* do, and what will be the probable good or harm of our actions. Larch's early medical career provides a dramatic

²⁸⁰ Campbell, p. 123

²⁸¹ Here I am referring broadly to the philosophical school of John Stuart Mill et al., which in its most basic iteration posits that we should take those actions likely to maximize the good and minimize the harm for the most people.

illustration of his developing utilitarianism; it is simultaneously heroic and very human. Here we should recall that, after being “branded” (though never directly or openly criticized) for performing abortions, Larch responds in a very plausible way: rather than staying in Boston, where he would have been inundated with women seeking abortions, Larch, who himself recognizes that he can’t withstand such stress without “burning out,” first tries to flee responsibility, to return to his hometown of Portland. Yet here he finds that his reputation precedes him, and is subjected to the disdain and hypocrisies of the more moneyed classes, his combined experiences in Boston and at home steeling him for his work in St. Cloud’s, which from the outset is based on the utilitarian approach of simply giving the women who come to him what they want: an orphan or an abortion.

Nor does Larch’s dedication wane; as he grows older, Larch even goes so far as to impress the importance of utilitarianism, of being “of use” as he puts it, on Homer Wells from a very early age. And Homer puts every effort into living up to his mentor’s demands; as the narrator informs us, “For Homer Wells, this was easy. *Of use*, he felt, was all that an orphan was born to be.”²⁸² Yet, when Homer balks at the idea of learning how to perform abortions, and at being present when Larch performs them, for the first time the two find themselves at odds with one another, the doctor informing his “apprentice” that he is “not permitted to hide not permitted to look away.”²⁸³

As for Larch himself, once he has crafted his plans for Fuzzy Stone and Homer, he concentrates his energies on staving off old age, on holding on to his energy so as to keep performing his duties until his successor steps up: “Where had the time gone? The problem is that I have to *last*, he thought. He could rewrite history but he couldn’t touch time; dates were fixed; time marched at its own pace. ... I have to last until Fuzzy is qualified to replace me, thought Wilbur Larch.”²⁸⁴ Later, he simply thinks to himself: “From now on ... let everything I do be for a reason. Let me make no wasted moves.”²⁸⁵

In the meantime Homer Wells, far from St. Cloud’s and the role Wilbur Larch has created for him, revels in the constant processes of growth at work and in interplay throughout the orchard, and at how very different his new home is from the orphanage:

At St. Cloud’s, growth was unwanted even when it was delivered – and the process of birth was often interrupted. Now he was engaged in the business of growing things. What he loved about the life at Ocean View was how everything was of use and that everything was wanted.²⁸⁶

²⁸² *Rules*, p. 35

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 188

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 309

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 341

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243

Though, for over fifteen years, Homer entertains the illusion that he can escape the field Larch initiated him into, the mounting crisis at St. Cloud's affords Wilbur Larch no such luxuries: he desperately needs Homer to take his place, as he knows no one else will. Nurse Caroline²⁸⁷ knows this, too, and has no qualms about reminding Homer of his responsibilities:

"Don't be a hypocrite," she began. "I hope you recall how vehemently you were always telling me to leave Cape Kenneth, that my services were more needed here – and you were right. And do you think your services aren't needed here, or that they aren't needed right now? Do you think the apples can't grow without you? Just who do you think the board's going to replace him with if you don't step forward? One of the usual cowards who does what he's told, one of your typically careful, mousy, medical men – a little law-abiding citizen who will be of absolutely NO USE!"²⁸⁸

Ultimately, however, it is Homer Wells who must decide for himself what the right thing to do is. After having performed an abortion for Rose Rose, and after having realized that, if he now refused to do the same for others, he truly *would* be a hypocrite, he knows what he has to do. Dwelling for a moment on the life he is giving up, he sees what his priority has to be: "At times, he admitted, he had been very happy in the apple business. He knew what Larch would have told him: that his happiness was not the point, or that it wasn't as important as his usefulness."²⁸⁹ Thus Homer, who has fought so long for a life of his own, and for his own happiness, ultimately adopts the same philosophy as his mentor before him, namely that of putting the wellbeing of others before his own desires.

The Critical Response to The Cider House Rules

Though *The Cider House Rules* is among Irving's best-received novels, it has nonetheless received its fair share of criticism. Harter and Thompson, for example, make the very pointed remark that "In *Cider House*, however, the 'lunacy and sorrow' [a recurring trope in *Garp*] have been reduced to eccentricity and sadness. 'Without contraries there is no progression,' William Blake would say; if Larch is God the Father, nowhere in the novel can one find his cosmic opposition."²⁹⁰ And there is certainly some truth to what they say; Larch is assigned no *bête noire* in the novel; or, more correctly, none of his caliber. Yet their criticism

²⁸⁷ Nurse Caroline, whom Homer and Candy get to know during their volunteer work at Cape Kenneth Hospital, is not only an outspoken socialist; she also helps women to obtain illegal abortions. In her function as a strong if unconventional woman, she is reminiscent of both Jenny Fields and Susie the Bear.

²⁸⁸ *Rules*, p. 532

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 561

²⁹⁰ Harter & Thompson, p. 143

seems to ignore two aspects, one factual and one related to storytelling. Firstly, from his very first meeting with the new members of the board of trustees, Dr. Gingrich and Mrs. Goodhall, Larch recognizes them for what they are: the enemy. It is not that they know or even suspect that Larch performs abortions; they see nothing more than the age of Larch and his loyal nurses, and want to replace them. It is very much to Irving's credit that the plot device he introduces, the greatest threat to Larch and his work, is not a dyed-in-the-wool pro-lifer, nor (perhaps more realistically) a woman Larch turned away (which he did whenever the pregnancy was too far advanced) turning him in to the authorities. Instead, somewhat reminiscent of the extremists Irving has introduced in the past, Larch's life's work is essentially threatened by a pair of clueless but righteous *do-gooders*. As the narrator tells us during Larch's first meeting with Gingrich and Goodhall:

"The older members of the board – all men, all as elderly as Larch – were intimidated by this new man who spoke in whispers and by this new woman who was so loud. In tandem, they seemed so sure of themselves; they viewed their new roles on the board not as learning experiences, or even as an introduction to orphanage life, but as opportunities for taking charge."²⁹¹

The fact is, then, that Larch does have a (double) counterpart. Secondly, not only is it more engaging from a story perspective that Larch's only visible opponents not want to remove him on moral grounds, but simply because he is too old for their tastes; it further emphasizes how very alone Larch and his nurses are; for the women in need of their help, they represent a bastion. Larch is given no further visible or tangible enemy, because his enemy is the *system*, by which I mean not only the law of the time making abortions illegal, but also the scorn Larch sensed from his fellow doctors in Boston, and the travesties perpetrated "off Harrison." Had Irving given Larch a tangible, physical opponent more imposing than Gingrich and Goodhall,²⁹² he would have necessarily undone the feeling he so successfully conveys in the novel that it is, in a sense, Larch (and later Fuzzy Stone) against the world.

Harter & Thompson are further of the opinion, echoed and expanded on by Elke Weiß, that *Rules* offers far less of Irving's trademark tragicomic elements than its predecessors:

A consistent element in all of Irving's previous fiction has been a lurking violence, not as an exception to normal existence but as its hallmark: "When I write a novel (he has said), I believe that it's necessary to have as much damage in it as I can imagine. It's necessary to spill both as much blood as I can and to retrieve as many souls as I can." Best symbolized by the ubiquitous "undertoad" in *Garp*, this constant presence of unpredictable danger has been a distinguishing feature of his

²⁹¹ *Rules*, p. 265

²⁹² We should bear in mind, however, that without Gingrich and Goodhall's growing obsession with replacing Larch, a different solution than the invention of Fuzzy Stone might have been found; i.e., for better or worse, the petty bureaucracy represented by the two board members may well have shaped Homer Wells' fate.

fiction and the source of critical controversy. But even those appalled by his use of violence have recognized it as the source of great *energy* in his fiction [...]²⁹³

This is certainly a valid claim. *The Cider House Rules* is a departure from the random violence seen in *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*. There are two likely explanations for this, one being that, in *Rules*, Irving has sought to write much closer to the Dickensian model, a thesis supported by several other elements, which will be addressed in the *Bildungsroman* discussion at the end of this chapter. The Victorian *Bildungsroman* does not share the same degree of contingency as do most of Irving's novels.

Alternately, story elements may very well have influenced Irving's decision. Unlike T.S. Garp or the Berry family, the line of work and setting Wilbur Larch has chosen for himself, and which Homer Wells seeks so desperately to escape, are by their very nature quite grim. What is more, the entire issue of unwanted pregnancies does great *spiritual* violence to the mothers, the orphans, and the medical staff involved. It is worth noting that the only major *physical* harm done the characters is only possible by their own free will; Wally's paralysis and sterility, tragic though they may be, might never have come to pass had he not volunteered to join the Army Air Corps. And Candy's father Ray, always the tinkerer, also does his part for the war effort by helping the Navy with torpedo design. Unbelievably, he takes one of the torpedoes home and experiments with how to improve it, ultimately blowing up himself and his entire house (Candy thankfully not being home at the time). Unwanted pregnancies produce enough pain in the world; for those who seek further risk in *The Cider House Rules*, they find it in ample store.

Yet, aside from the narrative elements and content of the novel, critics have also been quick to find fault with its message and intent. In a 1985 interview, Irving stated: "I honestly believe that this book is very different from anything I've ever written...It is a book with a polemic."²⁹⁴ Further, just following the book's release, he claimed that, though he had not set out to write a book about abortion, he felt that "if this book can contribute anything to what I consider the correct political vision on that issue, all the better."²⁹⁵ In short, Harter & Thompson are concerned by the fact that, though Irving has repeatedly insisted he set out to write a story about an orphan first, and stumbled onto the abortion issue later,²⁹⁶ the novel is clearly pro-choice, and that the nuances of the debate are not meaningfully explored.

²⁹³ Harter & Thompson, p. 143, Cf. Weiß, pp. 177-80

²⁹⁴ USA Today, 23 May 1985, 1D, cited in Harter & Thompson, p. 126

²⁹⁵ Harter & Thompson, p. 133

²⁹⁶ Irving continued to make this claim much later on. Harter & Thompson wrote their book on Irving in 1986; Irving repeated this version of the novel's development in a 1997 interview for Mother Jones. Mother Jones, May/June 1997, pp. 2-3

Elke Weiß also takes issue with the novel's claim to include a polemic, though her own criticisms are both of a slightly different and far more complex nature. Harter & Thompson make reference to Irving's self-proclaimed goals to "entertain and instruct"; Weiß does so as well, pointing out that the classic *prodesse et delectare* ("be useful and entertain") approach is very much in keeping with the writings of Dickens, Irving's role model, and the Victorian novel in general. And, just as Dickens' novels did, *Rules* runs the risk of being labeled "entertainment for the masses." Further, she feels that one of the key differences between this and previous Irving novels is the fact that, whereas in its predecessors, debates are often carried out in the form of concrete actions, here there is much more discussion of the abortion debate; as she refers to it, drawing on Wayne C. Booth's terminology, there is much more "telling" than "showing." As a result, the book has comparatively little narrative momentum; there is less contingency, and the progression of the plot is more predictable.²⁹⁷

There is certainly some truth to this claim; namely that, if we compare *Rules* with (say) *Garp* or *The Hotel New Hampshire*, the actors in the previous two novels were far more dynamic in acting out and acting on what they felt was right: we only need consider the Ellen Jamesians' brutal self-mutilation, Garp's chasing down speeders on foot, or the Viennese radicals' bloody plans to change the world. Such dynamism would seem to be missing in *Rules*. Yet I would argue that this simultaneously lends a certain quality of reality, of concreteness to the novel and to the work Larch does. In his first meeting with the new board members, Larch consults his calendar: "...he had two abortions to perform the next day, and three 'probables' near the end of the week. There were always those who just showed up, too."²⁹⁸ Unlike the one-time, life-changing decisions of the Ellen Jamesians or the radicals, and also unlike the well-meant but quixotic efforts of Garp to protect his children, the subject of debate in *Rules* is Larch's *calling*; it is his day-to-day work. The fact that he willingly chooses to perform such a grim and thankless service for decades, literally doing so up to the day of his death, is inarguably less dynamic, but also lends a poignancy to Larch's "unsung" work very much in contrast to the actions of his counterparts.

Weiß moves on to criticize a number of further points centering on the handling of the abortion debate in the novel, two of her chief complaints being that the nuances of the debate for both Homer and Dr. Larch are never satisfactorily explored, their positions remaining too black-and-white until the point of Homer's sudden "conversion"; and that the debate, which would seem so central to the book, effectively disappears for a period of fifteen years. She attributes

²⁹⁷ Weiß, p. 148

²⁹⁸ *Rules*, p. 267

the latter weakness to Irving's inability to wholly let go of his fabulatory penchant in order to tell a "socially realistic" story.²⁹⁹

To elaborate, Weiß feels the abortion debate is forced into the background by the Homer-Candy-Wally love triangle, which is hard to dispute. Further, said love triangle contains a great deal of potential for conflict, which could in turn counter the previously mentioned lack of dynamism. But this never comes to pass; there is no explosion of released emotions, no shocking resolution: the three partners quietly live a lie for a decade and a half, at which point Homer decides to tell his son the whole truth, and Candy does the same with Wally. We are not made privy to the contents of either conversation, and soon afterwards Homer quietly leaves for St. Cloud's, where we are informed his son often drives down to visit and where Wally and Candy, now a happy and mutually faithful couple, visit every Christmas. As Weiß states: "Es ist, als ob ein *deus ex machina* alle Schwierigkeiten beiseite gewischt habe. Die *ménage à trois* löst sich in Wohlgefallen auf; der Regelbruch ist gekittet, die gesellschaftlichen Normen sind wieder wirksam."³⁰⁰

While there is certainly merit to her criticisms, it is perhaps worthwhile to perform a short experiment and to ask ourselves how the novel would have looked had these perceived "weaknesses" been removed. Presumably the pro-choice/pro-life debate would have been revisited and rehashed in various constellations to demonstrate just how problematic it truly is. And, as Homer was physically absent from St. Cloud's for over fifteen years, this could realistically only have been explored through a lengthy exchange of letters between himself and Wilbur Larch. Half of these letters would necessarily have been written by Homer, who was desperately trying to put St. Cloud's and the whole issue of abortion behind him, at the same time he was raising a son who thought he was adopted, and while Homer was sleeping with his best friend's wife.

We can quickly see how problematic it would have been to reconcile a deeper exploration³⁰¹ of the abortion issue with Homer's life at Ocean View. Further, not only does the story benefit from its departure from the literally daily confrontation with abortion and its effects, but this also represents a decidedly realistic step for Homer, who, when he saw the chance to escape St. Cloud's, seized it with both hands. Though ultimately an illusion, these fifteen years are necessary in that Homer needs to believe he truly *can* have a life beyond St. Cloud's, i.e.,

²⁹⁹ Weiß, pp. 159-160 Interestingly, Weiß is glad Irving fails in his attempt to divorce himself from fabulation; she sees fabulatory writing as his chief strength and clearly laments what she considers the dearth of it in this novel.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 172. This can be translated as: "It's as if a *deus ex machina* had swept away all the trouble. The *ménage à trois* is amicably dissolved, the violation glossed over, and social norms become valid once more."

³⁰¹ Elke Weiß does, however, make the excellent observation that we never encounter women in the novel who are deeply divided as to whether or not to have an abortion. Those we do meet have made up their minds; Candy, you will recall, was more certain about the decision than was Wally. Cf. Weiß, p. 158

that he does not *have* to be “of use” in the way Wilbur Larch clearly expects him to be; and, moreover, that the reader has to be able to at least entertain the possibility that Homer can make a life of his own.

Insofar as Homer’s change of heart at novel’s end is concerned, Weiß not only finds it unconvincing, but further sees the resolution of events in Ocean View as a triumph of good over evil without serious consequences for any of the players. Yet his decision is not so far-fetched as it would seem, nor does it come as a bolt from the blue. When Homer realizes the situation Rose Rose is in, and that she wants an abortion, his first choice and first course of action is to call St. Cloud’s, which is when he learns of Larch’s death. Once he has overcome his initial shock, he wrestles with his conscience; when he realizes that, if it were Melony who needed an abortion, he would help her, then he sees that he must also help Rose Rose; and, by extension, he should not refuse to help any woman³⁰² wanting an abortion. Needless to say, the jump from deciding to help Rose Rose to committing himself to performing abortions on a regular basis is not a self-explanatory one; yet, given Homer’s specific background, given not only his intimate contact with both deliveries and abortions, and above all, the mantra he was indoctrinated with since early childhood to be “of use,” his decision becomes a much more plausible one.

It is also misrepresentative to claim that the book’s ending has no consequences. While it is certainly shocking how coolly the narrator relates how Homer leaves, while Candy stays with Wally, this does nothing to change the actual consequences for the characters involved. At story’s end, Rose Rose is out on the road alone with her baby daughter, having murdered her own incestuous father. Candy and Wally move on, but must both accept that, for fifteen years, Candy was unfaithful to him on a regular basis. Homer is parted from his son and, in leaving Ocean View, must effectively say goodbye to both his “Eden” and his “Eve.” Further, having taken up the mantle of his mentor, he faces the same dilemma: by performing a service he feels is needed but which is nonetheless illegal, how can he ever quit? Will there be another Homer Wells to take his stead? For Homer at the very least, the novel’s end and his momentous decision have very grave and very lasting repercussions.

Weiß’s final and most damning point of criticism is that *The Cider House Rules* lacks the tragicomic genius of Irving’s previous novels. Having discussed what she considers the novel’s unsuccessful mixture of instruction and entertainment, she concludes:

Zum zweiten (und meines Erachtens noch ungleich gewichtiger) ist es das Zurücknehmen jener tragikomischen Vision, die Romane wie *The World According to Garp* oder *The Hotel New Hampshire* so nachhaltig geprägt hat – jener Vision,

³⁰² This would seem to be an epiphany – an “eruptive” change – more in keeping with Uhsadel’s pattern for the “female” *Bildungsroman*; cf. Uhsadel, p. 17

die sich aus dem symbiotischen Miteinander von Glück und Unglück, von Gut und Böse, von Harmonie und Gewalt speist. Gewalthaftigkeit war bislang unverwechselbares Kennzeichen Irving'scher Fiktion [...] Stets unterschwellig vorhanden, dann plötzlich und unerwartet hervorbrechend, war Gewalt – und damit das Böse – ein markantes Element im Handlungsgeschehen, das die Lesenden bestürzte und irritierte. Einprägsam versinnbildlicht durch "The Terrible Under Toad" in *The World According to Garp*, trefflich allegorisch in dem Familienhund Sorrow in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, bildete solche Gewalthaftigkeit stets den negativen Gegenpol in einem sonst so positiven Lebensraum. Diese Doppelpoligkeit erschien als Triebfeder des Geschehens und als Ursprung der Irving-typischen tragikomischen Weltschau. Sie zeitigte Effekte, die erstaunlich und überraschend waren und die uns in ihrer Unvorhersehbarkeit faszinierten. *The Cider House Rules* bietet uns solches nicht. [...] Im hier geführten Argument geht es [...] darum, das Unterbleiben einer auf solchen Ingredienzen aufbauenden tragikomischen Perspektive festzustellen und deutlich zu machen, daß es das Fehlen von "lunacy and sorrow" ist, das den Roman „anders“ und zugänglicher macht und damit dem Erzählen eine andere – harmlosere – Qualität gibt. *The Cider House Rules* wird eher zum Beispiel reibungslos unterhaltender Narration – mit, wenn man so will, instruktiver Komponente – als zu jenem beunruhigenden Fabulieren, das *The World According to Garp* oder *The Hotel New Hampshire* kennzeichnete und das unsere postmoderne Verunsicherung letztendlich reflektiert.³⁰³

And she is right – that is, in claiming that *The Cider House Rules* does not convey a sense of the tragicomic as its predecessors did; the reader comes away from the novel with a very different feeling. Yet Weiß's reasoning also draws certain correlations which do not accurately represent the novel or the story it tells. When she equates violence with evil in Irving's storytelling world, she is only right to a certain extent, for two very simple reasons. First of all, the contingency (by which she means random violence, and random loss) whose absence she so laments, by its very nature precludes a one-to-one correlation with evil. *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* have shown us evil expressed as violence and loss, but they have equally (and just as importantly) shown it as something random and without moral or moralistic

³⁰³ Weiß, pp. 177-78, 179-80 Translated: "The second (and in my opinion far more important) change is the fading of the tragicomic vision that so indelibly informed novels like *The World According to Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* – the vision that drew its energy from the symbiotic co-existence of fortune and misfortune, of good and evil, of harmony and violence. To date, violence has been an unmistakable hallmark of Irving's fiction [...] Always lurking under the surface, always ready to spring out unexpectedly, violence – and with it, evil – was a distinct element of the plot, confusing and emotionally reaching the reader. Symbolized to good effect in 'The Terrible Under Toad' in *The World According to Garp*, appropriately allegorically represented in the family dog Sorrow in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, this violence always served as the negative antipole to the otherwise highly positive setting. This bipolarity appeared as the mainspring of the action and as the heart of the tragicomic paradigm typical to Irving. It yielded both surprising and astounding effects that fascinated us with their unpredictability. *The Cider House Rules* offers us nothing of the kind. [...] In the argument brought forward here, the [...] goal is to identify the omission of a tragicomic perspective based on such ingredients, and to make it clear that it is the lack of 'lunacy and sorrow' that makes this novel 'different' and more accessible, and as such gives the storytelling a different – more harmless – quality. *The Cider House Rules* can be seen more as an example of smoothly entertaining narration – including, if you like, instructive components – than of the disquieting fabulation that characterized *The World According to Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* and ultimately reflects our own postmodern sense of insecurity."

elements. Secondly, the relative lack of tragicomic violence is supplemented by a near-saturation with *both* “quiet violence” and “quiet evil,” for which we certainly *can* observe a one-to-one ratio in the novel.

Where do we see quiet evil in *The Cider House Rules*? In Boston, surely, and the brutal abortions offered “off Harrison.” We also see the *effects of* evil of various kinds at St. Cloud’s where, whether they come to have an orphan or an abortion, the women come alone: with the notable exception of Candy, not once do we encounter an expecting mother in the company of her husband or any other loved one. And though the sunny Ocean View orchards would seem idyllic in comparison with St. Cloud’s, they clearly hide their own share of evil among the “decent” workers there: Vernon Lynch, whom Homer initially tries to befriend, is both a racist and wife-beater, his wife Grace often showing up for work with fresh bruises. The evils perpetrated by another farmhand named Herb Fowler are less obvious but far more insidious: Herb, who loves to tell jokes about sex, carries a ready supply of condoms in his pocket, and has the annoying habit of tossing them at people, his catchphrase being that they “keep a fella free.” Though Herb steadfastly denies it, Homer ultimately realizes that he intentionally puts holes in the ends with a thumbtack; what is more, though Homer does not burden his friend with the knowledge, he realizes that Wally and Candy’s unwanted pregnancy was the direct result of using one of Herb’s condoms.³⁰⁴

It was a deliberate sort of hole, perfectly placed, dead center. The thought of Herb Fowler making the holes made Homer Wells shiver. He remembered the first fetus he’d seen, on his way back from the incinerator – how it appeared to have fallen from the sky. [...] And the bruise that was green-going-to-yellow on Grace Lynch’s breast. Had Grace’s journey to St. Cloud’s originated with one of Herb Fowler’s prophylactics?

In St. Cloud’s he had seen anguish and the plainer forms of unhappiness – and depression, and destructiveness. He was familiar with mean-spiritedness and with injustice, too. But this is evil, isn’t it? wondered Homer Wells. [...] What do you do when you recognize evil? he wondered.³⁰⁵

Nor should we disregard Rose Rose, whose own father beat her, repeatedly (but carefully, so as not to produce visible wounds) cut her, and regularly forced sex upon her, ultimately impregnating her. As Mr. Rose is stabbed to death by his daughter – the latter proving to be just a touch faster than the former, who was widely considered the fastest knife man among the migrant workers – there is a clear feeling of both vindication and justice at novel’s end; yet, as mentioned above, we can only wonder how Rose Rose and her little daughter will fare on the road, with no money and no protection beyond a knife.

³⁰⁴ *Rules*, pp. 303-04, 365-66

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-04

Apart from the stomach-turning evil of child molestation, the novel also deals with the far more mundane evils of adultery and betrayal. In keeping with flawed protagonists such as T.S. Garp and John Berry, we must honestly recognize, just as the disillusioned Melony did, that for years on end the otherwise so noble Homer Wells, regardless of how he justified it to himself, was doing little more than “ballin’ a poor cripple’s wife.” For a decade and a half, Homer and Candy were themselves guilty of indulging in quiet evil.

As a final but significant note, while many have seen fit to criticize the novel’s ending – Josie P. Campbell, for example, claiming that unlike previous Irving works it is not life-affirming³⁰⁶ – we must not forget the good that is at work and is demonstrated in *The Cider House Rules*. Ultimately, Wally and Candy are what they always planned to be: a loving and mutually supporting couple. Though Angel is parted from his father, there are no indications that he rejects him for his previous relations with Candy. Nurse Caroline, having long ago heeded Homer’s advice, dedicates herself as part of the “next generation” of willing helpers at St. Cloud’s. Most importantly of all, if Herb Fowler, Vernon Lynch and Mr. Rose represent “quiet evil,” surely the self-sacrifice of Wilbur Larch and later Homer Wells is a tremendous commitment to doing “quiet good,” and just as the former destroys and emotionally cripples wholly unbeknownst to us behind the social shroud of bedroom doors, the latter, at work in forgotten hamlets like St. Cloud’s but also in real-world orphanages, foster homes etc. surely does much to counter and heal the damage done.

The Cider House Rules in the Light of the Bildungsroman Tradition

There are numerous factors that point to *Rules* being a *Bildungsroman*. As Campbell has pointed out, characters such as Homer and Melony are concerned with their own origins, and with the origins of their actions; this concern with provenance is a key characteristic. Further, she claims, we see characters facing a lack of parents not only in the various “true” orphans, but also in Candy and Wally, the former’s mother having died in childbirth and the latter’s father, though alive through Wally’s teen years, having suffered for years from Alzheimer’s disease, the increasing dementia both making him effectively “absent” and sadly being misinterpreted as alcoholism.³⁰⁷

Further, it is clear that Homer Wells fulfills many of the key criteria of a *Bildungsheld*. He is namely a very contemplative character, who not only reflects on his own actions, but also evinces an active desire – despite his extended affair with Candy – to better himself. In leaving

³⁰⁶ Campbell, p. 123

³⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 9, 119

St. Cloud's he essentially embarks on a quest (as Melony assuredly does when she sets out to find him), both to find himself and to pursue a romantic love.

Homer Wells' story also appears to meet further "classic" requirements of the *Bildungsroman* as addressed by Schöneich; in examining the evolution of the genre, Schöneich starts at its German roots, where he finds that, though the prototypical *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* calls for the "universal" education and development of the protagonist, this was quickly and pragmatically modified, the more realistic requirement, which would become established, being that the *Bildungsheld* develop the select skills needed by society.³⁰⁸ Though for a decade and a half Homer deludes himself into believing he can work in an orchard, his true calling lies elsewhere. It is for example very telling that, following the end of the war, Candy returns to the orchard, but Homer – though still quite active at Ocean View, and eventually becoming foreman – continues to work on a volunteer basis at the local hospital. As he recognizes and accepts in assuming the fabricated identity of Dr. Fuzzy Stone, his calling is to be a doctor; perpetuating the role of the *Bildungsheld*, his ultimate occupation is clearly one in service of his fellow man, his skills – here, ironically also including the ability to perform surgical procedures that are both illegal and carry a heavy stigma – being those that society needs.

Schöneich further emphasizes that, from the outset of the genre, the development of the *Bildungsheld* has been contingent on the interplay of two essential factors: not only *Bildung* (education and formation in the broadest sense) but also *Bildsamkeit* (the potential for education, development and personal growth on the part of the protagonist).³⁰⁹ *Bildung* is in turn dependent on not only the access to opportunities to educate oneself and grow in terms of more or less formal education, but often has far more to do with the general atmosphere or surroundings at hand, i.e., the question is largely whether the *Bildungsheld* is exposed to an environment that (ideally) promotes their personal development or that (as a bare minimum) does not hinder it.

If we examine the novel from this perspective, the two main settings, St. Cloud's and Ocean View, each exhibit a number of advantages and disadvantages in terms of how conducive to development they are. Due to its geographic isolation, generally inclement weather, and the inescapably depressing atmosphere of the orphanage, St. Cloud's is a generally fairly grim place, a condition exacerbated by the extremely limited opportunities for formal education; past the sixth grade level, the local tutors are of very little help. Ironically it is this very problem in conjunction with both Homer's apparently "unadoptable" nature and, significantly, Homer's discovery of the dead fetus, that lead Dr. Larch to begin his medical

³⁰⁸ Schöneich, p. 34

³⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 20-21

instruction. While doubtless increasing Homer's intellectual stimulation immensely, this also leads him to the grimmer aspects of medicine as represented by the techniques for abortion, which Larch feels he should know even if he never chooses to use them.

Yet, excepting the mounting debate between Homer and Larch over abortions, Homer encounters much good at St. Cloud's, a fact that becomes increasingly apparent to him during his years at Ocean View. Though effectively cut off from "real" society, and though the weather is largely cheerless, Homer also receives a great deal of warmth from Nurse Edna and Nurse Angela and, in his own way, from Larch. What problems do exist are most often dealt with in an open and straightforward manner; there are largely no secrets, and Homer's duties (again, with the notable exception of the abortions) are clear-cut and meaningful, both to him and his fellow orphans. As the oldest male orphan, he is not only looked up to and listened to by the younger boys, his storytelling is a welcome, nightly escape from St. Cloud's for both the boys and girls.

Ocean View, in contrast to the forbidding St. Cloud's, is a much sunnier, more cheerful setting. Whereas Homer, though well-liked by the other orphans, had due to his age suffered a deep form of loneliness, which the less-than-tender ministrations of Melony did little to cure, in Ocean View he is quickly accepted by Wally and Candy, the orchard workers, and by Ray Kendall and Olive Worthington. While Wally and the orchard workers show Homer the ropes of apple-picking, Ray teaches Homer how to run lobster traps, and Olive also arranges for Homer to attend classes at the local high school. While none of these new tasks is as intellectually demanding – or, accordingly, as intellectually stimulating – as learning to practice medicine, they show Homer wholly new aspects of life; what is more, none of these activities presents him with the moral dilemmas that increasingly sullied his medical studies once abortion entered the picture. Lastly, Ocean View is also home to his first and best friend, Wally, and to Candy, with whom he falls deeply in love.

Yet for all its charms Ocean View is no paradise; in fact it harbors many pitfalls Homer could never encounter in St. Cloud's. Above all, Homer is exposed to the two-facedness of society, i.e., how ostensibly "good" people can conceal very dark aspects of themselves. In St. Cloud's most of the orphans were an open book, if for no other reason than that they had very little they could keep secrets *about*; in Ocean View, secrets, unwritten rules and shadow lives abound. Grace Lynch, the normally quiet and terribly furtive wife of the abusive Vernon Lynch, not only reveals to Homer that she had once had an abortion at St. Cloud's, but also practically assaults him on a rainy day in the cider house, stripping down and preparing to make love to him when the unexpected return of the rest of the picking crew saves Homer. Even before the atrocities he perpetrates on his daughter are revealed, Mr. Rose shows Homer that there are different rules, in a number of different ways, predominantly in how he maintains discipline

among his fellow black pickers through his mastery of what he and the others refer to as “the knife business”; here the unwritten rule is that, if problems cannot be resolved verbally or from a fistfight, knife fights are also allowed, but no one can be cut up so badly that the police will be involved, as it would create problems for everyone.

Finally, Ocean View simultaneously deepens and fundamentally clouds Homer’s sense of responsibility, a process that had already begun with his flight from St. Cloud’s. In the isolated and “society-distant” environment of St. Cloud’s, Homer had largely only been bound by responsibility to Dr. Larch and to a far lesser extent to Melony. In the decidedly more “society-near” setting of Ocean View, Homer is rapidly drawn into a web of conflicting responsibilities, not only to Wally and Candy, but also – among others – to Olive Worthington, who practically adopts him, and to Ray Kendall, who also considers Homer very close to family.

As such, though ironically it is St. Cloud’s that – morally speaking – is closer to the “Edenic childhood” prevalent in the earliest stage of the *Bildungsroman* progression, both St. Cloud’s and Ocean View provide deeply meaningful if also vastly disparate environments for Homer’s personal development.

Yet the second part of the equation must not be neglected; though Homer had various opportunities to receive *Bildung*, the success of the whole is contingent upon his own *Bildsamkeit*. Or, to reformulate slightly, having established that opportunities for development were available to him, and as the novel makes it clear that Homer is both deeply contemplative and quite apt at learning the most varied of skills, it seems that, given the shaping experiences over the course of the novel, from his earliest childhood to his forties, Homer has to have developed.

Elke Weiß, however, claims that this is precisely what does *not* occur in *The Cider House Rules*. Rather than develop as a character, Homer Wells simply becomes a copy of Dr. Larch.³¹⁰ And there is certainly something about this claim that, at first blush, seems compelling. After all, not only does Homer follow in his mentor’s footsteps, he nearly seems to *regress* morally; as Melony recognizes and very bluntly tells him, as an orphan he seemed to hold the potential for greatness: Melony always thought he would become a hero of one kind or another. Instead, Homer enters into a fundamentally dishonest and compromising relationship with Candy, and does nothing to free himself from it, or to tell Wally or his own son the truth, for well over a decade.

We must bear in mind, however, that development in the *Bildungsroman* is rarely a one-way street, nor could the genre continue to both entertain and instruct into the twenty-first century if it were so formulaic and predictable. Rather, the *Bildungsheld* very often suffers

³¹⁰ Weiß, p. 173

setbacks, makes the wrong choices, and enters into the wrong relationships before finding his or her way. Further, while it is true that Homer seems more morally upright at St. Cloud's, his growing up there represents time spent beyond the reach of society as we know it. Homer certainly *is* very moral in his youth, yet he does not have the "freedom to err" enjoyed by (say) Wally Worthington; he does not (at this stage in his life) make the same mistakes as Wally, but this is both because he is largely untried and also lacks the *opportunity* to do so. When Homer is given the chance to leave St. Cloud's, he seizes it; while his loyalty to Dr. Larch causes him some initial trepidation, this feeling quickly fades, and his promise to never leave without Melony evaporates; he leaves without even telling her goodbye.

Homer certainly does develop over the course of the novel. As a boy, he is fascinated by both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, and hopes to someday be as heroic as little David himself, yet this desire is little more than schoolboy fantasy as long as he remains untried, and as long as he has never had an encounter with society. After Ocean View, and after his fifteen years as Candy's lover, he has finally truly learned to accept responsibility. To clarify, very much in keeping with the three-phase development of the *Bildungsroman*, Homer's moral compass and sense of duty progress through three stages. In the first, his initial time at St. Cloud's, Homer has a very clear sense of right and wrong; he also feels a clear responsibility to Dr. Larch, but this responsibility proves to have limits when it becomes apparent that Homer can *stay away* from St. Cloud's, i.e., it does not extend to sacrificing his newfound freedom. In the second, his sensibilities are clouded and swayed by his own desires (to raise a child with and to not lose Candy) and by his own and even more so Candy's sense of propriety, the combination of factors yielding an immoral relationship. In the third, following the catalysts of Melony's sudden appearance, the revelation of Rose Rose's plight, and the death of Dr. Larch, Homer's sense of right and wrong is restored to him, and his sense of responsibility – to Angel, to Wally, to Larch, to women with unwanted pregnancies, and to himself – finally manifests itself. Though Weiß (as mentioned previously) condemns the preponderance of "telling" over "showing"³¹¹ in the novel, in an inverse development, Homer Wells matures from "talking the talk" of heroic behavior to actually "walking the walk" of selfless utilitarianism, placing him firmly in the *Bildungsheld* tradition.

Having established *Rules* as a *Bildungsroman*, the question of categorization is only half-answered, the remaining consideration being how it can be more precisely classified within such a broad and far-reaching genre. It would be an easy assumption to make that a novel so clearly intended as an homage to the literary tradition of Dickens would itself be Victorian in makeup. And indeed there are a number of aspects of the novel that place it in the "classic"

³¹¹ Weiß, p. 148

Bildungsroman category and distance it from the modern. Schöneich discusses a development he terms *Das Unbehagen in der Modernität* (which may be roughly translated as “the uneasiness of modernity”), which shows some remarkable changes to the *Bildungsroman* genre. In short, protagonists increasingly suffer from anomie, and their “selves” become more compartmentalized and conflicted. Further, the development of the self, surely the hallmark of the *Bildungsroman*, largely becomes irrelevant as the *self* becomes irrelevant. Stylistically speaking, these (post-)modern *Bildungsromane* can also be recognized by a conscious departure from verisimilitude and increased use of metafiction.³¹²

Interestingly, not a single one of these criteria fits *The Cider House Rules*; it categorically does *not* fit this definition of the modern apprenticeship novel. Though Homer may understandably be disturbed by certain aspects of the medical profession, he does not demonstrate what Durkheim established as anomie; there is no alienation or sense of meaninglessness to the work he does, whether as a doctor or an orchard worker. Further, while Homer may be conflicted as to questions of loyalty, of right and wrong, his *self* is never conflicted³¹³ in the fundamental manner of modern protagonists: he knows who he is, if not where he belongs. And though Wilbur Larch is surely the novel’s second protagonist, it is Homer’s life story that provides the marrow and sinews of the novel, and he as an individual – while admittedly ultimately choosing to sacrifice himself – is at the very center of the story. Finally, in terms of stylistic devices, *Rules* very consciously and uniformly avoids the metafiction of *The World According to Garp* and, unlike *The Hotel New Hampshire*, maintains its verisimilitude throughout.

Further aspects of the novel, however, suggest its proper location in the *Bildungsroman* spectrum as being farther away from more classic models, and also more in the English than the German tradition. As discussed in the first chapter of this work, in the English *Bildungsroman* there is a far greater emphasis on the practical than on the theoretical; the previous consideration of the role of utilitarianism in the novel makes this connection abundantly clear. Schöneich³¹⁴ contends that, for modern English *Bildungshelden*, it has become hopeless for them to find their place in the world. While this does not seem entirely true for Homer Wells, who does at least find a meaningful and socially beneficial place for himself by novel’s end, the underlying current of doubt throughout the novel is his freedom to make choices, especially such

³¹² Schöneich, pp. 62-67

³¹³ *Rules*, pp. 14-15, 19-20. On these pages, the narrator speaks of Homer seeking “the path he was looking for that led to himself,” and after yet another experiment with a foster family has failed and young Homer chooses to walk back to St. Cloud’s in the middle of a snowy winter night, he reflects that (also quite literally) he “felt he was on the track to finding out who he was, and how he could be of use, but he knew that the path led back to St. Cloud’s.”

³¹⁴ Schöneich, p. 41

a monumental, life-changing one; as such, while the novel cannot be said to be “truly” modern in this sense (in that he does find a meaningful occupation), it is certainly tinged by the subtle undermining of the protagonist’s free will, which clearly runs counter to fundamental patterns of the apprenticeship novel.

In his encompassing work, Schöneich also cites Moretti, who claims the key criteria of the English apprenticeship novel to be mobility and interiority, which the latter also considers the two essential aspects of modernity.³¹⁵ While there inarguably is a healthy amount of interiority in the novel – without sacrificing its aforementioned focus on utilitarianism – the question of mobility is problematic. At his first time at a drive-in movie theater, Homer sees a Bedouin on the screen, and learns that they are a nomadic desert people with no real homes. Throughout the remainder of the novel, he periodically (and despondently) sees himself as a Bedouin. This self-image and his ultimate choice create a paradox of sorts in that, while Homer is “mobile” (or more accurately “unanchored”) in the *negative* sense of not having a true home to call his own, he is not mobile in the *positive* sense of being free to do as he chooses, having compromised that freedom not by his loyalty to Larch, which ultimately redeems him, but by his dishonest relationships with Wally and Candy, which he can neither bring himself to end nor purify by telling the truth, for fear of losing the two most important people to him outside of St. Cloud’s.

The quest is a central element of the *Bildungsroman*. And, as Schöneich points out, given the increasing unreliability of the modern world, the quest for identity – though it changes its form – becomes even more essential. In short, the quest becomes more “everyday” in nature, and determines whether the protagonist develops his or her own potential or rather withdraws regressively. This unspectacular but indispensable quest in turn often entails a second quest, which consists of attempting to make sense of one’s life and past. If we consider Homer Wells in this light, his quest at Ocean View, which started out so promisingly, would seem largely undone by his fifteen-year affair with Candy: for fifteen years, he regresses. Yet the second quest, sparked in part by Melony’s confronting Homer with the truth, is his taking stock of the situation and ultimately choosing to end the lie he’s been living by both telling his son the truth and accepting responsibility.³¹⁶

As final considerations of the relatively modern qualities of *The Cider House Rules*, the novel’s end and overall tone must be addressed. As Schöneich points out, in more modern examples, the apprenticeship novel need not have a “happy end”; what is far more important is a resolution involving the productive interaction of self and world.³¹⁷ Further, emphasizing the

³¹⁵ *Rules*, p. 47

³¹⁶ Schöneich, pp. 89-90, 96

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 331

pragmatic tone of the modern, he feels the important distinction to be between recognizing the right choice and actually making that choice, between *knowing* and *acting*. And surely Homer has no “happy end” for himself; though the novel’s ending makes it clear that he and the young Nurse Caroline have begun a sexual relationship, this is nothing more than a solution born of necessity. Homer has sacrificed his one great love and put a huge distance between himself and his son and best friend, and has dedicated himself to serving both mothers and orphans in the isolation of St. Cloud’s, presumably for the rest of his life. His choice surely represents the fundamental acceptance of duty, of knowing the right thing to do and doing it.

Considerations of “duty” inevitably bring us back to the connection between Homer Wells and Dr. Wilbur Larch, which is a key example of the influence of father figures in the novel. As Shostak has correctly recognized, while *The Cider House Rules* is ostensibly a book about orphans, in actuality it has much more to do with fathers. The key fathers in the novel, she notes, are either impotent or evil: Senior Worthington is rendered powerless by Alzheimer’s, and Ray Kendall, though adept at fixing all manner of mechanical devices, does nothing to influence the growing and increasingly dangerous attraction between Homer and his own daughter, though he clearly sees it coming; Mr. Rose’s violations of his daughter Rose Rose are unquestionably evil. And Homer Wells himself, Shostak claims, is no model father himself, finally telling his son the truth about his origins only to leave him.³¹⁸

While I feel she misses the mark a bit in her evaluation of Homer’s conduct towards Angel – for surely Homer leaves the boy out of a sense of duty, and does not take him with him in order to spare his son the bleak isolation of St. Cloud’s – Shostak is certainly right in recognizing a pattern among the fathers in *Rules*, and her approach provides a platform for further considerations of father/son dynamics in the story. Shostak very accurately ascertains³¹⁹ that Wilbur Larch, the dominant *surrogate* father in the novel, both exerts authority over Homer and helps to shape his fate, his influence ultimately bringing Homer to accept his duty, a highly Victorian motif.

Yet the true combination of motivations for Homer’s choice are both more complex and more rewarding for the reader than her analysis suggests. Despite Larch’s protestations in his penultimate letter to Homer that Homer has been trapped, but not by him, in the very same letter Larch writes: “You are my work of art [...] Everything else has just been a job. I don’t know if you’ve got a work of art in you [...] but I know what your job is, and you know what it is, too. You’re the doctor.”³²⁰

³¹⁸ Shostak in Bloom (ed.), pp. 97-99

³¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 98-99

³²⁰ *Rules*, p. 518

To return to the previously mentioned Bakhtinian dialectic between freedom and constraint, it is clear that, as Larch's "work of art," which is to say as someone whose life has been *crafted* by a sculptor, namely his father figure, Homer's free will has been constrained. Yet this does not detract from his ultimately free choice to follow in Larch's footsteps; it was entirely within Homer's power to go on living the comfortable lie he had maintained with Candy and Wally for the last fifteen years, Melony or no Melony, and Candy would likely have preferred this. And, though he might have felt disloyal to Larch's memory had he not chosen to become Fuzzy Stone, Larch himself was dead, and St. Cloud's comfortably distant from the light and warmth of Ocean View.

The fact that Homer nonetheless makes the hard choice is telling both in terms of what motivates him as a man, and in the significance of that choice. As Schöneich³²¹ and more recently Uhsadel³²² have accurately pointed out, one of the most vital aspects of the *Bildungsheld* is that of their identity formation, which is achieved by creating meaningful connections between their present life and the past; if you will, by anchoring their life to a greater and more encompassing heritage. By choosing against Ocean View and for St. Cloud's, Homer Wells not only honors a debt of gratitude and responsibility he feels he owes Wilbur Larch, at a deeply intimate and internal level his choice is also a confirmation of Larch's fatherhood for Homer.

As such, by novel's end and as the direct result of his own choice, Homer Wells ultimately finds a father; if that father is deceased, his memory lives on in the work Homer will continue, and in his memoirs, which Homer often consults. In choosing this life, Homer fittingly pays the price paid by many sons who enjoy close ties to their fathers, namely the obligation to take up their work when they can no longer do it. In a clear continuation of the *Bildungsroman* tradition Homer, by choosing to continue the Lord's work at St. Cloud's, returns to the orphanage from which he came. Yet ironically, in having found his father, he has ceased to be an orphan himself.

³²¹ Schöneich, pp. 76-79

³²² Uhsadel, pp. 157-59

Chapter Four

Finding the Way Back: *A Widow for One Year*

Once there was a little girl named Ruth. When Ruth was four years old, she sometimes lived with her daddy in a big house, and she sometimes lived with her mommy in the same big house, but she was never with them both. Every day Ruth walked down the hallway to her bedroom, where the walls were covered with picture upon picture of her two brothers, Thomas and Timothy. Ruth had never met them, and she never would; she didn't know it, but her mommy and daddy had decided to have Ruth to make them happy again after her two brothers died.

Though the wording may not be identical, the preceding paragraph matches very closely the tone set by the beginning of *A Widow for One Year* (hereafter simply *Widow*); the reader is simultaneously faced with the feeling of a children's bedtime story and a grim reminder of mortality. And this would seem an apt beginning to the novel: *Widow* is initially set in the summer of the year 1958, in the less-than-happy home of the Cole family. Ted Cole, the father of the family, is a former and failed novelist, but a highly successful author and illustrator of children's books. His beautiful wife, Marion, has no job as such; rendered nearly catatonic since the loss of both her sons in a car wreck six years earlier, she is at best a poor and distant mother to Ruth, something Marion herself is keenly aware of. Complicating matters further Ted, at the story's outset, has been arrested for driving under the influence, as a result of which his driver's license has been suspended.

Enter into the picture the fourth major player in the first story arc (the novel has three): young Edward "Eddie" O'Hare. A high school student at the prestigious New England Exeter Academy, which not only Ted Cole but both of his deceased sons had attended, Eddie is an aspiring writer and bears a striking physical resemblance to Thomas Cole, the elder of the two boys. After a few telephone calls between Eddie's father, who teaches at Exeter, and the semi-famous alum Ted Cole, it has all been worked out: Eddie will spend the summer with the Coles as Ted's "writer's assistant," the duties associated with the position never being clearly defined. Eddie, somewhat daunted by the prospect of working for a writer he idolizes, leaves for the Hamptons and the Cole house with high hopes of learning what it takes to be a writer.

Yet Eddie very quickly realizes he has not been given all the facts. Taking the ferry to the Hamptons as the last leg of his journey, he expects to be picked up by Ted. Instead, it is Marion who he finds waiting for him: Ted, as she very frankly explains to Eddie, couldn't pick him

up, as his license is suspended. Ted hadn't needed an assistant; he'd needed a driver for the summer.

Still digesting this information and recovering from his first encounter with Marion's stunning, if also hauntingly sad beauty, Eddie next gets to meet Ted, who informs him that he and Marion have separated on a trial basis for the summer (a decision that in reality had been wholly Ted's, but which Marion had done nothing to oppose); in trying to find the best solution for their daughter, they had rented a small house nearby, and take turns sleeping there. When it is Ted's turn to spend the night with Ruth (who would never visit or even see the second house) Marion sleeps at the rental, and vice versa.

Eddie soon finds himself in a situation very different from the one he had imagined. His duties for Ted largely do consist of driving him from point A to point B: from the family house to the rental and back, or to and from his appointments with artists' models. As Ted illustrates his own books, he can at least nominally claim to be an artist, a title he shamelessly exploits. His pattern is as follows: Claiming to be looking for a model for one of his next books (in actuality he hardly writes anymore), Ted starts by sketching the model clothed, then naked in a variety of poses, and also feels free to sleep with her as often as he likes. This process usually continues for a few months before he gets bored and looks for someone new, at which point his previous "model" is discarded, their nude sketches (which normally progress from innocent to increasingly degrading poses) often returned to them. Even at his young age, Eddie quickly realizes what Ted is doing, and that Marion, while completely aware of it, has simply come to accept it. What love there had once been between Ted and Marion seems to have long since departed.

Eddie, for his part, is hopelessly smitten with Marion. One afternoon, when Eddie is supposed to be retyping some literary "corrections" for Ted at the rental house (usually no more than a sentence or two) while Ted has an appointment with Mrs. Vaughn, a local socialite and his current model, Marion enters the rental unannounced, catching Eddie masturbating, the visual stimulus for the act being one of her sweaters, a bra and panties. While Eddie is understandably mortified, Marion seeks to reassure him that what he was doing is perfectly normal at his age, and they should therefore write off the whole incident as being funny and nothing more.

Rather than put a wall between Eddie and Marion, the encounter seems to make Marion more interested in the young man. She soon offers to take him out to dinner, and on further occasions tells him much of the family's past, especially about her two late sons. Eddie, she explains to him, looks more like the outgoing elder son Thomas, but his character is more in keeping with that of the introspective Timothy. Invariably Marion's stories return to the countless

framed black-and-white photographs of her sons throughout the house, and to her regret for the lives they would never know.

Soon after Eddie and Marion become lovers, and though for Eddie it is the most important relationship of his life, it is hardly a perfect romance. Though Ted can't help but notice what is going on – Eddie and Marion making no effort to hide it from him – he seems indifferent to the development; that is, until the four-year-old Ruth catches them in the act. Though Ruth thankfully is too young to grasp or long remember what she has seen, she does talk to her father about it, who soon after warns Eddie that he may be called upon to testify in the event of a custody dispute. And it should come as no surprise that Ted is unruffled; knowing Marion's vulnerability to the memory of her two boys, and the susceptibility of *any* teenage boy to a woman of her beauty, Ted had planned all along for the two to begin an affair. Yet Ted, for all his cunning, has greatly underestimated his wife.

Though it is true that Eddie's resemblance to her sons draws Marion to him, it is not loneliness that drives her. Rather, Marion's sons were killed when they were only seventeen and fifteen respectively, and she is tortured by the thought of all they never experienced, and never will. For one thing, she doesn't know if either of them ever had sex, and from a very skewed perspective, by sleeping with Eddie it is as if, vicariously, she is giving him the sex they never got to have.

Ted has also completely misread Marion insofar as keeping Ruth is concerned. Marion has always been very distant towards Ruth, a fact necessitating the child's various nannies. As Marion explains to Eddie, she doesn't *want* to have custody of her daughter in the case of a divorce; after having loved and lost her sons, she couldn't bear to go through it again. This has made Marion afraid to let herself love Ruth, and consequently made her a bad mother, something she herself is painfully aware of. Though she had been a great mother to her sons, she cannot offer Ruth the same commitment, and would rather be no mother to her at all than to be a bad one.

Seeing through Ted's plan, Marion devises one of her own, and very carefully walks Eddie through his part in it. One morning towards summer's end, Eddie is to drive Ted to Mrs. Vaughn as usual, but not pick him back up. In the time it takes Ted to find another ride, movers Marion had previously hired will come and box up all of the pictures of Thomas and Timothy, along with the negatives. By the time Ted comes home, practically every trace of his two sons will be gone, along with his wife; as for Ruth, Marion doesn't even tell her own daughter goodbye. As for Eddie, who professes his love for Marion throughout their parting, her last words to him are a simple "So long, Eddie."

In the second story arc, Irving fast-forwards the lives of the main characters by thirty-two years, to the fall of 1990. Other than having become a divorcee and having aged incredibly gracefully, little has changed for Ted Cole; now in his seventies, the victims of his seductions have now become as a rule women in their forties. As for Eddie, if anything he is the opposite of Ted; while one man continues to pursue younger women, the other, whose heart still holds a torch for Marion (who has never been seen or heard from since 1958), has an almost embarrassingly categorical weakness for older women. Eddie, now in his fifties, is most often seen in the company of women in their seventies.

Yet the true focus of the remainder of the second and third parts of the novel is on Ruth. While Ted's children's books have been so successful that he hardly needs to write (nor does he seem to have any desire to), and while Eddie has had very marginal success with a number of novels perennially fixated on the love of a younger man for an older woman, Ruth emerges as the true writer in *Widow*. When we rejoin her life in 1990, she has just finished her third novel, her first two, entitled *The Same Orphanage* and *Before the Fall of Saigon*, respectively, having garnered her considerable international acclaim. In her third novel, *Not for Children*, her main character Jane Dash is herself a novelist, and loses her husband when he dies in his sleep. The protagonist having been a widow for one year when the novel starts, the story deals among other things with the difficulty of getting our own memories of the past under control, and of knowing when and how to move on from them.

At this point in her life, Ruth has very few people whom she truly feels close to. Her bond to her father is a love-hate relationship, largely because Ruth has long since recognized what a shameless womanizer he is. Nonetheless, after Marion's sudden departure, Ted had done his best to always be there for his daughter.

Ruth's closest friend is Hannah Grant, whom she has known since she was sixteen. The two went to college together, and later, after having graduated, spent a year touring Europe. Hannah, by far the more sexually experienced of the two, is different from Ruth in a number of ways. Not only is she tall and thin in contrast to Ruth's compact frame, her whole approach to life seems diametrically opposed to Ruth's, which Ruth finds at turns maddening and fascinating. Hannah is a journalist, obsessed with facts and patterns, and is constantly bouncing from one worthless boyfriend to the next. She seems to have no interest in their staying, or in finding *any* boyfriend who would be interested in a mature relationship. Ruth, in contrast, is not at all interested in journalism; as a novelist, her purview is the imagination, of creating stories of her own of what *could* happen, not simply reporting on what actually *has* happened. Ruth is also far less promiscuous than Hannah; Hannah had had three abortions by the time Ruth lost her

virginity. Unfortunately, while this means Ruth has had far fewer boyfriends, her caution does not entail good judgment: the few boyfriends she *has* had were categorically bad ones.

Ruth's current boyfriend or, as Ruth would reflect, her "boyfriend-in-waiting," is anything but bad. Allan Albright, fifty-four (eighteen years Ruth's senior) and Ruth's editor, has made it clear that he loves Ruth and wants to marry her. Ruth, however, is plagued by doubts as to whether he is the right choice for her or not. On the one hand, she is simply sick and tired of the bad boyfriends she has wasted her life with up to this point; on the other, she can't offer Allan the same passion and certainty with which he loves her.

Ruth's feelings for Allan are still unresolved when she is soon to leave for Europe on a promotional tour for her third novel. Before leaving the country, however, she and Hannah are to meet at Ted's house, especially so that Ruth can spend the weekend with her father. Hannah was also meant to attend the reading for Ruth's new novel, but hadn't shown up. When Ruth arrives a bit earlier than planned at her childhood home, she is shocked to discover the reason why: Hannah had been sleeping with Ted! Outraged and disgusted by both her best friend and her father, Ruth demands that they both leave the house; she wants to be alone.

Unfortunately for her, Ruth is so upset by what she has seen that she makes a rash decision. On the way home, she had run into one of her father's squash opponents, a young lawyer and divorcee named Scott Saunders. Though she knows she couldn't possibly want a relationship with him, there is an immediate chemistry. Thinking to give her father a taste of his own medicine, she invites Scott over, planning all along to sleep with him, and hoping her father will return home and catch them in the act. But neither her father nor Hannah comes home, and after she and Scott have sex, he proceeds to rape and beat her. Ruth, initially paralyzed with fear, soon recovers her wits and, retrieving Scott's squash racket, beats him bloody with it and kicks him out of the house. Seeing her father the day after, she finally manages to beat him at squash and, while he drives her to the airport, tells him about Scott and about why she had put herself in the situation to begin with.

Thus it is with a black eye and very mixed feelings about Allan, Hannah and her father that Ruth embarks on her European promotional tour, which takes her to various German destinations, including the Frankfurt Book Fair, and to Amsterdam, where Ruth hopes to conduct research for her next novel in the red-light district. Her idea for the novel, which she plans to call *My Last Bad Boyfriend*, is that the female protagonist is a woman at an age where she increasingly wants to marry and have a child. Also, she has made a string of bad choices with regard to her past boyfriends; she contemplates marrying her current suitor less out of love and more because she feels he can finally end this cycle.

In the book forming in Ruth's mind, the main female character should have some encounter in the red-light district that makes her want to change her life. After trying with limited success to speak to a number of different prostitutes, Ruth convinces a Dutch whore in her forties named "Rooie" (Red) to let her watch her with a customer. Rooie hides Ruth in the closet of her small window room, providing Ruth with an unobstructed view of the bed where Rooie does most of her work. The customer who enters, a small, bald and nondescript man in his fifties, tells the prostitute he doesn't want to sleep with her, only to watch her. He talks her into kneeling and tossing her hair back and forth, as a result of which she can't see him for a few seconds, which is all the time he needs to jump on her and strangle her. Ruth is paralyzed by what she sees; she cannot make herself move to try to help. Once Rooie is dead, her murderer produces a camera and carefully arranges the corpse before photographing it. Ruth unconsciously gasps, and the murderer, *almost* convinced he heard something, inadvertently drops a roll of film on the floor. Not noticing, he finally leaves, Rooie's corpse still lying on the bed just as he'd posed it.

Though Ruth cannot bring herself to go to the police, neither can she do nothing and move on. Hoping there might be a fingerprint on the film case, she takes it with her. Before she leaves Amsterdam, she carefully writes down everything she can remember about the murderer and has it translated into Dutch; she sends an anonymous envelope with the description and physical evidence to the police before flying back to America.

Following on the heels of the murder she has just witnessed are further major shocks for Ruth. Eddie O'Hare, with whom Ruth has recently become friends, had given her some interesting "airplane reading" without further comment at their last meeting. Shaken by her experiences in Amsterdam, Ruth finally starts reading the book, written by one "Alice Somerset," and quickly comes to the same conclusion as Eddie: the author is none other than Marion Cole! Before Ruth can decide whether or not to share this bit of information with her father, the choice is taken from her; in her absence, Ted has killed himself. Though he left no suicide note, no explanation whatsoever for his daughter – in this sense, carrying on a family tradition – Ruth is convinced that it was the bitterness of their last parting, the fact that, for perhaps the first time in his life, Ted Cole had felt true remorse that had driven him to suicide. Yet the novel's second arc ends with a mixture of joy and sorrow; soon after her return to America Ruth decides to accept Allan's proposal. The two are married, and within a year their son Graham is born healthy and happy.

In the final section of the novel, which jumps forward five years to the fall of 1995, Ruth has once more been abandoned, though she still has her beloved son. At the same time, much of her previous novel *Not for Children* seems excruciatingly prophetic. Just as her fictional

protagonist Jane Dash had, Ruth wakes one morning to discover her husband dead beside her. And, where we next re-enter her life, she has herself been a widow for one year, and must constantly struggle for control over her memories of the short but happy life she had known together with Allan. To promote her recently released novel *My Last Bad Boyfriend*, Ruth is once more scheduled to tour Europe, including a visit back to Amsterdam, which she philosophically views as a form of penance.

At one of her book signings in Amsterdam, Ruth catches a glimpse of a handsome middle-aged man who seems to be observing her very closely, yet he never approaches her. She later runs into him in the hotel of the lobby she's staying at, where he gives Ruth the impression that he is a police officer and asks her to join him for a walk through the red-light district. Ruth is immediately terrified, her subconscious convincing her that this policeman somehow knows everything that happened and is going to arrest her.

In actuality Harry Hoekstra is a recently *retired* Dutch policeman, having worked in the red-light district for forty years; he also happens to have been a close friend of the prostitute Rooie, and to be an avid reader of Ruth Cole's novels. By piecing together various bits of evidence Harry has become convinced that Ruth was the mystery witness whose tips helped the police catch the killer, who has since died, a mere six months after the crime. Far from wanting to arrest her, he wants to congratulate her on her invaluable contribution to catching a killer. Also, having read all of her novels and now having met her in person at long last, Harry realizes he is falling in love with her, a feeling Ruth reciprocates.

In the final chapter Ruth and Harry, after a whirlwind courtship, are married in a small ceremony at her childhood home, which Ruth has put up for sale. The day after the wedding, Marion shows up on Eddie O'Hare's doorstep (Eddie having long ago purchased a house only a few blocks from Ted Cole's); amazingly, she had not known about the wedding, and had decided to return when she heard her old house was up for sale. This also prompted her to return to the man who had once been her teen lover, now in his fifties. Eddie, after thirty-seven years, welcomes the now seventy-something Marion with open arms and suggests they buy Ted's house together. The two then visit Ruth and Harry unannounced, mother and daughter reuniting in tears while Eddie and Harry have common sense enough not to interfere.

Dominant Themes

A Widow for One Year is a fascinating novel, which is in no small part due to its function as a “bridge-builder” of sorts between the novels that come before it and those that come after. An absolutely essential aspect of the novel is the importance of parent / child relationships, and especially an examination of how painful and destructive they (very often unwittingly) can be. For the purposes of the novels examined in this work, such relationships are a nearly perennial element, and in *Widow* they are also tied to themes we will see addressed in later novels, chiefly abandonment and obsession. Further, what may be considered women’s “life choices” are once more examined in *Widow*, though by no means in the same light as in *The Cider House Rules* or other predecessors. For one thing, the abortion debate is of no real significance in or to the novel; and importantly, this is the first and only Irving novel to date with a female protagonist.

Though the two novels tell completely different stories, in many respects *Widow* echoes *The World According to Garp* more strongly than any other novel discussed in this work, touching as it does on the forces of contingency at work in the world, and how they at times can bring us joy but very often result in senseless loss, primarily in death. As in *Garp*, healing and forgiveness are central themes in the actors’ behavior. Finally, *Widow* is a novel populated by writers, the sheer number of authors in the story being a fine example of Irving’s penchant for exaggeration. As such the writing process, and in particular the connection between imagination and memory, for Irving an absolutely integral consideration in the craft of storytelling, is once more examined in great detail.

Parents and Children

When the story of *Widow* begins, the reader is immediately made aware that Ted and Marion Cole, along with their unfortunate daughter Ruth, are the survivors of a tragedy; or more correctly, the two parents *survived* the tragedy, whereas Ruth was only ever conceived *because of it*.

The story of what actually happened to Thomas and Timothy is only revealed bit by bit in the course of the novel; while their deaths are a palpable and ever-present theme in the first story arc, above all for the devastating effect they had and continue to have on Marion, it is only after Marion has left Ted, Ruth and Eddie behind that the older man finally tells Eddie the whole story. While they were still lovers, Eddie had once made the mistake of asking Marion what had happened, and if it had been anyone’s fault; she literally went into a catatonic state.

As for the events leading to Thomas and Timothy's deaths, they are exemplary of Irving's mastery of the tragicomic, of the interplay of contingency and human fallibility. While on a ski vacation, both Ted and Marion have a bit too much to drink while waiting on their two sons to finally finish skiing for the day. It is therefore out of the question that either of the two drive the family back to the hotel where they are staying; therefore Thomas, who has his driver's license, takes the wheel, and Timothy the front passenger seat. A wet and sticky snow is falling and has covered the car, snow Ted fails to clear from the rear windshield or taillights, though Marion wants him to clear the rear windshield. To get back to their hotel, Thomas must turn left; accordingly, he puts on his turn signal and waits in the left-turn lane for an oncoming snowplow to pass. In the meanwhile another car speeds up from behind and, covered with snow as the back of the Coles' car is, the other driver doesn't see it until it is far too late, the impact pushing them directly into the path of the snowplow, which neatly rips the vehicle in half. Ted and Marion are dazed and initially trapped in the rear half of the car; Thomas is killed on impact by the steering wheel. Timothy, one of whose legs was sheered off in the crash, dies of shock while his father helplessly looks on, Marion mercifully not being in a position to see. In one fell stroke, the Coles lose both of their beloved sons.

The reader is immediately drawn to the same question on Eddie O'Hare's young mind: was it anyone's fault? Of course it was and it wasn't. Had Ted not drunk so much, he could have driven; the same could be said of Marion. Ted could have thought to clear the rear windshield and check the taillights; by the same token, Thomas was a licensed driver, so wasn't it his responsibility to check? And Thomas was in a turn lane, not a passing lane, though the driver of the out-of-state car that crashed into them from behind *thought* he was in a passing lane. A thousand factors *could* have been different, but weren't.

The significance of the trauma lies not in the true culpability of Ted or Marion, but in the perceived question of blame, as well as the long-term fallout of that question. Not only does the thought of how things might have worked out differently continue to haunt and divide Ted and Marion, it also affects them in other, poignantly human ways. As the omniscient narrator tells us, by the summer of 1958, it is not only Ted's repeated infidelities that tear them apart: Marion resents Ted for his far superior ability to cope with a tragedy that can still paralyze her, while for his part Ted hates the fact that his wife is sadder than he is over the loss of their sons. Further, it is Ted who decides they should have another child. Marion does not want this, but is too despondent to actively resist the plan; as such, the once-happy parents soon conceive a child not wholly wanted, and whose chief "purpose" is to serve as a replacement, to ease a pain that will not subside.

As has been stated before, Ruth is the true protagonist in *Widow* and, like all children, she is to some extent the product of her parents and their choices. Her mother, by her own choice, is hardly there to watch her child grow; yet – a recurring theme throughout the novel – her absence is itself a tremendous presence in Ruth’s life. Indeed, in a scene almost supernaturally prescient and reflective of the damage parents can inflict on their children, not more than a day after Marion’s departure, Ted and Eddie are surprised to find Ruth calmly drawing in her room. In an eerie moment of circularity back to the novel’s beginning, where Ted had attempted to explain to his four-year-old daughter just what death is, Ruth now shows them her latest drawing, of her mother and two brothers lying under the ground. While Ted tries to console her that her mother is only gone, not dead, Ruth will not be budged from her stance that her mother and brothers are now all “died persons.”³²³

As Ruth grows from girl to woman, it is the mystery of her mother that sparks her imaginative powers, ultimately leading her to become a writer; perhaps not surprisingly, her critics notice a recurring pattern of unhealthy mother-daughter relationships in her novels. In an interview, Ruth claims that she is not looking for her mother, and that “[i]f she wants to find me, I’m the one who’s easy to find.”³²⁴

Yet, despite the brave face she puts on in public, Ruth’s true feelings for her mother are neither clear-cut nor constant. Though it is true that she does not, for many years, make any effort whatsoever to find her, Ruth nonetheless expects and hopes – especially after having talked with Eddie about Marion – to see her mother at major events in her life, such as her first wedding or the birth of her son. Yet Marion never shows. Further, while becoming a mother makes Marion’s abandoning her all the more reprehensible to Ruth, becoming a *widow* in turn increases Ruth’s sympathy for her: Ruth, having lost Allan, now loves her only child all the more and couldn’t bear the thought of losing him; perhaps, she thinks, that explains Marion’s hesitance to love another child after having lost two.³²⁵

Throughout the novel, Ruth remains deeply conflicted in her feelings for Marion. This is most clearly evinced by her reaction to having learned that the novelist “Alice Somerset” is in truth her mother. Shortly before his untimely death, Allan tracks Marion down for Ruth, yet for over a year the address sits on her desktop, while Ruth cannot move herself to contact her mother. She then passes the address – and with it, the question of whether or not to write

³²³ *A Widow for One Year*, (hereafter *Widow*), pp. 159-60

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216 Irving has on more than one occasion made the claim that it was the absence of his father, coupled with the fact that no one in his family would tell him anything about him, that contributed most to his budding imagination. See Academy of Achievement (2005), p. 1; title-magazin (2006), p. 6. Just as Ruth is criticized for constantly portraying unhealthy mother-daughter relationships, Irving has been accused of doing the same with regard to father-son relationships. Cf. Bloom, pp. 93-98

³²⁵ *Widow*, p. 516

Marion – on to Eddie. Finally, however, Ruth herself writes her mother, if only to tell her that Eddie is still in love with her.

As for Ted, who, by killing himself, would ultimately also abandon his daughter, his ties to Ruth are of a very different nature. Generally speaking, though it takes her many years to even begin to forgive her mother, her feelings for her tend to soften from childhood to adulthood, whereas with Ted – the parent who stayed, and who doted on his daughter – Ruth becomes increasingly embittered, chiefly because the illusions of her childhood are one by one stripped away. And Ruth's talks with Eddie O'Hare do nothing to warm her heart for her father; while she had years ago realized what a shameless womanizer her father was, learning that her father had set the stage for Eddie and Marion's affair further shocks her for two reasons. First of all it is a blow to realize how cruelly manipulative the man could be towards his own wife (not to mention how the young Eddie was used); but it is equally disquieting to Ruth to realize just how much her father had *wanted* Ruth all for himself.³²⁶

In essence, Ruth essentially loves her father for how he treats her, but hates him for how he treats other women, her hate mingled with a deep sense of injustice: her father, whose affairs have damaged countless women, hardly seems to age, still angling women in their forties when he is in his seventies. Worse still, Ruth interprets this, coupled with her father's ability to sleep as soundly as a child, as further proof of her theory that he is wholly without remorse. In her heart, she knows that there is no one that she loves or hates more than her own father.³²⁷

After the tragedy of Thomas and Timothy's deaths, Ted was obsessed with training Ruth to be a good and safe driver, above all one who could never be distracted by conversation or her emotions. As such, his own special "driver's test" for his daughter is a drive from the Hamptons into New York City; while Ruth navigates the hectic weekend traffic (all of the New Yorkers returning to the city on a Sunday night), Ted quite deliberately chooses this moment to finally tell her the whole truth about what had happened on the night of the accident, a story he had steadfastly withheld from his daughter. Though Ruth is understandably shattered by what she hears, she maintains her concentration, safely getting them into the city through the murderous traffic.

Yet the last straw for Ruth is when Ted sleeps with her best friend Hannah. Her disgust with and sense of betrayal towards the both of them leads her to kick them out of the family house, and to her traumatic encounter with Scott Saunders. Nevertheless, once Ruth has exacted revenge on her assailant, she still has plenty of anger left for her father. Continuing her years-long athletic rivalry with him, she finally succeeds in beating him on his own squash court.

³²⁶ *Widow*, p. 268

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 331

Yet Ted, in his enduringly self-important way, cannot even let his daughter enjoy her hard-won victory, quickly and quietly leaving the court.

It is this lack of satisfaction, coupled with the fact that she still senses no genuine regret or shame on her father's part, that lead her to now give him a test of her own. Asking him to drive her to the airport for her flight to Europe, she then proceeds to tell him every detail of what Scott had done to her, how he had raped and beaten her, and – perhaps even more painful to Ted – just how she had been moved to put herself in such a position; namely that she had wanted her father to catch her in the middle of meaningless and loveless sex, had wanted him to finally understand how his hedonistic womanizing made her feel. Though Ted begins to cry at the wheel, Ruth, like her father had during her driver's test, shows absolutely no sympathy, insisting that he keep both his eyes on the road or let her drive. When they finally reach the airport, Ruth simply congratulates her father on his good driving; though she says nothing more, at least Ruth kisses her father goodbye.³²⁸

To some extent, contingency plays a role in what transpires next. While Ruth is away on her European promotional tour, she sends various postcards back to the States: to Allan, to Eddie, to Hannah, and to her father. In her postcard to Ted, she apologizes for being so harsh to him the last time they spoke. But Ted kills himself before the postcard arrives.

Upon learning of her father's death, Ruth is shocked by what she herself perceives as “an absence of feeling for her father; what she felt was *no* feeling for him.”³²⁹ The confounding mixture of love and hate Ted normally evokes in her is missing, in its place a mild surprise at his suicide, as Ruth had “not thought her father capable of committing suicide, because she'd never thought him capable of blaming himself for anything,”³³⁰ coupled with the steadfast certainty that it was her actions that had brought her father to kill himself.

Significantly, after his funeral, Ruth rarely if ever reflects on her father. Though Ted did much to shape Ruth, both in good and bad ways, now that he has taken his own life there are few who seem to mourn the loss, least of all the daughter he loved so well. In a symbolic victory for the countless women Ted Cole used up and discarded in his long life, Ruth now moves on from her father's death with hardly a tear to shed.

Though Ted may be gone, his legacy sadly does not disappear with his passing. Aside from the various women he damaged in his self-serving life, there is the inarguable influence Ted Cole had on his daughter Ruth. To his credit, Ted honored the one precondition Marion (or more precisely her lawyer) laid out upon her departure, namely that he would never again drive

³²⁸ *Widow*, p. 337

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 434 Emphasis in original.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 432

drunk; should he not uphold this agreement, Marion would do everything in her power to wrest Ruth from him. Not only does Ted himself swear off hard liquor for the rest of his life, he goes to great lengths, as detailed above, to make an excellent driver out of the daughter he so loves.

Yet that seems to be the sum total of Ted's positive contributions to Ruth's life: Ted for example makes it very clear to Ruth that he has a very low opinion of the institution of marriage as a whole, believes that all men are fundamentally unfaithful, and, as he puts it to his own daughter, Marion had "failed the mother test," thus instilling in Ruth the suspicion that she might very well make a horrible mother herself, a fear only partly dispelled after her talks about her mother with Eddie O'Hare.³³¹ In so doing he not only succeeds in poisoning Ruth towards the memory of her mother; as the primary male figure for much of her life, he provides her with a very disheartening image of the merits of the male gender and of monogamous relationships as such.

Aside from the views, opinions and half-truths Ted plants in his only daughter's mind, there is of course the reprehensibility of his own hedonistic behavior, something Ruth begins to be aware of at the tender age of ten. Nor should this be misconstrued as being limited only to womanizing; as a role model, Ted is equally disappointing. A boy who never grew up, as Ruth comes to see him, it is nearly impossible to prove him wrong on a topic, and if she succeeds, he then pouts about it, a case in point being their final squash match. In all their years of play, not once does it occur to Ted to let his daughter win; when she finally does succeed in beating him fairly, he is so embarrassed he hardly even congratulates her.

Perhaps one of the greatest disappointments to Ruth is her discovery of Hannah's one-night-stand with her father. After kicking the two of them out of the family house Ruth bitterly reflects:

Since [her] earliest memories – not only since she'd begun to read, but from the first time her father had told her a story – books, and the characters in them, had entered her life and remained fixed there. Books, and the characters in them, were more "fixed" in Ruth's life than were her father and her best friend – not to mention the *men* in her life, who for the most part had proven themselves to be almost as unreliable as Ted and Hannah had.³³²

This passage succinctly shows the greatest pain of Ruth's life: that she is, time and again and in various guises, abandoned or betrayed by those she places her trust in. As such, the pinnacle of Ted's self-serving life – which is, of course, the ultimate irony for both an author of children's books and the parent who had once fought so hard to hold onto his daughter – is its

³³¹ *Widow*, pp. 267, 285

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 307

inglorious end. Rather than attempt to come to terms with his daughter, or to mend his ways, he leaves her in a decidedly more permanent manner than had her missing mother, his suicide the ultimate abandonment.³³³

Women's Choices

Apart from the often-painful relations between parents and children, *Widow* also revisits what may for lack of a better term be called “women’s choices.” In doing so, it both continues and expands upon an admirable Irving tradition. *The World According to Garp* examined various forms of brutality against women and the consequences of that brutality – notably including the transformation of women, in the form of the Ellen Jamesians, into perpetrators of intolerance and even violence themselves. *The Hotel New Hampshire*, in turn, more specifically dealt with the crime of rape, and with the at times nearly insurmountable task of overcoming it for both women and men. Finally *The Cider House Rules* examined in great detail the highly volatile and complex issue of abortion.

Yet, commendable as Irving’s repeatedly choosing to deal with such uncomfortable topics may be, a certain weakness of sorts may be identified in all of the above-mentioned novels: namely that, while women are certainly prevalent among the main characters, often as victims, sometimes as very strong characters in their own right, and at times as both, what we chiefly read is how *men* feel about and attempt to come to terms with issues that intrinsically and deeply affect *women*. While in her too-short life Jenny Fields is certainly a force for good in *Garp*, we actually read very little of her views beyond her own desire to remain in control of her life and body, which led to the unique circumstances of T.S. Garp’s conception. In *The Cider House Rules*, while characters such as Candy and Rose Rose choose to and do receive abortions, we glean next to nothing from the novel as to how they feel about such a monumental decision. And in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, among the novels examined in this work certainly the one where we can read the most about how women feel about and respond to the hardships in their lives, the protagonist and narrator nonetheless remains a man.

In short, what has been missing in the literature discussed to this point is a novel that, to a considerable extent, examines the issue of women’s life choices as told by a female

³³³ Ironically, though Ted’s suicide certainly can be considered an act of moral cowardice, and though in killing himself he indeed *is* yet another person to abandon Ruth, Irving’s own thoughts on the matter reveal Ted’s motives to have at least a tinge of decency: “Ted Cole kills himself because he sees how his own sexual misconduct has influenced his daughter’s sexual choices – not because he feels guilty for sleeping with his daughter’s best friend.” So we see that, while Ted still chose escape over self-improvement, he was not wholly without a conscience. Cf. BookBrowse (2000), p. 1

protagonist. Though he cannot quite bring himself to abandon the distancing mechanism of an omniscient narrator, for the first time in John Irving's career his true protagonist is a woman, and we are granted access not only to her actions and choices (as we have already been allowed to sample with Jenny Fields, Susie the Bear, and Franny Berry), but importantly also to her inner, emotional world.

We are not told much about Ruth's childhood following Marion's departure, though we do know that Ted doted on his only daughter. It is also noteworthy that Ruth not only attended the Exeter Academy just as her late brothers and illustrious father had before her, but that she took up her father's sport, squash, getting in good enough shape to eventually play on the boys' varsity team.

At Exeter Ruth also came to know Hannah Grant, who would become her best friend. Though they got along well even as teenagers, the two girls were very different, not least in their approach to the opposite sex: Ruth, perhaps informed by her father's aforementioned maxim that all men are fundamentally unfaithful,³³⁴ is extremely cautious about sex, not only retaining her virginity through high school, but even throughout college. Hannah, in radical contrast, would have a total of three abortions, one in high school and two in college (Ruth and Hannah would decide to attend the same college to "stick together"), their disparate levels of sexual experience often putting the two girls and later women at loggerheads.

As Ruth and Hannah mature, the latter remains by far the more sexually adventurous (and generally adventurous) of the two, eventually becoming a successful journalist and changing boyfriends on a regular basis. It would be too convenient, however, to make Hannah out as the "bad girl" and Ruth the "good girl" of the story; in actuality, though Ruth has far fewer boyfriends than Hannah, and dates far less frequently, there seems to be little difference in the quality or longevity of her relationships; Ruth herself is amazed at the stream of bad boyfriends she subjects herself to – the relationships tend to be short-lived, and she is often ashamed of the men she dates – and even wonders if on a subconscious level she always picks men she *knows* will never last.

At the point in the novel where the reader reenters Ruth's life (fall 1990), most but not all of Ruth's bad boyfriends are behind her; her current suitor being her editor, Allan. A far cry from being yet another worthless boyfriend, Allan presents Ruth with a very different sort of dilemma. While it is clear that Allan is in love with her, and very much wants to marry her, her own feelings are hardly so clear or unbridled, as one of Ruth's first talks with Hannah about Allan reveals:

"He loves me, he wants to marry me, and I think I would be happy living with him."

³³⁴ *Widow*, p. 285

“Did you say you loved him?” Hannah asked. “I didn’t hear you say that.”
“I didn’t say that,” Ruth admitted. “I don’t know that. I don’t know how to tell,” she added.
“If you can’t tell, you don’t love him,” Hannah said.³³⁵

Ruth’s feelings for Allan continue to be very confused; though she knows he is a good man, and would surely be good for her, she is not convinced that that is enough to make him the right man for her to marry. As Josie P. Campbell, one of the few Irving scholars to discuss *Widow* at length, succinctly puts it: “Allan, although not sexually attractive to her, is polite, caring, articulate, well-read, non-aggressive with women, and loyal. In short, Allan is safe.”³³⁶ The problem seems to be that Ruth, likely due to her disillusionment with past boyfriends and surely in no small part to the less than shining example of her own womanizing father, is herself guilty of taking a “means to an end” approach. The narrator helps to put the problem in perspective:

As usual, when it came to the subject of marriage and children, Ruth had put the cart before the horse; she was jumping ahead to the question of having a child before she’d answered the question of whom, or whether, to marry. And Ruth had no one she could talk to about this, except Allan. Her best friend didn’t want a child – Hannah was Hannah – and her father was [...] well, her father. Now, even more than when she’d been a child, Ruth wanted to talk to her mother.³³⁷

In short, Ruth is both attracted to and repulsed by the thought of marriage. For one thing, she fears losing her independence, a degree of which is surely part and parcel of the communion of married life. Further, Ruth has never truly felt in love with anyone, and Allan is unfortunately no exception. What Irving masterfully portrays here is the split in Ruth’s feelings on the matter: while she recognizes that her feelings for Allan and motivations for marriage are anything but ideal, this realization does little to reduce the urgent desire, accompanied by the ticking of her biological clock, to marry and conceive a child.³³⁸

Ruth’s ambivalence toward the prospect of marrying Allan plays out in both her writing and her personal choices regarding dealings with other men. Though still very much considering marrying Allan, Ruth has for example no qualms about entering into a meaningless fling with Scott Saunders, a decision with very traumatic consequences. To truly grasp Ruth’s behavior, it is imperative to keep in mind the chronological progression of her actions. The painful encounter with Scott and Ruth’s subsequent triumphs, both on the court and behind the wheel, over her father, all take place immediately before she leaves the country for her European promotional tour. Amazingly, while in Amsterdam Ruth also allows herself a semi-sexual and

³³⁵ *Widow*, pp. 236-37

³³⁶ Campbell, p. 165

³³⁷ *Widow*, p. 286

³³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 286, 313, 346

physically intimate flirtation with one of her most ardent fans, a teenage Dutch boy named Wim, reasoning with herself that “After all, she was alone in Europe; she was probably going home to get married. A no-regrets fling with a young man, with a *much* younger man...wasn't that the kind of thing that older women who were about to marry even older men *did*?”³³⁹

Ruth seems to bear no pangs of guilt whatsoever for her brief involvement with Wim; as for Scott, he serves only as further, painful proof to Ruth that she cannot bear to have another bad boyfriend, that she wants to escape the cycle of her relationships to date. After the horror of witnessing Rooie's murder, Ruth's mind is finally made up, and she escapes to the safety of Allan's arms.

Ruth's short-lived marriage to Allan is a mixed blessing; following Allan's wholly unexpected death, only three years after their having married, she reflects that

If [she] would never have confessed that their sex life had been only tolerable at the start, she later would have described even this aspect as something she'd learned to enjoy. Ruth had found a companion she could talk to, and he was someone she liked to listen to as well; furthermore, he was a good father to the only child she would ever have. And the child [...] ah, her whole life had changed because of Graham, and for that, too, she would always love Allan.³⁴⁰

The night of Allan's death – and here we see the forces of contingency at work once more – Ruth, worried about how the autobiographical aspects of her latest novel, *My Last Bad Boyfriend*, might make Allan feel (the protagonist, too, has deep-seated reservations about marrying an older suitor), tries to tell him more about her past, and about how much their relationship means to her:

“It's not just that I love you and Graham,” Ruth said. “It's that I will appreciate forever the life you've spared me *from*, the life I *had* [...]”

“I know – you've told me.” He sounded slightly less patient with her now, as if he didn't want to hear her say, again, how she'd repeatedly got herself in trouble as a single woman; how, until Allan, her judgment (when it came to men) was not to be trusted.

“In Amsterdam [...]” she tried to say, but then she thought that, to be honest, she should begin with Scott Saunders and the squash game – not to mention the après-squash game. But her voice had stopped. [...] Already she was evading what she wanted to say! She felt as crippled by cowardice as she had in Rooie's wardrobe closet.³⁴¹

³³⁹ *Widow*, p. 376

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 507-08

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 510

The true nature of Ruth's ties to Allan becomes all the more evident after his death. At the funeral, the narrator informs us that: "Understandably, everyone in attendance assumed that Ruth cried so bitterly because of how much she'd loved her husband. She *had* loved Allan, or at least she'd learned to. But even more, Ruth had loved her *life* with him."³⁴² And a year later, when Hannah suggests that Ruth begin dating again, Ruth is appalled at the thought: "Not only was she still in love with Allan and her memory of their life together, but Ruth felt chilled at the prospect of confronting her own bad judgment *again*."³⁴³

Even a cursory inspection of Ruth's thoughts and statements shows the difficulties in her bond to Allan, in why exactly she needs him: the emphasis is always on what Allan provides Ruth (security, a child), and on what he protects her from (the foolishness and consequences of her otherwise poor choices in men), rarely on Allan himself. And after his death, when Ruth has difficulties letting go, we note above that she still feels in love "with Allan *and her memory of their life together*." Never do we hear Ruth simply say that she loves Allan, or that she is in love with him. He seems to have been far more of a (short-lived) life preserver than a true love interest, to have been more "the lesser of two evils" (the alternative being dating other men, at the risk of simply repeating her depressing past experiences) than the man of her dreams.

The inadequacies of Ruth's relationship with Allan, conveniently cut short as if by a *deus ex machina* less than three years after their having brought to the world the child Ruth had so longed for, are rendered in even starker contrast when compared to her whirlwind courtship with Harry Hoekstra. Magically, Harry proposes to Ruth after only a *week* together, and she accepts. She does make one simple (and understandable) caveat to Harry, who is coincidentally the same age Allan would have been: "Just don't die on me, Harry."³⁴⁴ Yet what is perhaps most telling about the difference in relationships is that, whereas with Allan the reader was exposed to Ruth's constant inner turmoil, her battles with the pros and cons of a life with Allan, in the case of Harry we see neither pros nor cons: Ruth has finally found a home in Harry; there is no need for debate.

In closing this discussion of "women's choices" in *A Widow for One Year*, two last points are of special importance. Firstly, the unique quality of Irving's characterizations, in no short supply in *Widow*, is how complex he allows the depiction of our life choices (male or female) to remain and how he on the one hand allows them to be influenced by forces that are both mundane and bordering on the banal: Ruth Cole is in many ways only a clearly female variant of Irving's recurring "abandoned child" motif, and, as such, a likely candidate for entering into a less

³⁴² *Widow*, p. 500

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 518

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 548

than ideal relationship simply for the sake of safety. Indeed, a year after Allan's death, she is at risk of falling into the same trap again. To recall the quotation from the previous page, she not only still felt bound to her memory of Allan, but also "felt chilled at the prospect of confronting her own bad judgment *again*." On the other hand, Irving's convincingly human depictions do not overly dwell on or restrict themselves to our weaknesses and baser instincts, the human equation also allowing and certainly needing other variables that are noble, perhaps even sublime: yes, Ruth does fear to start again, and yes, she does want a father and guardian for her young child; but her bond to Harry is clean and unadulterated; as Eddie and Hannah cannot help but recognize on the weekend of Ruth and Harry's wedding, their happiness seems to practically radiate from them. Far from repeating the mistakes of the past, Ruth has moved forward from a relationship that, while yielding her a son, had largely only been what we might term "functional"³⁴⁵ to one that is (for both partners, and presumably in the long run for her son as well) "fulfilling." It is fitting in this regard that the very last time we are made privy to Ruth's own reflections, they are not only on her own happiness, but also show a more noble sense of sympathy for the mother she has demonized for most of her life. Just one day before Marion mystically appears on Eddie's doorstep, Ruth enjoys a quiet moment in the yard of her father's house, which, after the wedding weekend, is to be put up for sale:

Now it occurred to Ruth that, on other cold nights [...] her mother must have stood in this yard, under these same pitiless stars. Ruth knew she'd been lucky. My next book should be about fortune, she thought: about how fortune and misfortune were unequally distributed, if not at birth then in the course of circumstances beyond our control; and in the seemingly random pattern of colliding events – the people we meet, when we meet them, and if or when these important people might chance to meet someone else. Ruth had had only a *little misfortune*. Why was it that her mother had had such a *lot*?
 "Oh, Mommy," Ruth said, to the cold stars, "come enjoy your grandson while you still can."³⁴⁶

Writing, Imagination and Memory

When asked, in a 2000 interview, why he had chosen to make so many characters in *Widow* writers, John Irving responded:

³⁴⁵ This relational pattern is of course reminiscent of the Victorian pattern of a first, "wrong" love followed by a second, "true" love. It should be borne in mind, however, that the benefit of such experience, of learning from a failed relationship and taking those lessons to heart in one's future relationships, was initially the preserve of the male *Bildungsheld*; female *Bildungsheldinnen* were granted this boon only much later, cf. Uhsadel, p. 16 ff.)

³⁴⁶ *Widow*, p. 568 Note that "a little misfortune" refers back to the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, from Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*: "...as for this little lady, the best thing I can wish her is a *little misfortune*."

Once I made Ruth and her father writers, I thought that everyone should be a writer – partly out of mischief, knowing what fun I would have comparing and contrasting the kinds of writers they are, but also because making the four of them writers allowed me to intertwine their lives with what they wrote about. Ted's stories for children are arguably stories for young mothers: the young mothers are Ted's principal targets – both his principal book buyers and his sexual prey.

[...]

Ruth is more autobiographical as a novelist than she is willing to admit, but her fiction goes far beyond her personal life; it is much more imagined than it is strictly autobiographical. Eddie, of course, cannot imagine anything. And Ruth's mother, Marion [...] well, her writing is painful. It's storytelling as therapy. I say, if it does her good, let her do it.³⁴⁷

In discussing those main characters who are also writers, Ted is certainly the least likeable, if by no means the least skilled. Ted certainly *does* possess storytelling skills – above all when reading his stories aloud; Ted, unlike his daughter, very much enjoying public readings – and knows how to capitalize on them. But that is precisely the problem. Ted is a limited writer who has found a very profitable niche, and when we meet him in 1958 he spends almost no time writing, concerning himself with drawing illustrations for his books instead.

Yet there would be nothing reprehensible about Ted Cole, were he simply a niche author. What is reprehensible is his use of storytelling as a tool: as Irving himself says above, Ted writes primarily for young mothers, who will read the stories aloud to their children. Ted's penchant for seducing this very group of women, and in particular often faculty wives, is what forced the Coles to constantly relocate prior to settling in the Hamptons. Another case in point is Ted's manipulations of his so-called models: under the pretense of having them pose for potential illustrations in "an upcoming book" (for which he never actually uses a single one of them), he invariably photographs them in a number of degrading poses, as well as sleeping with them until he grows bored and discards them. When Ted decides to kill himself, he collects all of the photographs – there are hundreds of them – in a large trash bag and leaves a note for the maid to throw them out before his daughter returns, perhaps the only instance of him showing some semblance of remorse.

If Ted is a writer of moderate talent who exploits his gifts to the fullest, Eddie is a far more likable if also untalented writer, all of his novels rehashing in largely unimaginative ways the motif of the younger man falling in love with the older woman. And this is a pity, in light of the fact that the summer of 1958, and his experiences with Marion, ignited a spark in Eddie. On the day Marion leaves, he realizes that

it wasn't Ted who'd taught him anything. What Eddie O'Hare had learned from Ted Cole, he'd learned from reading him. [...] That Friday [...] Eddie O'Hare had a life-

³⁴⁷ BookBrowse (2000), pp. 1-2

changing realization: if the writer's assistant had become a writer, it was *Marion* who'd given him his voice. If when he'd been in her arms – in her bed, inside her – he'd felt, for the first time, that he was almost a man, it was losing her that had given him something to say. It was the thought of his life *without* Marion that provided Eddie O'Hare with the authority to write.³⁴⁸

Sadly, though the fire Marion kindles in Eddie's heart will never fade (it keeps going for the 37 years he has to wait for her return), the creative seed their affair plants in him does not fall on fertile ground: though Eddie is a good enough writer to make a modest living, his books are tediously uniform in terms of content and massively lacking in imaginative force. In short, as what we could term a fictional "proto-Irving," i.e., what could have happened to John Irving had he not been able to harness and nurture his own considerable imaginative powers, Eddie is wholly incapable of transcending the autobiographical. At least until the point in time where the novel ends, Eddie seems doomed to repeat and reiterate the most important relationship of his life, his emotional inability to move beyond it in real life mirrored by his creative inability to tell stories of any other kind.

Whereas both male writers would seem in some way limited, their female counterparts in *Widow* fare better. Eddie is amazed to learn from Marion of her own connection to writing. Though Ted had gotten her pregnant when she was only seventeen, she later went back to school, attaining first her high-school diploma equivalency and later (and unlike Ted, who had been accepted to and later asked to leave Harvard) a college degree. In fact, Marion was just preparing to start as a writer in earnest when her two sons were taken from her.³⁴⁹

Yet Marion undergoes a metamorphosis of sorts over the course of the book. When Eddie meets and falls in love with her in the first part of the novel, she explains to him that she is unable to write because every time she tries to activate her imagination, she can only think of her sons. Yet when we gain a glimpse of Marion's novels, written under a pseudonym, in the second part, it is clear that, through the stories she tells, Marion is very clearly facing and working through her memories of and longing for her sons: her protagonist, a policewoman named Margaret McDermid, switches from Homicide to Missing Persons, where she eventually becomes obsessed with an unsolvable case involving two young American boys who disappeared years ago. Thus, though Marion seems blessed with more talent, she has been irrevocably damaged; her writing is little more than therapy, as she herself readily admits.³⁵⁰ Interestingly, once Ruth discovers who "Alice Somerset" truly is, she is amazed her mother was actually able to write about such a deeply painful topic; Eddie, on the other hand, applauds her

³⁴⁸ *Widow*, p. 123

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 585

doing so.³⁵¹ Eddie, of course, has very good reasons for his stance: not only is there his enduring fascination with Marion; her writing also mirrors his own in that both are continually drawn to reexamine the most important events of their lives, Eddie's being bittersweet and Marion's devastating.

Yet the truest writer, the truest storyteller in *Widow* is doubtless Ruth Cole. Further, whereas Ted, Eddie and Marion all represent certain aspects of John Irving or aspects of what he might have become, Ruth is clearly the closest we see to an "Irving avatar" in the story; she as a novelist is preoccupied with many of the same questions that Irving has concerned himself with throughout his career.

We can for example see many parallels between Ruth and Irving in terms of their views and personalities. For one thing Ruth is very much speaking with Irving's voice when she reflects on the exploration of the "unseemly" or morally questionable topics in novels; Ruth is frustrated by the fact that there is a distinct double standard for women and men when it comes to exploring the unseemly, which she is accused of exaggerating. Ruth reflects that she is not "entirely sure that she *did* exaggerate the unseemly. Her worst fear was that the unseemly had become so commonplace that one *couldn't* exaggerate it."³⁵² Irving has been quoted as claiming: "The bizarre is so commonplace we should stop calling it bizarre."³⁵³ In her diary, Ruth writes:

It galls me that seeking out the seedy, the sordid, the sexual, and the deviant is the expected (if not altogether acceptable) behavior of male writers; it would surely benefit me, as a writer, if I had the courage to seek out more of the seedy, the sordid, the sexual, and the deviant myself. But women who seek out such things are made to feel ashamed, or else they sound stridently ridiculous in defending themselves – as if they're bragging.³⁵⁴

Irving himself has said:

The decision to make Ruth Cole a novelist was secondary. She was always a woman, and one who was successful in her career [...] But everything that haunts her and fills her with self-doubt is something that women think about and worry more about than men. Men don't hold themselves accountable for sexual misjudgment – or they don't hold themselves as accountable as women do. Many men have made countless bad-girlfriend choices; they tend to shrug them off.
[...]
So many women today have careers that are in advance of their personal lives, or at the expense of their personal lives. Men, too – but men concern themselves

³⁵¹ *Widow*, pp. 429, 431

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 341

³⁵³ Cited in *Observer* (2001), p. 1, see also *The Atlantic* (1998), p. 3

³⁵⁴ *Widow*, p. 345

about this less. If a man is successful, and has been married three times, and has not a single speaking relationship with any of his children from these fallen marriages, the foremost thing about him is still his success. But a woman, no matter how successful she is – in any career – sees herself as a failure if her personal life is unsatisfying, or if she’s ashamed of it. Other people, men and women, tend to look upon such a woman as a failure, too.³⁵⁵

Both Irving and his protagonist Ruth, then, are aggravated by the hypocrisy of the discrepancy between women and men in terms of the unseemly – both in the real lives of men and women, and in which topics convention “allows” them to explore. Thus yet another layer is added to the characterization in the novel: not only do we see the dilemmas Ruth’s personal choices regarding sex, love and marriage create for her, but are also – not insignificantly through the device of her diary³⁵⁶ – granted access to her personal frustration at the trammels she feels have been placed on her as a result of her sex.

Insofar as Ruth’s style and themes are concerned, she also shares many telltale qualities with her creator. For example, Ruth is accused, both by her friend Hannah and by her professional critics, of repeating or recycling characters:

After three novels, Ruth was familiar with the charge that her characters were “recycled” from one book to the next, and that there were also “signature eccentricities” that she repeated in novel after novel. I suppose I *do* develop a fairly limited cast of characters, Ruth considered. But, in her experience, people who accused an author of repetition were usually referring to a detail that they hadn’t liked the *first* time. After all, even in literature, if one *likes* something, what is the objection to repeating it?³⁵⁷

Here Irving skillfully links two separate charges against Ruth’s and his own writing, one being the reuse of certain character types, the other being “signature eccentricities,” which in this context can be considered synonymous with the aforementioned “unseemly” and “bizarre.” Ruth, like Irving,³⁵⁸ readily admits that she tends to reuse or modify past characters. As for repeating *themes*, she echoes Irving³⁵⁹ in seeing no harm in their repetition; Ruth’s suspicion (seen in the passage above) that critics’ accusations of repetitiveness actually have more to do with their disapproval of the subject matter harmonize quite clearly with Irving’s more blunt claim that

³⁵⁵ BookBrowse (2000), p. 1. Ruth also shares Irving’s stance on revenge (namely advocacy), as can be seen in her immediate physical revenge on Scott Saunders and embittered verbal attack on the mysterious widow who had plagued her so. Cf. *Widow* pp. 328, 381, 532-33. For Irving on revenge, see also p. 4 of the interview mentioned in this footnote.

³⁵⁶ This connects to the use of internal texts in the female apprenticeship novel, cf. Uhsadel, pp. 121-23.

³⁵⁷ *Widow*, p. 249

³⁵⁸ boston.com (2005), p. 1

³⁵⁹ Academy (2005), p. 5; Observer (2001), pp. 1-2

I've always been verbally abused for the sexual explicitness of my books, usually by the kind of prudes who lack the courage to say so. People don't write that my novels offended them. They say they're "overlong" and "aesthetically unpleasing." It's so obvious. It's perfectly fine to dislike a John Irving novel, but I'd like somebody for once to be honest about why they dislike it. If they want to say, "I dislike it because there must be 150 mentions of the word 'penis'" [...] Don't give me this BS that the novel is a "sprawling mess." I know how to build a story. If you don't like me, you don't like my subject matter.³⁶⁰

Ruth, like John Irving, very much respects the late Graham Greene: while Irving has said of Greene that he "is such a good storyteller that I forgive him for being as modern as he is,"³⁶¹ Ruth even goes so far as to name her first and only son after him. Yet in typical Irving fashion, Greene's role in the novel is multi-tiered: not only is Ruth a great admirer of Greene's works, Allan gives her the Greene biography by Norman Sherry as a present. The book itself (an actual book) touches once more on the question of the unseemly, as well as on to which degree storytellers use imagination as opposed to memory in their craft. While Ruth is quickly disenchanted with the biography – preferring to enjoy Greene's works unalloyed by the potentially interfering influence of biographical elements³⁶² – it also opens the door to Irving's most extensive and forthright examination to date of the relation between imagination and memory. While Ted, Eddie and Marion all contribute in their own ways to *Widow's* investigation of the role of imagination, it is most clearly brought to light in Ruth's own reflections on it, spurred by her ongoing debate over the matter with her journalist friend Hannah. In a 1998 interview, Irving claimed that he had great fun with "Ruth's obdurate denial that there is any truth to Hannah's accusation that Ruth is an autobiographical writer. It is enduringly fascinating to me how simplistically that subject is treated, both by writers themselves and by people writing about writers. When the writer is any good, it's complicated. It's a subject I think can be fascinating – and very funny."³⁶³

In the case of Ruth, imagination has been part and parcel of her everyday life from her earliest childhood. Not only is her house dominated by countless black-and-white photographs

³⁶⁰ boston.com (2005), p. 1

³⁶¹ Academy (2005), p. 4

³⁶² *Widow*, pp. 312-14, p. 345. Here we may see how Irving makes use of a single source for a myriad of purposes. Not only do we as readers get to see Greene's views on the unseemly, imagination and memory; we are also privy to Ruth's (i.e., a filtered version of Irving's, informed by an (imagined) female perspective) response to those views. What is more, in keeping with Irving's own distrust of over-exaggerating the importance of auto/biographical elements in recognizing good storytelling, we also see Ruth's disappointment with and eventual abandonment of Greene's biography which, far from enriching her enjoyment of his works, serves only to distract and dilute the purity of the experience. Here we may recall how Helen Holm, after the death of T.S. Garp, fought off several would-be biographers of her late husband before allowing a trusted friend to take on the task, telling them, just as Garp himself would have: "Read the work. Forget the life." Cf. *Garp*, p. 416

³⁶³ bookpage (1998), p. 2

of her dead brothers, each with its own story, but even as a very small child she senses how monumental their loss was, especially to her distant mother. So, whether she wants to or not, Ruth is indoctrinated into the wistful longing for brothers she never knew, which requires and activates her imagination.

Sadly, Ruth soon also has to overcome a more direct loss. Whereas, Ruth being a replacement for her brothers, she of course never knew them, she does know her mother. Yet Marion abandons her family when Ruth is only four years old, meaning for the vast majority of her life, Ruth must imagine her as well. Marion is however (in her own eyes, at least) to some extent justified in leaving Ruth, her logic being that it is better for Ruth to have no mother at all than to have a bad one, the only kind Marion feels she can be to her daughter. Yet, in an example of how the battles between parents can blind them to the repercussions for their children, Marion not only takes all but two of the photographs of Thomas and Timothy – leaving a picture of the boys in front of Exeter Academy as a gift to Eddie (which Ted promptly reclaims) and one of Marion herself as a young and happy mother (simply because it happened to be at the frame shop for repairs) – but the negatives as well; determined to take from Ted all record of the sons she had so loved, she fails to consider or simply does not care that in so doing she is also depriving her own daughter of all of the pictures, presumably for the rest of her life.

These factors conspire to put Ruth in a situation in many ways similar to that of the young John Irving. Not only did John never see a picture of his father as a child, no one in his family would tell him anything about him. This forced him to imagine his biological father, with two major results. The first was a nearly “automatic” demonization of his father because, as Irving has said, “I assumed because no adult ever discussed him, he must be bad.”³⁶⁴ Secondly, Irving feels that having to imagine a father he never knew contributed greatly to making him a writer.³⁶⁵ For her part Ruth never received anything more than cryptic answers to her questions about Marion, and Ted adamantly refused to tell his daughter how Thomas and Timothy died until she had passed his own home-made driving test.³⁶⁶ As such she, too, was forced to imagine lost family members from a very early age. And, storyteller that he was, Ted Cole also explained the boys’ deaths (not what happened, but what death means) to his daughter in ways that also may have sparked her imaginative abilities:

³⁶⁴ New York Times (2005), p. 1

³⁶⁵ Academy (2005), p.1

³⁶⁶ Here the otherwise detestable Ted Cole demonstrates the thoroughly eccentric but also laudable qualities of many father figures in Irving’s writings, and is especially reminiscent of T.S. Garp: not in withholding this information from his daughter, but in devoting countless hours to making sure she would be a better and safer driver than her ill-fated siblings, and in telling her the truth at what he likely felt was the absolute best point in time to ensure she never forgot the lesson, a form of benevolent if not necessarily beneficial paternal manipulation.

“So,” Ruth said, “tell me what *dead* is.”

[...]

“When you look at Thomas and Timothy in the photographs, do you remember the stories of what they were doing?” her father asked her. “In the pictures, I mean – do you remember what they were doing in the pictures?”

“Yes,” Ruth answered, although she wasn’t sure she could remember what they were doing in *every* picture.

“Well, then... Thomas and Timothy are alive in your *imagination*,” her father told her. “When you’re dead, when your body is broken, it just means that we can’t see your body anymore – your body is gone.”

“It’s under the ground,” Ruth corrected him.

“We can’t see Thomas and Timothy anymore,” her father insisted, “but they are not gone from our imaginations. When we think of them, we see them there.”³⁶⁷

When we catch up with Ruth in her thirties, though she is a successful novelist, she is beginning to have serious doubts about her own ability to imagine good stories. These doubts are exacerbated by her constant exchanges on the subject with her old friend Hannah, who essentially sees each of her friend’s novels as a reshuffling of Hannah and Ruth’s own experiences.

Hannah was a journalist. She presumed that all novels were substantially autobiographical. Ruth was a novelist; she looked at her books and saw what she had invented. Hannah looked at them and saw what was real – namely, variations of Hannah herself. (The truth, of course, lay somewhere in between.)

In Ruth’s novels, there was usually a woman character who was an adventurer – the *Hannah* character, Hannah called her. And there was always another woman character who held herself back; the less-bold character, Ruth called her – the *Ruth* character, Hannah said.³⁶⁸

Though Ruth adamantly insists on the primacy of imagination in her storytelling, she herself is increasingly forced to recognize that, though she inarguably does use her imagination in her writing, it is equally undeniable that events in her real life shape and inform it as well. Already deeply unsure of her feelings for Allan, and further shaken by her run-in with Scott Saunders, Ruth feels the seed of a new novel forming in her mind on the plane to Europe and her promotional tour. From her diary, we see how Ruth begins to find a synthesis of her own on the relation between imagination and memory³⁶⁹:

Norman Sherry, [Graham] Greene’s biographer, writes of “the novelist’s right – and need – to use his own and others’ experience.” Mr. Sherry thinks there is a ruthlessness to this “right” of the novelist, to this terrible “need.” But the

³⁶⁷ *Widow*, p. 20.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

³⁶⁹ In this context, “memory” should be understood to represent not only the faculty of memory, but the use of real-life, autobiographical experience in storytelling. Memory in the narrower sense of our (limited) capacity to accurately record and recall information will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

relationship between observation and imagination is more complicated than mere ruthlessness. One must imagine a good story; then one must make the details seem real. It helps, when making the details *seem* real, if some of the details *are* real. Personal experience is overrated, but observation is essential.³⁷⁰

Though Ruth can admit this to herself, in the relative privacy of her diary, it is nevertheless a major departure from her initial stance on the sanctity of the imagination and her derision of autobiographical writers. Following a lecture she holds in Amsterdam, Ruth grows increasingly aware of her own hypocrisy, a realization that at the same time frees her to move beyond it:

Here she was, espousing the purity of imagination as opposed to memory, extolling the superiority of the invented detail as opposed to the merely autobiographical. Here she was, singing the virtues of creating wholly imagined characters as opposed to populating a novel with personal friends and family members – “ex-lovers, and those other limited, disappointing people from our actual lives” – and yet the lecture had worked well again.

[...]

Ruth Cole’s credo amounted to a war against the *roman à clef*, a put-down of the auto-biographical novel, which now made her feel ashamed because she knew she was getting ready to write her most autobiographical novel to date. If Hannah had always accused her of writing about a Ruth character and a Hannah character, what was Ruth writing about now? Strictly a Ruth character who makes a bad, Hannah-like decision!

[...]

Novels were not arguments; a story worked, or it didn’t, on its own merits. What did it matter if a detail was real or imagined? What mattered was that the detail *seemed* real, and that it was absolutely the *best* detail for the circumstances. That wasn’t much of a theory, but it was all Ruth could truly commit herself to at the moment. It was time to retire that old lecture, and her penance was to endure the compliments for her *former* credo.³⁷¹

Though this may seem an admission of defeat, it is a crucial step in Ruth’s development, and it liberates her to write her next novel, which draws heavily not only on her own doubts about marrying Allan and string of bad boyfriends, but also on the murder she witnessed in Amsterdam. Further, as if in karmic recompense, only four years later Ruth is very much reconfirmed in her imaginative abilities, though at great personal cost. When she wakes to find Allan dead beside her, the next year of her life is almost preternaturally identical to that of her protagonist Jane Dash in her third novel, *Not for Children*. Though it is surely cold comfort to her, as an author she cannot help but be struck by how similar her experience is to what she had purely imagined. Also, as mentioned previously while becoming a mother had made Ruth if

³⁷⁰ *Widow*, p. 346. It is of course an excellent language game – and also points to a character flaw on the part of the protagonist – for *Ruth* to reflect on *ruthlessness*.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 386-87, see also Irving, *John Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, p. 5.

anything even less capable of understanding Marion's abandoning her, becoming a widow in turn makes Ruth more sympathetic:

In the same year, also unforeseen, Ruth had experienced a softening in her feelings toward her mother. Ruth had lost Allan, but she still had Graham. With her heightened awareness of how much she loved her only child, Ruth found herself sympathizing with Marion's efforts *not* to love another child – since Marion had already lost *two*.

How her mother had managed not to take her own life was a matter of amazement to Ruth, as was how Marion had even been *able* to have another child. All at once, why her mother had left her began to make sense. Marion hadn't wanted to love Ruth because she couldn't stand the idea of losing a third child. (Ruth had heard all this from Eddie, five years ago, but until she'd had a child and lost a husband, she didn't have either the experience or the imagination to believe it.)³⁷²

In essence, Ruth's realization (as regards the craft of storytelling) is much the same as that of T.S. Garp, namely that imagination and memory must work hand in hand to tell the best story. Further, Ruth's shock at realizing how accurately she had imagined the experience of widowhood, while significant for her development as a writer and as a woman, also carries on the Irving tradition of weaving prescient or near-prescient elements into his narratives, something we have seen in all of the novels discussed to this point.

Yet *Widow* does more than simply recall and perpetuate existent patterns of Irving's writing; it also builds on and expands them. For example, in *The World According to Garp*, Garp is frustrated by the limits of art: "‘Art doesn't help anyone,’ Garp said. ‘People can't really use it: they can't eat it, it won't shelter or clothe them – and if they're sick, it won't make them well.’ This, Helen knew, was Garp's thesis on the basic uselessness of art; he rejected the idea that art was of any social value whatsoever – that it could be, that it should be."³⁷³

Widow shows us, however, that art (in the form of literature) certainly can have a real-world value. Even if it is only demonstrated at the individual level, it is certainly her art that allows Ruth to cope with the deep-seated doubts she has as to the life she is leading, and later, to work through the trauma of having witnessed a murder: Ruth, like her mother, successfully uses writing as a form of therapy. Furthermore, we witness the synergistic interplay of art and life, as Ruth's writing on widowhood unexpectedly helps her to cope with the pain of the real experience, while at the same time that very pain helps her to better grasp her mother, who in turn Ruth can only access through the latter's own writings, thus opening the door for reconciliation and forgiveness.

³⁷² *Widow*, p. 516

³⁷³ *Garp*, pp. 179-80

Healing and Forgiveness

While she is still trying to decide whether or not to marry Allan, and shortly before she encounters Scott Saunders, Ruth thinks back on what Graham Greene had written on being a child:

“In childhood,” Greene himself had written (in *The Ministry of Fear*), “we live under the brightness of immortality – heaven is as near and actual as the seaside. Beside the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities: God is good, the grown-up man or woman knows the answer to every question, there is such a thing as truth, and justice is measured and faultless as a clock.”

That hadn't been *her* childhood. Ruth's mother had left her when she was four; there was no God; her father didn't tell the truth, or he wouldn't answer her questions – or both. And as for justice, her father had slept with so many women that Ruth couldn't keep count.³⁷⁴

Plainly, when we meet Ruth in her thirties she is a woman with much to forgive; understandably, she bears much anger for her absent mother and her immoral father, just to name a few. In this regard, too, Ruth reflects many of the views of her creator. When we first meet her as an adult, she gives a reading from her latest novel, which goes very well until she allows herself to be baited by a journalist in the follow-up question and answer session. Though Allan is frustrated at her inability to just let critics' and journalists' barbed remarks go and her readiness to “bite back,” Ruth replies: “But I like to bite back.”³⁷⁵ Unlike Allan, Ruth is more comfortable (for better or worse) in venting her more negative emotions. It is revealing to compare this to John Irving's own thoughts on anger:

Anger is fuel. Laughter is fuel. Joy is fuel. Love is, hate is, envy is. You just have to direct these emotions and put them to work for you. I've always been able to do that. When I lose my temper at a dinner party, my friends and family alternately feel sorry for me and are irritated with me. But it's just a release – like exercise, like eating good food or drinking good wine. I like anger, but only if it's contained, *directed*. Anthony Lewis once wrote a wonderful piece about Dickens in which he suggested that Dickens's energy was triumphant because his anger was directed very democratically, that absolutely everything made Dickens angry, *generously* angry – he singled out everyone. I try to do that, too. Make the targets specific, but have as broad a range of targets as possible.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ *Widow*, p. 304

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50

³⁷⁶ *The Atlantic* (1998), p. 5, see also *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, p. 47 for Greene on hate, p. 417, Günter Grass on staying angry and funny, something Irving has taken to heart.

The primary focus, however, in Ruth's maturation – which will be examined more closely in the *Bildungsroman* section of this chapter – is on her developing the ability to forgive: to forgive her mother, her father, and even herself. In short, over the course of the novel Ruth's imagination, memory and experiential pool are vastly expanded, as a result of which her illusions and preconceptions are increasingly stripped away, allowing her to more clearly recognize the culpability and near-villainy of the parent who didn't abandon her, and the all too human (yet indubitably more noble) motivations of the one who did.

Or, more precisely, Ruth grows to forgive Marion, as does Eddie, and, while initially wanting to hurt her father the way he hurt her – something she succeeds in far beyond her expectations or likely even her intentions – Ruth soon wants to reconcile with him, yet her apology does not arrive in time to prevent his suicide. Essentially what we see here, as with previous Irving protagonists – T.S. Garp and Franny Berry spring to mind – is a moral and pragmatic ability to move beyond pain, to let go of old and painful grievances. Ruth, initially incapable of such release, comes to learn it through painful experience, as a result of which, against all hope, she ultimately regains the mother she hasn't seen for 37 years. The otherwise laughable Eddie is also capable of forgiving Marion, allowing him to reclaim his first and greatest love. Though Ted, in his own way, kills himself for moral reasons – as Irving claims, “because he sees how his own sexual misconduct has influenced his daughter's sexual choices – not because he feels guilty for sleeping with his daughter's best friend”³⁷⁷ – it is nonetheless significant that, in choosing the cowardly path of suicide, Ted is the only one unable to move on: just as he never forgives Marion, he apparently now cannot find the strength to forgive himself for his daughter's sake. Ted gains nothing, and indeed is quickly forgotten by his own daughter.

Though the overarching theme in *Widow* certainly is forgiveness, it would be misrepresentative to portray such a rewardingly complex novel as promoting a blanket “feel-good” approach to life. Apart from the blood shed by forces both banal and universal, lives taken by snowplows and molemen, and the countless lives damaged by Ted Cole's philandering, the forgiveness the book clearly advocates is not without its limits: in *Widow*, there is a time and a place for revenge. Ruth quickly and brutally avenges herself on Scott Saunders for raping her, as a result of which she suffers little if any of the lasting trauma experienced by Franny Berry. And though Ruth surely never meant to push her father – a man she firmly believed incapable of remorse – to suicide, there is of course a fine irony to a man who had carelessly harmed and degraded so many women being undone by the daughter he had worked so hard to have all to himself.

³⁷⁷ bookbrowse (2000), p. 1

The last character to be mentioned in this regard is an elderly widow who takes issue with Ruth's book *Not for Children*, in which Ruth writes at length about the experience of being a widow, though at the time she has never even been married herself. As the "true" widow writes Ruth in an anonymous letter, "...I will pray that you will truly love your husband – and that you will lose him. What I will pray for you is that *you* become a widow for the rest of your life. Then you will know how untruthfully you have written about the real world."³⁷⁸ This not being enough, she even crashes Ruth's wedding to Allan, just to see Ruth's face and tell her: "I want to see your face again, when you're a widow," the angry widow said. "I can't wait for that."³⁷⁹

Much later in the novel, at a public reading in Amsterdam (her second visit, a year after Allan's death) Ruth again encounters the angry widow, though she initially fails to recognize her. The (other) widow, for her part, has since remarried, though she had claimed she would love and miss her deceased husband to the end of her days. Having now become an avid Christian, she wants to ask Ruth for her forgiveness.

Harry Hoekstra, who is attending the reading in the hopes of getting to talk to Ruth afterward, not only notices (as a recently retired policeman would) but *admires*³⁸⁰ how much bottled-up anger seems to reside in Ruth:

Although Ruth signed books for more than an hour without complaint, there was one mildly shocking occurrence. It suggested to Harry that Ruth was a lot less friendly than she'd at first appeared; indeed, at some level, Ruth struck Harry as one of the angriest people he'd ever seen.

Harry had always been attracted to people who contained a lot of anger. As a police officer, he'd found that *uncontained* anger was nothing but a menace to him. Whereas contained anger greatly appealed to him, and he believed that people who weren't angry at all were basically unobservant.³⁸¹

Once Mrs. Reardon (the former widow) has explained why she is there, Harry continues to observe that "Ruth went on looking at Mrs. Reardon in what seemed to [him] an increasingly *unfriendly* way. As far as Harry was concerned, Christians always wanted something. What Mrs. Reardon wanted was to dictate the terms of her own forgiveness!"³⁸² When Ruth makes it clear that she has no intention of complying, and that the former widow should leave, things get ugly:

³⁷⁸ *Widow*, p. 343

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 446

³⁸⁰ This is a masterstroke on Irving's part in that both Harry and Ruth share his views on anger and retribution, and these two facets of Irving's own personality meet and soon fall madly in love.

³⁸¹ *Widow*, p. 531

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 532

"I don't forgive you for not forgiving me!" Muriel Reardon cried out, an *un-Christian* venom in her voice.

"Fuck you and *both* your husbands!" Ruth shouted after her, as her new husband struggled to lead her away. [...]

Harry had assumed that the somewhat shocked-looking man seated beside Ruth Cole was her Dutch publisher. When Ruth smiled at Maarten, it wasn't a smile Harry had seen on Ruth's face before, but Harry correctly interpreted the smile as indicative of a renewed self-confidence. Indeed, it was evidence that Ruth had re-entered the world with *some* of her former assertiveness intact.³⁸³

Widow shows us, then, that there is room in life for both forgiveness and – provided it is not taken too far, in which case it is certainly capable of poisoning even the best of us, becoming obsession – good old-fashioned revenge. Though paradoxical at first blush, this position shows us that both approaches can be healthy; the fact that Ruth ultimately forgives her mother, and would have forgiven her father had he mustered the courage to make himself a better person instead of fleeing into suicide, yet very deliberately withholds forgiveness from the former widow who had so tormented her over the years, makes her a compellingly human *Bildungsheldin*. Both Ruth and Harry, who is immediately smitten with her, very much echo Irving's own sentiments. When, in a 2000 interview, Irving was asked if he found Ruth's punitive tendencies admirable, he replied:

Oh yes, I do! What idiot said that revenge was a dish best served cold? What matters is that you get the opportunity to serve it – who cares whether it's hot or cold? Ruth does have every reason to be punitive, to be more than a little rough (or crude) around the edges. Her revenge on Scott Saunders and on her father is, in my view, justified. So what if she goes a little too far? She didn't strike the first blow, did she? If she overreacts (a little) to what's been done to her, it doesn't bother me.

If people take a piece out of you, what's wrong with taking a piece and a half or two pieces out of them? I don't pick fights. I do fight back.³⁸⁴

The Critical Response to A Widow for One Year

Interestingly, there has been very little scholarly research covering *A Widow for One Year*: of the works consulted for the purposes of this dissertation, only one deigns to discuss the book at any length, namely Josie P. Campbell's *John Irving: A Critical Companion*, which was published only a year after the novel. Though it is surprising that Campbell is the only author who chose to discuss the novel substantially – Elke Weiß for example relegating it to one of

³⁸³ *Widow*, p. 533

³⁸⁴ bookbrowse (2000), p. 4

Irving's more recent and therefore, in her eyes, less valuable novels –, Ms. Campbell thankfully provides a number of useful insights on it.

Firstly, Campbell recognizes certain parallels between the villains depicted in the novel. For example, the moleman Ted Cole writes about in one of his children's novels, *A Sound Like Someone Trying Not to Make a Sound*, is a creature "twice the size of a child, but half the size of most adults. This mole walked upright, like a man, and so he was called the moleman. He wore baggy pants, which hid his tail, and old tennis shoes that helped him to be quick and quiet."³⁸⁵ Further, the moleman has a very specific purpose in mind:

The moleman's job was hunting little girls. He liked to catch them and carry them back underground with him, where he kept them for a week or two. The little girls didn't like it underground. When the moleman finally let them go, they would have dirt in their ears and dirt in their eyes – and they would need to wash their hair every day for ten days before they stopped smelling like earthworms.³⁸⁶

Finally, the moleman, though nearly blind, also has certain tricks up his sleeve:

He couldn't see the little girls, and he could barely hear them. But he could smell them with his star-shaped nose – he could smell them especially well when they were alone. And his fur was velvety – you could brush it in any direction without resistance. If a little girl stood too close to him, she could not resist touching his fur. Then, of course, the moleman would know she was there.³⁸⁷

As Campbell recognizes about the story:

It is about a moleman, truly a man / animal, who kidnaps little girls to take them to his underground lair, where he keeps them. The psychological aspects of the tale, the aggression of the male, his desire to possess and punish the female, are clear. The girl's alternating fear and desire for the moleman are equally clear, as are the Oedipal implications in the story of the daughter's love for her father / hero who saves her. Irving strategically uses the story of the moleman as part of a larger tale of a "real" moleman who captures his female and keeps her forever by first killing her and then photographing her body.³⁸⁸

The parallels Campbell identifies are as clear as they are disquieting. Just as the fictional moleman takes little girls underground, and just as the "moleman" serial killer who murders Rooie strangles prostitutes before photographing their corpses, Ted Cole, who Campbell claims is "squarely in the camp of the moleman,"³⁸⁹ photographs his models in countless poses, starting with the innocent, moving into the seductive, and invariably ending in the degrading. The link is cemented, she astutely claims, by Ruth's observation that the

³⁸⁵ *Widow*, pp. 405-06

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 406

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 406

³⁸⁸ Campbell, p. 163

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163

moleman used the same type of camera as her father.³⁹⁰ It is also telling of what was perhaps Ted's only moment of true remorse that, just prior to his suicide, he asked the cleaning lady to destroy the hundreds of photographs of his models he had so carefully accumulated and preserved over the years before his daughter returned.

Nor does this cover all of the villains in the story. Scott Saunders also belongs to the lot, and indeed fits in quite well, himself a manipulator and abuser of women. Whereas the "real life" moleman, middle-aged, balding and suffering from emphysema, can hardly be considered seductive, it is true that he is at least unassuming, thus making him seem perfectly harmless until the moment he strangles the life out of his victim. All of the male perpetrators in the novel – both incarnations of the moleman, Ted Cole, and Scott Saunders – succeed in getting what they want and doing irreparable harm (emotional, physical, or both) to their female victims. Significantly, as Campbell notes, all three non-storybook characters are fathers themselves.³⁹¹ The only fathers free of blame in the story are Allan Albright, who dies when his son is only three years old, and "Minty" O'Hare, Eddie's father, who, while loving, is one of the most boring teachers at Exeter Academy. Boring though he may be, Minty is the only genuinely loving and reliable father in *Widow*, though there are grounds for optimism that Harry Hoekstra will be a good father to Graham.

Turning from the male characters in the novel to the females, Campbell feels that, though other love stories are certainly of significance, the most essential is that between Ruth and Marion. Further, their bond and reunion serve to counterbalance the overly paternal plot, adding a strong feminist element. To support her claims, Campbell ties Marion and Ruth to both the Biblical story of Naomi and Ruth and to the Homeric tale of Demeter and Persephone. While the link to Homer seems strained³⁹² and sheds little light on *A Widow for One Year*, the Biblical correlation is far more convincing and rewarding. As Campbell elaborates:

In the Biblical tale, mother and daughter-in-law are widows, and although Naomi tells Ruth to leave and return to her homeland to remarry, Ruth refuses. Instead, the two women journey to Bethlehem, Naomi's birth land, where they live together until Ruth eventually marries Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. The Biblical story takes place in a male-dominated society that deals heavily with women (especially single older women), a fact underscored by Naomi's insistence that her people call her Mara, a name that means bitterness [...]

It is hardly a coincidence that Irving names his characters Marion (cf. Mara)³⁹³ and Ruth. After all, Irving has refashioned Biblical stories before, as in *Owen Meany*. Both *A Widow for One Year* and *The Book of Ruth* contain marriage plots that on

³⁹⁰ Campbell, p. 183

³⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 183-84

³⁹² More correctly, it is ill-suited to better understanding the ties between Ruth and Marion, my key concern here. It does offer an interesting further perspective on Ted and the moleman. Cf. Campbell, pp. 182-183.

³⁹³ It is perhaps also worth noting that Marion is only one letter away from being an exact anagram of Naomi.

the surface are linear and genealogical, but the alliances that matter in *The Book of Ruth* (as in *A Widow*) are matrilineal, not patrilineal. [...] What gives the narrative life is the story of the two women.

[...] Ruth says to her mother-in-law, “for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, thy God my God” (I: 16).

Although Ruth’s words to Naomi are, ironically, used today at weddings – occasions that separate mothers and daughters – no more powerful words have been written of love and devotion between women.³⁹⁴

Campbell notes that, just as the deaths of Naomi’s husband and sons are the impetus for her and Ruth’s narrative, the same is true of Marion and Ruth Cole with regard to the deaths of Thomas and Timothy. Yet, she claims, that narrative is initially heavily dominated by the male influence of Ted, who (through his negligence) helped bring about the death of his own sons; whose decision it was to have Ruth in the first place; and who coldly manipulated his wife and a teenage boy into an affair, all to ensure that he could take his daughter away from his wife.³⁹⁵

As Campbell observes, in both the moleman story and when Ruth encounters the “real” moleman, her silence is the key to her survival, something which leads her to despise what she considers her cowardice in failing to intervene. Yet Ruth inarguably finds her voice as well, the crucial information she left for the police soon leading to the killer’s arrest.³⁹⁶ I would add at this point that the authority and power of Ruth’s voice are also demonstrated in other ways: it is for example Ruth’s voice in the literal sense, in the story she tells her father after her abuse at the hands of Scott Saunders, that drives Ted to suicide, the paternal storyteller laid low by the narrative skills of his own daughter. Also, Harry Hoekstra was not only able to identify Ruth as his mystery witness from her novels; he became increasingly interested in her, both as a novelist and as a woman. Surely, had Ruth not found the strength to work through the trauma of Rooie’s murder in her novel, she and Harry – by far the most positive male presence in the novel (for Ruth) beyond her own son – would never have found one another.

Lastly, it is certainly an interesting take on individual healing and growth that, while Marion and Ruth overcome their own losses, their own demons separately, it is only in doing so that they heal sufficiently to be reunited, each – significantly – having come so far largely through her own writing. At novel’s end, which happens to be at Thanksgiving, Eddie, having brought Marion to meet her daughter, and Harry both seem to hang back and not interfere, recognizing the weight of the moment. And indeed it is mete that they should show a certain deference: Ruth has now become the central force in Harry’s life, while the lives of both Ruth and Eddie have been massively influenced by Marion. Far from the paternal machinations that

³⁹⁴ Campbell, p. 181

³⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 181-82

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 183

characterized the novel's beginning, the world of *Widow* as we leave it is one much more informed by feminine voices.

A Widow for One Year in the Light of the Bildungsroman Tradition

Widow certainly is a *Bildungsroman*, and the first Irving novel to have a truly central female *Bildungsheldin*. Ruth Cole, an ostensibly peripheral character at the tender age of four at the beginning of the novel, is its driving force by story's end (and for much of the novel beforehand). Further, the novel clearly shows hallmarks of the American *Bildungsroman* tradition, which Thomas Jeffers has identified as striking a balance between the German emphasis on personal cultivation and English focus on intersubjectivity and family life.³⁹⁷ The more complex question is to what extent the novel reflects essential aspects of the 19th-century, 20th-century, and postmodern coming-of-age novel.

Christoph Schöneich, referring back to Morgenstern and the origins of the *Bildungsroman* genre, cites the struggle for freedom³⁹⁸ as being central to the protagonist's development, which in turn is dependent on the combination of *Bildung* and *Bildsamkeit* discussed in the previous chapter. And indeed, Ruth Cole would seem to be struggling for her freedom throughout much of the novel, as she is burdened not only by her mother's abandoning her and by her father's ceaseless seductions – likely at least a partial explanation for Ruth's overly tentative attitude towards sex, as evinced by her remaining a virgin throughout college – but also and significantly by the constraints of convention, which she feels limit her as an author.

Insofar as *Bildung* and *Bildsamkeit* are concerned, the two factors only seem to coincide fairly late in Ruth's life: though in the second part of the novel we encounter Ruth in her thirties, she is in many ways still growing. Enjoying international success as a novelist, her personal life is nonetheless largely a shambles, dominated by deep-seated emotional issues with friendship, love and marriage, her father and her mother, and even with her own womanhood. Were Irving to leave Ruth in this initial state, though an interesting protagonist, she could never qualify as a *Bildungsheldin*.

Yet a number of factors conspire to shake Ruth out of her comfortable if unfulfilling life: her father sleeping with Hannah, her rape and beating at the hands of Scott Saunders, witnessing Rooie's murder, marrying Allan, having her son Graham, and losing Allan are events that deeply change Ruth; or rather, they are events that have the *potential* to do so. These events, nearly exclusively negative and painful in nature, Ruth's "little misfortune," are her

³⁹⁷ Jeffers, p. 36

³⁹⁸ Schöneich, pp. 20-21

Bildung: what little Ruth had learned from her lecherous father, and the lessons on relationships she thought she had learned for herself are all overturned by the harsh realities she is now faced with. And, though Ruth may stumble along the way, her ultimate development clearly reveals her *Bildsamkeit*. The Ruth we see at novel's end, in a happy and honest relationship, has learned forgiveness while retaining a healthy amount of contained anger; while much more at peace with her life and herself, she has lost neither the ability nor the will to fight back.

The points mentioned above demonstrate *Widow's* compliance with the criteria of more "classic" *Bildungsroman* patterns. The novel also distances itself from more modern variants in that, while the latter are often characterized by a break with verisimilitude, in *Widow* an omniscient narrator grants us access to Ruth's innermost thoughts, verisimilitude thus remaining intact.

In other regards, however, *Widow* can only partly be tied to the 19th-century model. In fact what can be seen in the novel is a female protagonist who is very much at risk of falling into a Victorian model of marriage, i.e., who makes marriage (and a child) the be-all and end-all of her life; though not truly drawn to Allan, she sees him as a comforting refuge of sorts, as a haven from the larger world. Yet at the same time she has major reservations, which taint both her reading and writing. Ruth is for example greatly disheartened by a section of the Graham Greene biography Allan gives her as a present entitled "Marriage At Last": though clearly meant as a celebration and joy at Greene's having finally found his soulmate, Ruth cannot help but interpret it as just the opposite, as an unavoidable and joyless transition. Though her life presents her with no better options – in Ruth's eyes – her feelings toward the prospect of marrying Allan are chiefly dominated by resignation.³⁹⁹

Here we should also recall that female *Bildungsheldinnen* of 19th-century novels were not granted the two loves⁴⁰⁰ typically experienced by their male counterparts, instead having only one major relationship, their mentor figures very often later becoming their husbands. Had Allan not been taken from Ruth after only a few short years – which happened as the result of pure contingency – her life, though enormously brightened by her son Graham,⁴⁰¹ might very well have been one characterized by a complacent union with a much older husband and mentor.

³⁹⁹ This is reminiscent of Woolf's protagonist in *The Voyage Out* (1915), who is so appalled by the thought of marriage, yet sees no avenue of escape, that she falls into a fever and dies, cf. Uhsadel, p. 56.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰¹ Here the parallels between Ruth Cole and Jenny Fields are evident, the difference being that Jenny only wanted a child, and wanted no part of men whatsoever (indeed only having sex once in her lifetime, to conceive Garp), whereas Ruth wanted a husband and child, though the former (initially) was largely a means to procuring the latter. The fact that Ruth later receives and is far happier with a husband she can love for *himself* and not solely as father to her son or guardian / mentor is indicative of her emotional growth and the far greater emotional health of her second marriage.

Significantly, the Victorian heroine Ruth bears the most resemblance to is Jane Eyre, in that Ruth, like Jane, is temperamental, restless, and very much willing to take risks (as evinced in Amsterdam) to, as Brontë writes of Jane, “seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils.”⁴⁰² This very quality, revolutionary for *Bildungsheldinnen* at the time, is what set Jane apart, showing that she and Ruth must in many ways be classified as modern heroines.

Firstly, Ruth follows the pattern of more modern *Bildungsheldinnen* in that her development over the course of the novel, while indisputable, is a predominantly individual⁴⁰³ one, which is to say that, while Ruth develops and grows as a person, this process largely takes place internally, making her evolution personal and individual, in terms of both its provenance and its scope. This in turn further sets Ruth apart from more classic heroines in that she does not ultimately opt for an occupation that helps her fellow man (or woman), at least not beyond the quiet and ineffable contribution she makes by producing stories that ring true.

Further, while 19th-century female protagonists tended to undergo very gradual transformations, their 20th and 21st-century sisters are far more likely to experience “eruptive” epiphanies.⁴⁰⁴ And indeed, the major insights Ruth has in life, the events that shape her most, are not gradual in nature: the disappearance of her mother, from one day to the next, Scott Saunders’ abuse, Rooie’s murder, finding her husband dead beside her, even her father’s suicide and mother’s sudden return; Ruth, as a woman and as a writer, is greatly shaped by these traumas, and her responses to them define her. Though Ruth is a deeply contemplative character, in these defining moments her development progresses in quantum leaps. After Scott is through with her, she quickly dresses, grabs his squash racket, and proceeds to beat him to the point that he will require serious medical attention. After the combined humiliations of Hannah and her father’s roll in the hay and what Scott had done to her, Ruth also decides to unleash her pent-up anger on her father. Even after having witnessed Rooie’s murder – and Ruth would, until learning of the killer’s capture and death, always blame herself for her cowardice – and not intervening to save her, Ruth has the presence of mind to collect evidence the killer left at the scene, along with a written description and other tips which she leaves for the police. Without Ruth, the “moleman” might never have been caught, and would have gone on killing.

Widow is also of interest in that it mirrors a role reversal of sorts that Schöneich recognizes as having taken place during the twentieth century: namely that the once largely confessional female apprenticeship novel became increasingly experiential, whereas the male

⁴⁰² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 86, cited in Uhsadel, p. 29.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Schöneich, p. 42, for more on this development.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Uhsadel, p. 17.

apprenticeship novel underwent just the opposite change.⁴⁰⁵ This takes on a further level of meaning when we compare not only the development but also the writing of Ruth and that of Eddie: whereas Ruth is ready to go out and experience the world, braving Amsterdam's red-light district for the sake of her writing, Eddie does nothing but churn out book after book revisiting his brief liaison and decades-long pining for a lost love.

This serves to further place Ruth in the ranks of modern heroines, in that, whereas Victorian *Bildungsheldinnen* were content to read literary works and identify with the figures therein, their modern counterparts not only read about strong and adventurous women and men, but also *applied* what they read, often embarking on quests of their own.⁴⁰⁶ In this regard Ruth, while turning to George Eliot for thoughts on romantic love, is more inspired – just as John Irving is – by Graham Greene on what it takes to be a writer, which includes a near-greed (“ruthlessness”) for knowledge and real experience.

The constant references throughout the novel to Graham Greene and others are in turn indicative of the modern device of intertextuality, and are accompanied by a number of internal texts as well. As seen to some extent in Dr. Wilbur Larch's annals of St. Cloud's in *The Cider House Rules*, and much more pronounced in *The World According to Garp*, in *Widow* we are provided with several samples of Ruth's writing. The key difference between *Garp* and *Widow*, however, lies in the nature of the texts: while in the former, we are treated to much of T.S. Garp's actual published writing (at one point an entire chapter), in the latter the focus is far more personal and intimate. While we see short samples of Ruth's work, her postcards home while in Europe and even more so her diary entries are infinitely more revealing of the woman's inner workings. These devices are masterfully placed; not dominating the entire novel, they are limited to the very crucial and pivotal period of her European promotional tour, serving to both help the reader better understand the forces at work inside Ruth and as a clue that important changes are in store.

Widow also makes a contribution to the *Bildungsroman* tradition by adding new twists to established patterns. For example, just as the 20th-century apprenticeship novel differed from the Victorian model by including events in female protagonists' lives *after* finding a husband,⁴⁰⁷ such as motherhood, much of Ruth's personal growth – including her ability to forgive her own mother – only come after her widowhood, adding a significant layer of development.

Finally and, in a novel as concerned with relationships as *Widow* clearly is, quite appropriately, let us examine Ruth's marriage to Harry at novel's end, and what that union

⁴⁰⁵ Schöneich, p. 49.

⁴⁰⁶ Uhsadel, pp. 19-20, 63, 70.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

represents. First of all, as Uhsadel has aptly observed, modern female *Bildungsromane* have witnessed a major change⁴⁰⁸ in the role of mentor / guardian figures. Once blurring the lines between father figure and husband, modern mentors are not higher authorities, but instead represent complementary equals. It is worth noting in this regard that Ruth, a writer, initially sought an editor as her husband, yet after his death, found her true happiness with a passionate *reader*.

Ruth's happiness with Harry also represents the changing goals of *Bildungsheldinnen*, namely the desire for romantic love, emotional and intellectual satisfaction.⁴⁰⁹ While it is true that Ruth found Allan intellectually stimulating, and that she found he challenged and respected her in many of the ways she needed, what was always lacking was the passionate spark of connection. Allan represented if you will a transition between the stereotypical Victorian mentor figure and a modern lover-as-equal; thus capable of offering Ruth the child and security she had always wanted, he was nonetheless incapable of offering the more holistic satisfaction of her love for Harry.

Finally, at novel's end Ruth offers an extremely interesting picture of female success. In discussing the historical evolution of the female coming of age novel, Uhsadel examines Antonia Byatt's novel *A Whistling Woman*, the title of which for Byatt represents a woman unencumbered by any constraints on what she wishes to do.⁴¹⁰ In this sense, Ruth Cole surely represents a "whistling woman," in that she is financially successful – her new husband having recently retired, she is in fact the only breadwinner – and doing what she wants to do. In fact, Ruth appears to have divested herself of all constraints. She has let go of her former bitterness towards her mother, and no longer allows her views on relationships to be tainted by those of her late father. And she is unafraid to write on the subjects she – not convention – chooses, and *how* she chooses to do so.

Yet Ruth has come so far only after much travail, only after a functional but imperfect marriage, widowhood, her own rape, her father's suicide, and witnessing a murder. Importantly, however, she has also achieved so much only after having found the right husband and the child she had so longed for. In a masterful blend of tradition and innovation, and in an imaginative revitalization of the female *Bildungsroman*, marriage and motherhood, far from imprisoning Ruth, are ultimately what save and empower her.

⁴⁰⁸ Uhsadel, p. 138.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-39, 176.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 145-46.

Chapter Five

Beyond Skin Deep: *Until I Find You*

When Jack Burns was five years old and living with his mother in Toronto, she led him by the hand to show him St. Hilda's, his future school. While St. Hilda's had, up until quite recently, been an all-girls' school, the school board had decided to also allow boys to attend, though only from kindergarten through fourth grade, and young Jack was to be among the first male kindergartners. Timing their visit to coincide with school getting out for the day, Jack was amazed to see the mass of young girls in their school uniform skirts and tops flooding out of the building. When asked why he was supposed to go to a school full of girls, his mother Alice replied: "Because it's a good school [...] And you'll be safe with the girls."⁴¹¹ Jack could not understand just what his mother meant by this; and after the five years he spent at the school, Jack would be equally mystified as to her motives.

Nor had the year prior to his enrollment at St. Hilda's helped to add clarity to his life. From 1969 to 1970, Jack and his mother had set out on a whirlwind trip through a number of North Sea ports, from Copenhagen to Stockholm, Oslo and Helsinki, the final leg leading to Amsterdam. Alice had explained to Jack (and explained to him, again and again) that they were looking for his father William, and that they were tracking him down to remind him of his "abandoned responsibilities."⁴¹² Though they never found his father (which prompted their settling in Toronto and signing Jack up for kindergarten), the year was nonetheless full of formative experiences for Jack.

Jack would for example never forget their visit in the winter of 1969 to Copenhagen, and to the military citadel there. While his mother (a tattoo artist by trade) talked with the citadel's commander as to the possible whereabouts of her husband, who was an organist, Jack took the opportunity to walk on the ice covering the citadel's encircling moat. Falling through the ice, Jack was saved by a very small soldier, little more than a boy himself, who stretched out flat on the surface of the ice, extending a rifle for Jack to grab onto. Jack suggested to his mother that, as a token of gratitude, she could give the "littlest soldier" (as Jack would come to think of him over the years) a free tattoo, an idea she warmed to. That night, when Jack had a nightmare and went to his mother's bed, he was surprised to find the soldier there, naked in bed with Alice. The soldier jumped out of the bed and left immediately, and Jack was puzzled by the fact that,

⁴¹¹ *Until I Find You* (hereafter simply *Until*), p. 5

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

though he had seen the littlest soldier naked, he hadn't been able to make out a tattoo anywhere on his body.

In the months that followed, Jack and his mother travelled from town to town and country to country, always seeming to lag one step behind his derelict father. To pay their bills at the various hotels they stayed in, Jack's mother always did her best to drum up customers looking for tattoos, at times even enlisting her young son's help. As such, Jack's first experience with acting was in Stockholm, and consisted in memorizing the following lines, both in English and Swedish: "Do you have a tattoo? Would you like one? I have the room and equipment, if you have the time."

Yet Stockholm would turn out to be a dead end, as would Oslo and Helsinki, leading Jack and his mother to Amsterdam, where Alice would work in a local tattoo shop, and would befriend some of the prostitutes in the red-light district. When Jack inevitably grew curious at what "prostitutes" – a word he kept hearing – were and what they did, Alice explained to her son:

A prostitute [...] was a woman who gave advice to men who had difficulty understanding women in general – or one woman, such as a wife, in particular. The reason the men looked ashamed of themselves was that they knew they should really be having such an important and personal conversation with their wives or girlfriends, but they were inexplicably unable or unwilling to do so. They were "blocked," Alice said. Women were a mystery to them; they could pour out their hearts only to strangers, for a price.⁴¹³

While Alice and Jack would spend a great deal of time in the red-light district, making friends of the two Dutch prostitutes Saskia and Els, Alice herself would stick to tattooing, at least until shortly before their departure, at which point Alice suggests that she could sing hymns in the district, using one of her friends' rooms to do so. Though the idea is that she will sing in front of the walk-up room and not take in any customers, she later does take in a very young boy. Late that night Jack, whom Saskia had been baby-sitting while Alice was occupied, is woken from his napping by the sounds of Alice, Saskia and Els laughing and talking about Alice's experience with the boy. When Jack asks his mother if she had given the boy some advice, she tells him:

"Yes, it was pretty good advice, I think," Alice replied.
"The best advice he'll ever get," Saskia said.⁴¹⁴

Shortly thereafter, Alice and her son would leave Amsterdam, abandoning the pursuit of Jack's father altogether. The next essential phase of Jack's young life would be at St. Hilda's,

⁴¹³ *Until*, pp. 88-89

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119

which he would attend from kindergarten through the fourth grade. Perhaps not surprisingly, Jack's time at the school was dominated by the influence of various female figures. Only in grade 2 did he have a male teacher, all others being women. Jack's grade 3 teacher, Miss Caroline Wurtz, would also be his first infatuation and his first drama coach (though in grade 4 Jack would work with a man on the school theatrical productions, Mr. Ramsey). And the elderly Mrs. McQuat would serve both as his grade 4 teacher and moral guardian, as the young Jack became increasingly convinced that he already was, or was in danger of becoming as morally reprehensible as he believed his absent father to be.

There are several factors leading to Jack's deep-seated self-doubt. First of all, there is of course his mother's continued demonization of his father, very closely connected to the rumor circulated at the school that William had gotten one or more boarders pregnant. This rumor leads many of the older girls (and ultimately Jack himself) to wonder if Jack will turn out to be a "womanizer" like his father before him.

The girl most interested in finding this out is Emma Oastler, whom Jack meets on his first day at school. Emma, who is twelve when she meets the five-year-old Jack, immediately takes a great interest in him and his development, especially his sexual development. When Jack is only six Emma, who comes home with him after school nearly every day under the pretense of "helping him with his homework," asks Jack to see his penis, the growth of which she thereafter checks on a regular basis. When Jack is eight, Emma shows him her breasts, and soon after Alice catches wind of the kinds of games Emma is playing with her son. Yet, when she confronts Emma's mother Leslie with the news, she finds her wholly unmoved:

In Mrs. Oastler's opinion, it was not possible for a woman or a girl to molest a man or a boy; whatever games Emma had played with Jack, he'd probably liked them, Mrs. Oastler maintained. But Emma was disciplined in some minor fashion. She was "grounded," she told Jack; she was to come directly home from school for a month.⁴¹⁵

Not only does this behavior then go largely ignored, it is only one of many such instances. At his mother's request, Jack is always driven to school by a Jamaican chauffeur nicknamed Peewee. By the time Emma is sixteen and Jack nine at the latest (when Jack is in grade 4, his last year at St. Hilda's), Peewee knows they always kiss in the backseat while he drives them home, but says nothing. In the same year, Emma would also show Jack her vagina, and on the same day, her mother Leslie would as well, something Leslie suggests Jack not tell Alice so as not to "needlessly upset" her.

⁴¹⁵ *Until*, p. 184

Jack's last year at the school is also marked by a further theatrical performance. Following past female roles in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Anna Karenina*, Jack would be awarded the lead role of Darlin' Jenny in the nineteenth-century Canadian play *A Mail-Order Bride in the Northwest Territories*. Emma and a few of the other older girls use the opportunity of having Jack in drag to smuggle him into a female dormitory, where they hope to see if he will live up to their expectations of being a (future) lady-killer. Partly undressing him, they have Emma kiss him until he ejaculates, young Jack not even understanding what had happened.

Emma and Jack are next upset by a very unwelcome piece of news from their mothers, who the children have now gathered are lovers: after the summer, Jack is to be sent off to a boarding school in Redding, Maine, in the States, while Emma is to stay at St. Hilda's, but will for the first time be a boarder and no longer live at home. Their mothers' choices spark a great deal of resentment among the children: not only have Alice and Leslie never talked to their children about their romantic relationship, it now seems they are making a conscious effort to split the close friends up. For Jack, it is just the latest example of his mother distancing herself from him, something he has sensed for years.

Before Jack's journey to the all-boys' school in Redding, where he will spend grades five through eight, Alice decides her son needs to toughen up, sending him to a gym where he can take wrestling lessons all through the summer, and indeed, the training and exercise seem to do Jack good. Here Jack also meets Mrs. Machado, a Portuguese woman in her forties who is also taking wrestling (and kickboxing) for self-defense, who tells Jack that her children have grown up and moved away, leaving no one to protect her from the frequent appearances of her violent ex-husband at her apartment.

When Emma is sent off to a fat farm for two weeks, Mrs. Machado is hired as Jack's temporary babysitter. One night, Jack unintentionally startles her while she is practicing her kickboxing; as a result, she instinctively kicks him in the groin. Mrs. Machado is distraught, and looks over the injury to see if any permanent damage was done. Though this starts out as genuine concern, she then proceeds to mount Jack, who doesn't understand what is happening, only that he is scared, which he repeatedly tells Mrs. Machado, to no avail. Jack's body responds to the motion, but Jack himself feels something very different from pleasure:

He felt something leave him. If he had tried to describe the feeling to The Gray Ghost [Jack's nickname for his aforementioned confidante, Mrs. McQuat], she would have told him that he'd lost his soul. Something momentous had departed, but its departure went almost unnoticed – like childhood. Jack would imagine, for

years, that this was the moment he turned his back on God – without meaning to. Maybe God had slipped away when Jack wasn't looking.⁴¹⁶

Mrs. Machado (like Leslie Oastler before her) of course insists on keeping what happened a secret, and she and Jack thereafter often have sex in her run-down apartment. Jack, who is hurt and confused by his mother keeping secrets of her own, sending him off to another country and away from his best friend to school, tells her nothing of what Mrs. Machado did (and continues to do) to him. It is only after he finally confides in Emma that Jack begins to see the holes in Mrs. Machado's story. In all the times he had visited her apartment, her ex-husband had never made an appearance. Nor had he noticed any new locks – Mrs. Machado had claimed she had to keep changing them because of her ex-husband constantly breaking in. Emma makes it clear to Jack that what Mrs. Machado was doing was wrong; and importantly, that it was Mrs. Machado who had done something wrong, not Jack. The next day she accompanies Jack to the gym, where, after a bit of warming up, she proceeds to “wrestle” with Mrs. Machado, breaking one of the woman's fingers and choking her so badly she can hardly leave the gym on her own power. Mrs. Machado would never molest Jack again.

Jack's next step is to prepare himself mentally for his new setting, for Redding, where he will spend the next four years of his young life. Following his time at St. Hilda's, where we should recall his mother made a special effort to send him in order to keep him safe, it is Redding that is presumably now intended to make him strong. Yet the narrator shows us that Jack's own feelings are not at all in keeping with his mother's apparent rationale:

Jack Burns would miss those girls, those so-called older women. Even the ones who had molested him. (Sometimes *especially* the ones who had molested him!) He would miss Mrs. Machado, too – more than he ever admitted to Emma Oastler.
[...]

He would miss each one, every major and minor character in his sea of girls. Those girls – those *women*, at the time – had made him strong. They prepared Jack Burns for the terra firma (and not so firma) of the life ahead, including his life with boys and men. After the sea of girls, what *pushovers* boys were! After Jack's older-women experiences, how easy it would be to deal with *men*!⁴¹⁷

Jack's experiences at Redding would bear this out. A school that clearly valued hard work and discipline over brains or talent, Redding utilized a strict points-based disciplinary system: students who accrued too many points for bad behavior in a month were expelled. Rapidly adapting to what he could and could not do, Jack took to Redding like a fish to water, joining and even becoming captain of the school wrestling team. Significantly, for the first time

⁴¹⁶ *Until*, p. 243

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 271

Redding gives Jack the feeling that he truly fits in, his only major disappointment being that, in the four years he stays there, his mother never once comes to visit him.

As promising as his Redding experience may have been, his high school years at Exeter, New Hampshire would prove a more sobering experience. While Jack enjoys further success in school stage productions there (as he had also done at Redding), he finds Exeter's significantly more stringent academic standards extremely difficult to live up to. Further, at both schools Jack constantly pursues relationships with older women that are uniformly marked by two characteristics: their secrecy and their fundamentally unhealthy nature. At Redding, Jack had often slept with Mrs. Adkins, the headmaster's wife, who had a tendency to dress Jack in her clothes. At Exeter, Jack sleeps both with an older married woman (one of the dishwashers at the school cafeteria) and with his roommate and close friend's college-aged older sister, Leah Rosen. And these exploits are not without their consequences: the headmaster's wife ultimately commits suicide, though it was some years after Jack's graduation; Mrs. Stackpole, the homely dishwasher, is ultimately murdered, possibly by her husband; and Jack's roommate's sister is forced to get an abortion thanks to her affair with the then-fifteen-year-old Jack; she would eventually drop out of college as well. Far from romanticizing Jack's sexual exploits as a budding teenager, the narrator points out that, by high school: "Jack Burns had no better understanding of women, or what might constitute correct behavior with them [...] or that it was sorrow and boredom that drove Mrs. Adkins and Mrs. Stackpole *and* Leah Rosen to sleep with Jack, when they knew he was nothing but a horny boy."⁴¹⁸

Jack's college years would be characterized by two major developments: firstly, though Alice – who had initially created the considerable physical and emotional distance between herself and her son – now pleads with him to come back to Toronto, Jack, loath to forgive her for sending him away, chooses to attend the University of New Hampshire instead. Secondly, it is in college that Jack meets and eventually moves in with Claudia, an actress. The two remain a couple throughout his four years of college, and Claudia proves to be the closest Jack comes to a normal, healthy and committed relationship.

As "normal" as Jack's time with Claudia was – she was after all his age, and their relationship was no secret – it, too, comes to an end, and Jack accepts Emma's invitation to come and live with her in Los Angeles, where she is an aspiring screenplay writer. Jack accepts, and the two share a house together. Though their bond continues to be semi-sexual in nature, the two of them often being physically intimate with one another, there is a tacit understanding that they are and will remain nothing more (nor less) than best friends for life. Unfortunately, though the ten years Jack and Emma live together will see her write a best-selling

⁴¹⁸ *Until*, p. 299

novel and Jack develop at first into a fledgling actor and ultimately a Hollywood star (often still playing cross-dressing roles), neither of the two seems capable of building a lasting romantic relationship with anyone. This prompts Emma to choose a Latin phrase to describe their life together: *Nihil facimus sed id bene facimus* (We do nothing, but we do it well.).⁴¹⁹

When Emma dies at the young age of 39 (the result of a congenital heart disease), it changes Jack's life radically. Not only is his best friend gone, her death brings many planned and some unplanned consequences with it. First of all Emma's funeral and the preparations it entailed threw Jack back into contact with her mother Leslie, with whom Jack had had little to do since his childhood. Though prior to her death Emma had made Jack promise never to sleep with her mother, and though Jack's own mother had made him promise the same, Leslie nonetheless exerts a powerful hold over Jack, a fact she is well aware of. Though she does not follow the seduction through to the point of actually sleeping with him, Jack is crushed by the knowledge that, had she insisted, he could not have resisted her. The narrator makes the significance of Mrs. Oastler and others like her clear:

In this way, in increments both measurable and not, our childhood is stolen from us – not always in one momentous event but often in a series of small robberies, which add up to the same loss. For surely Mrs. Oastler was one of the thieves of Jack's childhood – not that she necessarily meant to hurt him, or that she gave the matter any thought one way or another. Leslie Oastler was simply someone who disliked innocence, or she held innocence in contempt for reasons that weren't even clear to her.⁴²⁰

Sadly, Emma could exert no power over the actions of her mother (either alive or dead). However, she could and certainly did take steps to influence Jack's fortune. Knowing her second novel could be adapted into a successful screenplay, she stipulates in her will that Jack have the exclusive right to rewrite it for the screen. Only Jack and a select few others will know that Jack only reworked what had been Emma's "baby"; in this way, she ensures her best friend's financial security, can be sure that the film adaptation will be in keeping with what she had in mind, and obligates Jack to grow beyond his old limitations.

At the same time, Jack is faced with a very different problem. The day after Emma's funeral, Leslie informs him that his mother has cancer. In fact, as Jack learns, Alice was first diagnosed at the age of thirty-one; when Jack was twelve years old and in grade seven, she had received her first regimen of chemotherapy, yet in twenty years she had never spoken a word about it to her only child. Having just lost his best friend, he must now face the fact that he will also soon lose a mother he feels he has never truly known.

⁴¹⁹ *Until*, p. 386

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 450

Shortly thereafter Alice dies, passing painlessly in her sleep. Before Jack loses her, though, she confesses the truth about certain aspects of her parting from his father, and on the nature of their trip through the various North Sea cities. Alice's revelations and Jack's realization of how unreliable his own memories of the time were prompt him to repeat his childhood trip, visiting important people from his past in the hopes they can shed more light on what really happened.

In short⁴²¹ what Jack learns is that William, though he had realized he did not love Alice, nevertheless wanted to provide for and have contact to their son. Alice, however, had not allowed this; she had even gone so far as to "blackmail" him: either he had to take Alice *and* Jack, or nothing at all. Further, in hopping from town to town, Alice and young Jack were not in fact following William; in each town, Alice systematically asked around to find where he was most likely to go next (there being a limited number of choices for church organists who also favored maritime towns with skilled tattooists) and made sure she and Jack arrived there *before* he did. She then set about poisoning any and all relationships her ex-husband tried to establish. This culminated in Amsterdam, where Alice actually did become a prostitute (and certainly not for just a night), hoping the thought of his child being dragged through the red-light district by a mother who had now become a prostitute would force William to take her back. When this failed, Alice finally despaired of winning him back, settling in Toronto and enrolling Jack in school.

Learning the truth of the matter does much to disabuse Jack of his illusions about his mother and father, yet it does little to assuage his deeply conflicted feelings towards them both. Jack's response is to seek out a therapist, a Dr. García, who points out to him the hard facts: though he is a superstar, he has no real friends. He knows no one who is normal and real. He must forgive both his parents in order to move on. And, perhaps most importantly, she makes it clear to him that he will still *need* to find his father someday.

In the five years that Jack spends in therapy with Dr. García (which are also five years in which he does not search for his father), his life continues to be dominated by almost wholly sexual and meaningless or damaging relationships. It is only a call from Jack's old school teacher Caroline Wurtz, who had since confided in him to have once been his father's lover, that shakes Jack awake. Jack learns that he has a half-sister from his father's second marriage, who is living in Edinburgh, and that she needs his help. Heather, who studies music in Edinburgh, informs him that their father is in a sanatorium in Zurich, where he is in treatment for depression and certain bipolar episodes. The problem, as Heather clearly states it, is that she cannot afford to pay for William's care alone. She wants Jack to meet William, on his own, and see if he can

⁴²¹ This will be explored in considerably more detail in the section on "Unreliable Memory" in this chapter.

love him: in lines that could be from the late Alice Burns, she bluntly states that “He loves you. If you love him back, I’ll love you, too. If you can’t bear to be with him, I’ll despise you forever.”⁴²²

In the novel’s final arc Jack travels to Zurich, where, before he can meet with William, he must speak with an entire team of specialists who are trying to help his father. They explain that it is likely William, though at the sanatorium of his own accord, will have to stay there for the rest of his life. Upon actually meeting his father Jack is shocked to see that, though his father looks perfectly normal, certain “triggers” – e.g. the sight of his own reflection, or certain words – provoke him to take off all of his clothes; he wants to see all of his tattoos, which now cover most of his body, each telling a part of his life’s story. Despite the obvious problems his father has, and despite the knowledge that his condition will likely never improve, Jack decides to buy a house in Zurich, so that he can visit his father as often as he likes. In one of the few healthy and unselfish choices of his life to date, Jack commits to doing his part in forming a family with his father and half-sister, comforted to know that, regardless of how things develop from this point, he has at last found where he belongs.

Dominant Themes

Both in the context of the selected works analyzed in this dissertation and in that of all of Irving’s novels, *Until* enjoys a unique position. Firstly and significantly, it is by his own account Irving’s most autobiographical⁴²³ novel to date. Secondly, it was published seven years after *A Widow for One Year*, the span between the two books being occupied by *My Movie Business*, published in 2000, and *The Fourth Hand*, Irving’s tenth novel, published in 2001. While *My Movie Business* is of no concern whatsoever to an in-depth analysis of Irving’s novels, constituting as it does a memoir focused solely on the triumphs and defeats involved in adapting (or attempting to adapt) various Irving books into movies, *The Fourth Hand* is certainly worthy of mention as a significant if not particularly glorious chapter in Irving’s evolution as a novelist.

In short, what Irving appears to have attempted in *The Fourth Hand*, one of his most poorly received books, was to write an “un-Irving-like” novel. This can be seen in the book’s length of roughly 350 pages, which makes it far shorter than its predecessors. Similarly, the plot and characterization have been simplified, the story revolving mainly around two men and three women – one need only think of the veritable menageries of characters in *The World According to Garp* or *The Hotel New Hampshire* to see a glaring difference in the number of imagined personalities. The plot, in turn, centers on a television journalist, Patrick Wallingford, who gains a very dubious claim to fame when one of his hands is bitten off by a lion on national television.

⁴²² *Until*, p. 759

⁴²³ Bookreporter (2005), p. 3; New York Times (2005), pp. 1-3

The novel focuses on his efforts to acquire a transplanted hand by means of an experimental surgery and to make something meaningful of his shallow and womanizing life. With the notable exceptions of random violence, redemption and some very interesting insights into the nature of memory, *The Fourth Hand* does not include any of the major themes presented to this point; indeed, were it not for certain telltale devices, one could easily think the novel were from another author.

If its predecessor was a massive departure from Irving's style and method, in *Until I Find You* Irving's authorial voice and inimitable style return with a vengeance. Indeed, were Irving not already hard at work on his *twelfth* novel,⁴²⁴ *Until* could arguably serve as a crownpiece to his impressive body of work, boasting a vast array of primary and secondary characters and weighing in at over 800 pages. The novel's singular nature becomes increasingly apparent when we examine it with regard to the topics I have chosen to point out in the four previous novels, the following themes finding iterations in *Until*: children and parents; memory; death; women's choices; pragmatism; playing God; hopelessness and hope; and healing and forgiveness.

Other themes reappear in altered form: The examination of sex so prevalent in *The World According to Garp* and the intense confrontations with rape in *Garp*, *Hotel* and *Widow* are merged in Jack's painful initiation into the world of sex, particularly in his molestation at the hands of Mrs. Machado. The complex interrelations of the nuclear family, explored in *Hotel*, are notable for their pronounced absence in *Until*, Jack's lack of any "true" family beyond Emma having grave consequences for his personal growth. Finally, the extremism recurrent in *Garp*, *Hotel* and *Rules* takes on a new and fascinating guise in *Until*, having been transmogrified into various forms of obsession.

As a last introductory note, as an opposite number to the author-filled *Widow*, *Until* is almost completely devoid of writers, the only exceptions being Emma, who writes two novels, and Jack himself, who rewrites Emma's second novel into a screenplay. In both cases, no story time whatsoever is taken up with discussing or exploring the actual process of writing and storytelling, nor does imagination enter into the discussion. In this most personal of Irving novels to date, the story is the story, not storytelling itself.

Unreliable Memory

⁴²⁴ Irving's twelfth and thirteenth novels have since been published: *Last Night in Twisted River* (Random House, 2009) and *In One Person* (Simon & Schuster, 2012).

From the outset, *Until's* epigraph provides the reader with a warning that the version of Jack's early childhood as he recalls it may very well not reflect what actually happened:

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory – meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion – is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.

– William Maxwell,
So Long, See You Tomorrow

As we have seen in previous Irving novels, his writing often deals with protagonists who are limited and/or flawed in some fundamental way, which can often be seen in the loss (temporary or permanent) or the perversion of certain of their abilities or faculties. In *Garp*, for example, voice and the ability to speak were at risk; in *Hotel*, it was the sense of sight. *Widow* explored at length the faculty of imagination. It therefore seems appropriate that, given Irving's nearly obsessive interest in the ties between imagination and memory, *Until* should deal heavily with the latter faculty.

Yet it would be misleading to portray memory, and in particular its unreliability, as being the source of all of Jack Burns' woes. It is much more accurate to say that his quite fallible and malleable memory as a four-year-old was no more nor less than a prerequisite for the manipulations and misunderstandings that would shape the majority of his life (that is, the majority of the over thirty years we are made privy to). The matter of Jack's age is paradoxically both random and quite deliberate. Of course Jack had no control over when he and his mother went on their round trip of North Sea cities; nor is it likely that Alice (consciously, at any rate) chose the age of four to roam through Europe and Scandinavia with her child in a desperate bid to regain her husband. Had she chosen to do so earlier, Jack would have had no coherent memory of what occurred; conversely, had they gone a year or two later, he might not likely have been so easy to convince of his mother's version of events. In terms of the story it is a rapacious coincidence that Jack was subjected to such a potentially momentous ordeal at the "threshold" age of four. John Irving has however clearly stated⁴²⁵ that it was imperative for him that Jack be four at the time of the journey, as this is the specific age when consecutive memory begins, but has not yet fully developed.

Until I Find You's greatest success lies in the portrayal of human complexities. This can be seen both with regard to the motivations for our actions, which will be discussed later in this

⁴²⁵ bookbrowse (2000), p. 2

chapter, and concerning the connection between memory and Jack's identity (or lack thereof). Dr. García, who has no qualms about confronting Jack with cold, hard facts, tells him plainly: "You're thirty-eight, Jack – you're rich, you're famous, but you don't have a life."⁴²⁶ Jack's unreliable memory is only a small part of the equation, making him susceptible as it does to his mother's manipulations of the truth. However, as questionable a character as Alice may be, her actions are also only a further element. Jack also fundamentally misinterprets many key pieces of information in his life. It is this triad of foggy memories, lies and misunderstandings that produces a man who doesn't even know who he is, or, as Irving himself has put it:

At the end of the story Jack Burns comes to know the two most normal people in his life to date. His father – even though he lives in a sanatorium – is the first person who asks nothing more of Jack than that he be a good soon. Up to that point, Jack had felt most comfortable when he was being someone else. He had wanted to be someone else so badly that he'd had his greatest successes as an actor when he played female parts.⁴²⁷

Alice's lies were of course essential to (mis)informing Jack's youth; always believing that his father had never wanted anything to do with him, and baffled and increasingly embittered by what he saw as his father's chosen absence from his life, Jack is amazed when in the end he discovers the truth. Alice's experimentation with prostitution in Amsterdam, which she hoped would finally sway William to act, was only a partial success. Alice, who was threatened with deportation by the Amsterdam police, and who the majority of red-light district prostitutes (many of whom had children of their own but would never dream of subjecting them to the place) despised for bringing her child with her, was ultimately approached by Femke (a lawyer and not a prostitute as Jack had believed). She proposed a compromise: if Alice would take Jack away from the red-light district, and would ensure he was safe and received a good education, William would pay for everything. Alice agreed, but only on her own terms that William would never seek custody or make contact with his son, not even after her death. William accepted, his priority being to keep Jack safe.⁴²⁸

As Jack also learns upon meeting William, far from trying to forget Jack, his father had actually obsessively studied him for years. His room at the sanatorium is decorated with posters from Jack's movies; Jack is even more shocked to find countless pictures of himself from St. Hilda's, Redding, and Exeter, his father explaining that he had been in touch with Emma, Leslie,

⁴²⁶ *Until*, p. 694

⁴²⁷ *titel-magazin* (2006), p. 3 Translated from the original German transcript, which reads: "Am Ende dieser Geschichte lernt Jack Burns die zwei normalsten Menschen seines bisherigen Lebens kennen. Sein Vater – obwohl er in einer Heilanstalt lebt – ist der erste Mensch, der von Jack Burns nicht mehr verlangt, als ein guter Sohn zu sein. Bis dato hatte sich Jack am wohlsten gefühlt, wenn er jemand anderes war. Er wollte so sehr jemand anderes sein, dass er seine größten Erfolge als Schauspieler mit Frauenrollen hatte."

⁴²⁸ *Until*, pp. 607-08

Caroline Wurtz, and Claudia, all of whom had talked on the phone with him from time to time. William had even been in attendance when his son had wrestled in Redding and Exeter, though he had kept his word not to contact him.

Jack's confusion as to where he "came from," i.e., as to his background is further exacerbated by information he is only provided shortly before Alice's death, namely that she had been diagnosed with cancer twenty years earlier. It is both a tremendous credit to and a staple of Irving's writing, however, that this revelation of a serious illness that will eventually kill Jack's mother at best only partly mitigates her behavior towards her son. It does for example explain why she did not visit him in his 7th grade year at Redding, a year in which she underwent intensive chemotherapy; it seems plausible, even laudable that a mother would want to shield her son from unnecessary worry and pain. But what about the other three years Jack spent at Redding, during which his mother never once visited him? Insofar as Jack's four subsequent years at Exeter are concerned, the novel tells us only that "In those years away at school, Jack extended the distance between his mother and himself – a process Alice had initiated when Jack was still at St. Hilda's."⁴²⁹ There is no indication that she visited her son there either. It is only after he has finished high school that she begs him to return to Toronto, but by this time Jack has no interest in indulging her.

Why did Alice push her son away to such an extent that the distance between them grew insurmountable? Did she simply want privacy for her budding lesbian relationship with Leslie? Did she feel ashamed of it, or feel it could be harmful to her son? Or could she simply not bear to constantly be reminded of the man who had broken her heart by seeing him in her son? At novel's end, we know just as much as Jack does, the truth of the matter becoming as compellingly opaque as it is ultimately irrelevant: the why and how of Alice's actions inevitably pale in comparison to their effects on her son. Without a history to call his own, with nothing but a patchwork of half-remembered events, fabrications and misunderstandings, Jack is wholly unable to find himself.

Parents and Children

As previously stated, in the case of *Until* the protagonist's family is chiefly notable for its non-existence. Throughout his childhood and into his thirties, Jack has no contact with his father. As an only child without a father figure, Jack could understandably be expected to rely all the more heavily on his mother. Yet Alice, from very early in Jack's childhood, begins "weaning" him off of her affection, leaving him precious little support in the form of a nuclear family.

⁴²⁹ *Until*, pp. 300-01

Little wonder, then, that Jack soon looks elsewhere. At St. Hilda's first Caroline Wurtz (Jack's first schoolboy crush) and later Mrs. McQuat offer Jack what help they can, the former being the first to nurture Jack's acting abilities, the latter doing what she could to foster his moral development. Yet for all his infatuation with her as a romantic symbol, Jack soon recognizes Caroline's limitations; namely her desire to constantly dramatize great works of fiction into children's plays, with a heavy-handed emphasis on imparting moral lessons that often left the actual story butchered. As for the elderly and ghostlike Mrs. McQuat, though she does her best to support and guide Jack in his grade school years, she can of course no longer help him in Redding or at Exeter.

In short, the person who was the most central force in Jack's life, from kindergarten into his thirties, was Emma Oastler. Over the course of the novel, Emma's ties to Jack undergo a metamorphosis made all the more unique by the fact that it remains unexplained. When the two first meet, when Jack is only five, Emma initially has her fun terrorizing him along with the other kindergartners; in a pedagogically dubious policy, the older girls at St. Hilda's, Emma included, are given the task of supervising the kindergarten children's daily naps, which they are allowed to do without a teacher present. Emma and her friends use the occasion to frighten the children to death. And as for Jack in particular, the "games" Emma played with him have already been detailed earlier in this chapter.

Yet, despite what could certainly be considered her abuse or even molestation of Jack, it is abundantly clear that in her own way Emma comes to care very deeply about him. After the traumatic experience of Jack's first orgasm, provoked by the other older St. Hilda's girls, Emma vows to never let them near him again. And when Emma learns of Mrs. Machado's crimes against Jack, she teaches her a lesson in physical suffering so severe that Jack never sees or hears⁴³⁰ from the woman again – importantly *not* because Emma sees in her a rival for Jack's affections, but clearly because she wants to protect him from any and all harm. And it is Emma (with whom Jack would never once have sex) who helps him get started in Hollywood and later entrusts him with writing her screenplay, ensuring his continued popularity and financial wellbeing even from beyond the grave.

It is certainly true to say that Emma and Jack enjoyed an unusual friendship. For example, though the two decided they were better off as best friends, they were also often physically intimate. And in the ten years they lived together in Los Angeles, neither Jack nor Emma succeeded in establishing anything resembling a healthy and meaningful relationship with

⁴³⁰ Amazingly, when Jack returns to the school as an adult, he does have a run-in with a much older, horrific Mrs. Machado; however, neither Jack nor the reader knows for certain whether this actually took place or was simply a hallucination. Cf. the section "Sex, Initiation and Molestation" later in this chapter.

a member of the opposite sex, a phenomenon that was not lost on them and that prompted Emma to coin her previously mentioned mantra to describe their bond and their situation:

“Say it in Latin for me,” he said to Emma.

She knew what he meant – it was the epigraph she’d set at the beginning of her novel. She went around saying it like a litany, but until now Jack had not realized she meant *them*.

“*Nihil facimus sed id bene facimus*,” Emma whispered, holding his penis like no one before or since.

“We do nothing but we do it well,” Jack said in English, holding her breasts.⁴³¹

Emma is nonetheless ultimately the most benevolent and beneficent relationship Jack has prior to meeting his (half-)sister and father; though she and Jack are physically intimate, she neither keeps him at arm’s length nor clings to him desperately; perhaps even more importantly, there is nothing Jack has to *do* to keep her satisfied and to keep their relationship alive: in a sense quite similar to that enjoyed by siblings around the world, the link between Jack and Emma simply *is*, death being the only force that can end it.

Sadly, despite all the good Emma would do for Jack in life and after her death, she could do little to protect him from the advances of her own mother. Leslie Oastler is certainly also a central quasi-familial presence in and throughout Jack’s life: having had no qualms with showing nine-year-old Jack her vagina, Leslie would become his mother’s lesbian partner up until the latter’s death.

Leslie is a curious case. Despite her (one-time) exposing herself to Jack and aforementioned opinion that females were incapable of molesting males, Leslie by no means makes a habit of abusing Jack; she is a loyal and faithful partner to Alice to the very end. Yet Leslie is also very aware of and at times seems to revel in her hold over Jack: though they never sleep together, on the occasion of Emma’s death and the preparations for the funeral Leslie makes it abundantly clear to Jack and to herself that, despite Jack’s having promised both his own mother (who is of course also Leslie’s lover) and the now-deceased Emma (for all intents and purposes his proxy sister) that he would never sleep with Leslie, he is utterly powerless to resist her. Cruelly, Leslie seems to take no small pleasure in this shared knowledge, which is devastating to Jack.

Dickensian as he is, it would of course be anathema to John Irving to simply portray the interactions of flat characters: figures with no “why” background to who they are and what they

⁴³¹ *Until*, pp. 385-86

do. Accordingly, we the readers are given a tantalizing amount of information on the backgrounds of Emma and her mother, first revealed much later in the novel. The amount of information given strikes a golden mean between the inadequacy posed by cryptic fragments and the pat convenience of overly clear (and as such not convincingly human) causal relations.

What we do know (as revealed after Emma's death) is that Leslie was not always a lesbian; prior to entering Alice and Jack's lives, she (like Ruth Cole from *A Widow for One Year*) suffered through a string of bad boyfriends, the last of whom had sexually abused Emma when she was only nine or ten. The trauma led Emma to miss a year of school, and surely had something to do with her aggression towards and abuse of the kindergartners when she was still in grade school; we can only guess at how it factored into her efforts to initiate young Jack into the world of sexual maturity.

Further, as the story progresses we recognize that, just as Emma's behavior can at least partly be traced back to her own abuse, Leslie and Alice *both* appear to have *chosen* to live as lesbians but are in fact heterosexual, something Emma attempts to explain to Jack and his then-girlfriend Claudia in her own no-bones manner:

"They're not normal lesbians, baby cakes – they're nothing at all like lesbians, except that they sleep together and live together."

"They sound a *little* like lesbians," Claudia ventured.

"You gotta understand their relationship *in context*," Emma explained. "Jack's mom feels that her life with men began and ended with Jack's dad. *My* mom simply hates my dad – and other men, by association. Before my mom and Jack's mom met each other, they had any number of bad boyfriends – the kind of boyfriends who are in the self-fulfilling prophecy category, if you know what I mean."

[...]

In an effort to change the subject, albeit slightly, Jack asked Emma a question about his mother that had been on his mind for years. [...] "I don't know about your mom, Emma," he began, "but I would be surprised if my mother wasn't still interested in men – in *young* men, anyway. If only occasionally."

"I wouldn't absolutely trust my mom around young men, either, honey pie, but I *know* your mom is still interested in men – in young men, *especially*."⁴³²

In short, what this reveals is that all three women are in a very real sense damaged goods. Shortly before her death Emma confides in Jack that she has a condition known as vaginismus, which makes it nearly impossible for her to have sex, her body freezing up with any intimate sexual contact (though she does not tell Jack the source of her problem). As for Leslie and Alice, though they are essentially monogamous, Emma's observations reveal that the two

⁴³² *Until*, pp. 325-26

are at best engaged in a form of pseudo-lesbianism born of necessity, their obsessive and/or traumatic experiences with men having driven them into each other's arms.

Though these story elements provide multiple tangents for analysis, for our purposes perhaps they can best be distilled into two main points. Firstly, it is a surprising and refreshing turn in Irving's writing to see that he, a staunch and consistent defender of homosexuals and other minorities, also shows such an interesting case of "affected" lesbianism. Not to be misconstrued as a denigration or condemnation of actual lesbians, the novel has the courage to show that, as yet another iteration of the human condition, people can invent or resort to any number of survival strategies, including adopting a sexuality that is not their own.

Secondly, Irving presents us with a number of insights on human damage: we see that not only can past damage deeply inform our behavior towards others, but that damaged souls often attract one another, a statement as valid for Emma and Jack as it is for Leslie and Alice. Also, here we witness damages passed on from parents to children: Jack labors under a complete delusion as to his father's character and by extension his own provenance for over thirty years; Emma (though she surely has reasons enough of her own) is influenced by her mother's scathing rejection of men *per se*.

Further, having displayed what might be termed the behavioral, the mutually attractive, and the generational elements of human damage, with the development of Jack's and Emma's personalities we see that these factors can culminate in even greater harm when passed from one generation to the next; yet there are also grounds for hope. As for the first point, while Emma, Leslie and Alice are certainly each flawed in their own way, they are all at least able to socially function to the extent they choose to do so. This pales in comparison to Jack's utter inability to lead any semblance of a normal life: a superstar with no friends, a heartthrob who's never had a single healthy relationship with a woman. In terms of how well-adjusted and emotionally balanced he is, Jack is a car wreck on two legs.

Yet, carrying on a fine tradition of Irving heroines, it is Emma who both shows personal progress and seems most likely to serve as a role model for Jack. Though throughout her life she is unable to overcome her vaginismus, there is nothing about her conduct or (adult) biography that smacks of cruelty. Indeed, whereas her mother is merciless in her sexuality and Alice has come full circle from sleeping with the thirteen-year-old "littlest soldier" in Copenhagen to prostitution in Amsterdam and pseudo-lesbianism with Leslie to seducing the occasional teenage boy, Emma displays none of this. Despite the quiet desperation evident in her *nihil facimus sed id bene facimus* mantra, Emma only occasionally brings home boys with her in the hopes she will be able to sleep with them, her vaginismus nearly always hindering this. She is also a true and invaluable friend to Jack; her loyalty is both selfless and unflagging, a claim none

of the other major characters in the book can make. In overcoming her own damage to reject cynicism and cruelty, and in her display of loving and true friendship, Emma rises above both what has been done to her and the influence of her mother; in so doing, she offers hope that Jack, too, may ultimately make a meaningful life for himself.

Sex, Initiation and Molestation

Beyond the mystery surrounding his father for much of his life, it is a sad truth that sex simply entered Jack Burns' world at a far too tender age. Though she would grow to become his best friend, it is nonetheless true that Emma was the one to begin Jack's sexual education: Jack is age 6 when she inspects his penis for the first time; when he is 9 or 10, she and the other older St. Hilda's girls intentionally excite him to the point of his first orgasm. Yet shocking and formative as these developments surely were, it was Jack's molestation at the hands of Mrs. Machado when he was ten that did him far greater harm.

It is both an essential and an especially convincing aspect of Jack's abuse that his feelings about it are extremely mixed. As Jack reflects (during the time when he continued to see Mrs. Machado, before revealing to Emma what had happened):

She sometimes physically hurt him, but never intentionally. And he was repulsed by her, but many times – on occasion, simultaneously to being repulsed – Jack was also attracted to her. He was often frightened, too. Or at least Jack didn't understand what she was doing to him, and why – or what she wanted him to do to her, and how he was supposed to do it.

One thing was certain: she cared for him. He felt it at the time; no later reconstruction of his pliable memory could convince Jack that she didn't, in her heart, adore him. In fact, however confusingly, Mrs. Machado made him feel loved – at a time when his mother was sending him to Maine!⁴³³

Jack's mixed feelings would continue to haunt him; far worse, though Emma had surely exacted physical revenge on Mrs. Machado, Jack's continued sexual relations with older women throughout his childhood and adolescence point to a more fundamental and irreversible change. When Jack begins sleeping with the headmaster's wife at Redding, it is a certain nostalgia for his experiences with Mrs. Machado that moves him to do so:

Yes, Jack slept with her – but not until his eighth-grade year, when he was thirteen going on fourteen and the deprivations of a single-sex school had made him nostalgic for his earlier life as a sexually molested child. By then, Mrs. Adkins had given him three-plus years of the best speaking parts, and he was old enough to be attracted to her permanent air of sadness.

⁴³³ *Until*, p. 251

“There will be no points against you for this,” she told Jack the first time. But he foresaw that, after Redding, the world might hold him accountable to another system for keeping score. Jack Burns would hold Mrs. Adkins as a point against him.⁴³⁴

Nor would this be the last secret and unhealthy relationship in Jack’s life, far from it. At Exeter it was his roommate’s older sister, whom he impregnated, followed by the wholly unattractive and unhappily married Mrs. Stackpole, not to mention the countless meaningless and forgettable sexual adventures after Jack becomes famous. It is only years later, when Jack returns to St. Hilda’s to attend Emma’s funeral, that he realizes the impact Mrs. Machado had had on him. While momentarily alone in a shadowy corridor of his boyhood school, he suddenly imagines⁴³⁵ he sees her lurking:

To see her, to know it was really her, had the effect on Jack of her high-groin kick of so many years ago. He couldn’t move or speak – he couldn’t *breathe*.

He’d recognized that Leslie Oastler had a certain power over him, and always would have. But in all his efforts, conscious and unconscious, to diminish his memories of Mrs. Machado, Jack had underestimated her implacable authority over him. He’d never defeated her – only Emma had.

Gone was her waist – what little she’d ever had of one. Mrs. Machado’s low-slung breasts protruded from the midriff of her untucked blouse with the over-obviousness of an amateur shoplifter’s stolen goods. But what she’d stolen from Jack was more obvious; Mrs. Machado had robbed him of the ability to say no to her. (Or to anyone else!)⁴³⁶

Just as Jack, who now finds himself as helpless as a child in Mrs. Machado’s presence, is sure that the crazy old woman is going to molest him *again* in the school hallway, the scene is interrupted by one of the other old St. Hilda’s students in attendance, who wanted to make sure Jack was all right. Jack, turning all about, can find no trace of his tormentor, and is never truly sure whether he imagined the encounter or not. But real or imagined, the insight it yields is equally valid: for Jack Burns, his molestation meant the loss of his ability to say no, the loss of his ability to choose.

Obsession

⁴³⁴ *Until*, p. 289

⁴³⁵ It is important not to oversimplify Jack’s experience here. While for the sake of brevity I have described him as “imagining” he sees Mrs. Machado, in the book’s actual portrayal of the scene it is left very unclear as to whether Jack actually did encounter her or not, there being evidence to support both interpretations. Here Irving also skillfully reintroduces the concept of recovered memory, a phenomenon he had Ruth Cole openly deride in *Widow* but which Jack Burns quite vividly experiences in *Until*. See *Until*, pp. 482, 485.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 481

Molestation is not the only thief of our ability to choose; we are also robbed of it by obsession. As the actions of Jack's mother Alice and other characters show, succumbing to obsession is an essentially conscious choice not to let go of the past, which equates to a conscious surrender of our freedom to choose.

In *Until*, obsession is a very real force, arising among different characters for very different reasons; accordingly, its manifestations and levels of intensity vary greatly. If for example we examine how it is displayed in the novel's female characters, we can see that most clearly Alice but also Caroline Wurtz is obsessed; Ingrid Moe and Heather Burns⁴³⁷ on the other hand are examples of women who to varying degrees have triumphed over or avoided the trap of obsession.

In *The Mourning Bride* (1697), William Congreve's often-misquoted character Perez claimed that, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned." Fair or not, the actions of Jack's mother Alice in *Until* surely bear out this assertion: poisoned by the loss of the man she believed to be the great love of her life, Alice descends into lies, manipulations, deceit and depravity. This is primarily evinced in her actions during the year she and Jack "searched for" William (though "baited" or "blackmailed" might be more accurate terms). In her efforts to glean information on William's life and to ruin any and all relationships he held dear, she had no qualms about using sex to get what she wanted: in Oslo, she slept with William's student Andreas Breivik, which ended the latter's engagement to another student, Ingrid Moe. In Helsinki Alice tried but failed to break up William's lesbian students Ritva and Hannele, though she slept with both of them. Most damningly, she had sex with the "littlest soldier" who had saved Jack when he fell through the ice in Copenhagen; the boy, who Alice knew to be the younger brother of William's new love and fiancé, couldn't have been older than twelve or thirteen at the time. When Alice left Copenhagen without so much as a goodbye, the infatuated young boy shot himself, the tragedy driving a permanent wedge between William and his fiancé's family; they would never marry, and William would blame himself for what happened.

Alice's further actions as a result of her obsession with William are an authentically heterogeneous – which is to say authentically human – mixture of cold calculation and what

⁴³⁷ For the sake of brevity, the cases of Ingrid Moe and Heather Burns will not be entered into in greater detail here. Ingrid was one of William's students and engaged to a fellow student, Andreas Breivik. Alice's seduction of Andreas led the couple to call off the engagement, and though she would later marry, have children and divorce, she would never forget what Alice had done to her. As she explains it, she hated Alice twice: once for what she'd done to her personally, and once for what a horrible mother she'd been to expose Jack to what she did. She insists that Jack make love to her, hoping that Alice can see them in Hell. Cf. *Until*, pp. 564, 569-70. While Ingrid is clearly scarred by Alice's actions, Heather Burns (aside from never having known her half-brother) is not; nonetheless, she flatly claims that she will never forgive Alice for what she did. Cf. *Until*, p. 737

would seem nothing more than childish lies. An example of the former is Alice's turning to prostitution in Amsterdam's red-light district, which she made a very deliberate game of parading Jack through for all to see. At this point in time, reprehensible as her behavior may have been, it served if nothing else a clear purpose: to pressure William to take her back so as to save his son from further exposure to prostitution.

The evolution of Alice's actions becomes apparent when we contrast her "Amsterdam" behavior with how she behaved in Jack's youth in Toronto: gone was any attempt to manipulate her fortunes for the better, her guile having been replaced by spite. Now that she knows William will never return, her only comfort is in filling his son's head with lies about his character and supposed misdeeds. It is also worth noting that, mirroring to some extent how she would love and hate William to the day she died, Alice's feelings for Jack vary from the need to distance herself from him – which manifested very early in his childhood and culminated in her unilateral decision to send him off to Redding – to ambivalence, as can be seen in both her desire to have her son close to her again after he had completed high school at Exeter and in her fairly apathetic attitude towards him and his success later in life. Alice fluctuates from trying to escape her son, to wanting him by her side, to not really caring overly much about his life at all, the last stance sadly dominating her final years. Alice is a primary example of obsession; though it is cancer that ends her life at the young age of 51, it is obsession that poisons that life: from the time she abandoned her efforts to regain her husband at the latest, and up until her death, nothing and no one ever broke its grip on her.

If Alice was a negative influence on her son's life, and it is difficult to find any evidence to the contrary, it is all the more interesting that the only other character in the novel similarly affected by obsession should be one of Jack's mentors. Caroline Wurtz, Jack's third-grade teacher and the first woman he was ever smitten with, is a friend and guide to him throughout the novel. Like Alice, Caroline also fell in love with William; and as was the case with Alice, he was the one great love of her life, a fact Caroline has no qualms making perfectly clear to Jack. Having agreed to be his "date" for the Oscars, the next day she tells him: "Don't take this the wrong way, but not even a night like last night is as special to me as *every* night I spent with your father. If I never got to go to the Oscars, I would still have had *William* in my life – that's all that matters."⁴³⁸

Caroline's obsession with William Burns is both "better" and "worse" than Alice's; whereas Alice's feelings drive her to destructive behavior (i.e., her obsession is thanatic), Caroline's simply prevent her from moving on with her life at all. Throughout the thirty-plus years covered in the novel, there is no indication that Caroline finds or even seeks a new love; when

⁴³⁸ *Until*, p. 658

Jack is a boy, her favorite clothes are the ones William picked out for her. And at the Oscars, three decades later, she blows a kiss into the camera, mouthing his name.

In presenting these two faces of obsession – the thanatic and what might be termed the static – Irving reveals both how insidious and nearly invisible obsession can be, and why it must be resisted. Had Alice been able to overcome her anguish at the loss of William, who knows how many lives she might not have damaged, or how differently William's and Jack's lives might have turned out? For that matter, how happy was Leslie as the partner of a woman she knew never fully got over the first man she loved? It is clear that obsession of the variety Alice gave in to taints all it comes into contact with.

But what of Caroline's static obsession? Unlike Alice, she does no harm to those around her. Nor does she bear any ill will towards William; her statements make it clear that she remains in love with him (or at least with an ideal of him). Yet, innocuous though her torch-carrying might seem, the question presents itself how much harm she does to herself by refusing to move on. Is the memory of a brief and lost love enough to subsist upon for the rest of her life? Surely not. For, though Caroline may put on a bold face, the fact remains that she cannot put her arms around a memory; she cannot wed a ghost. As such, though there is no trace of blame in Caroline's behavior, it must nonetheless serve as a warning: even if our obsessions go unseen to all but ourselves, they can rob our lives of joy as, instead of pursuing new loves, we content ourselves with the fading memories of past ones. If obsession is left unchecked we can break upon it, even (and perhaps especially) if this is a silent and deeply personal suffering.

Healing and Forgiveness

To take stock for a moment, *Until* has shown us the horrible ramifications of the loss of choice resulting from sexual abuse or obsession. To greater or lesser extents Alice, William, Caroline, Leslie, Emma and Jack (among many others) are affected. As we have seen, the lives of Alice and Caroline are dominated by their individual obsessions. Both Leslie and Emma are permanently damaged by the sexual abuse perpetrated on Emma by one of her mother's boyfriends.

That leaves the main male characters. Jack Burns is not only the victim of his own traumatic molestation by Mrs. Machado; the focal character of the story, he is also at the epicenter of damages. Not only does his mother's obsession irrevocably shape his life, he also feels the repercussions of the harm done to Emma and her mother. Abuse and betrayal having been visited on them, they change (consciously or not) from the kicked to being the kickers, the actions of both women speeding and tainting Jack's initiation into the world of sexual maturity.

One might hold out hope that William Burns, who was largely spared the negative female influences his son was subjected to, would also be spared the harm and bitterness so prevalent in the other characters. Yet this is not to be. Thanks to Alice's sleeping with the younger brother of William's fiancée Karin Ringhof in Copenhagen and the boy's subsequent suicide, the engagement is called off. Though William never truly gets over Karin or what happened to her brother, he eventually comes to love and marries one Barbara Steiner, a German woman with whom he lives together for five years in Germany. When Barbara becomes pregnant, they decide to move to Edinburgh, which for William means going home. Not long after, Barbara is diagnosed with cancer. Though after chemotherapy the disease goes into remission Barbara, who had never gotten used to the cars driving in the opposite lane in Edinburgh, steps off a curb and is hit by one, killed right before the eyes of her five-year-old daughter Heather.

The culmination of the loss and guilt weighing on William's shoulders eventually drive him over the edge. When Jack finally meets his father towards novel's end, William is suffering from a number of serious problems: his body, excepting his face, hands and feet, is now completely covered with tattoos; he suffers from bouts of depression; and certain signals such as mirrors and keywords like "skin" prompt him to take off all of his clothes so that he can see all of his tattoos. The group of doctors caring for William at the sanatorium in Zurich inform Jack that his father's condition is unlikely to get better or worse: he will require professional supervision for the rest of his life.

While it is undoubtedly bitter that William, whose Christian faith helps him to forgive Alice, should end up mentally ill and without a love to call his own, this conclusion is not only quite conceivable in light of all that he has lost, it also serves to reinforce patterns consistent with the *Bildungsroman* genre: insofar as the "older" generation of characters is concerned, Alice is dead, Leslie shows no signs of improving her character, and William is mad. Of the younger generation, Emma succeeded in breaking the cycle, though she died far too young. Yet thanks to the influence of her example and that of his damaged father, there remains hope that our *Bildungsheld* Jack (and perhaps Heather as well) will rise above the bitterness his mother could not. Their chances of success are improved by their (newfound) familial cohesion; whereas for the bulk of the story Alice, Leslie and William⁴³⁹, not to mention Jack, Emma and Heather, cannot be said to be part of a healthy nuclear family – whether in the form of siblings or a spouse –, the patchwork family formed at novel's end holds the promise of renewal, and importantly for *both* generations, father and children.

⁴³⁹ Here we should keep in mind that, though William did remarry, and Barbara Steiner was his wife and Heather's mother, Barbara and William were only together for ten years before the car accident took her from him, as well as from Heather, who only had a mother for five years of her young life.

Bildungsroman Elements

Until I Find You is among those Irving *Bildungsromane* that are most easily recognizable as such. In 1998, Josie P. Campbell made the sweeping claim that Irving's characters were concerned with their origins and with the origins of their actions; she further claimed that his central theme was initiation.⁴⁴⁰ And *Until* bears out her stance in an exemplary fashion: Jack Burns, treading a similar path to but by no means copying previous Irving protagonists such as T.S. Garp and *A Prayer for Owen Meany's* Johnny Wheelwright, certainly is preoccupied with and deeply troubled by the largely cloudy question of his origins. Further, the entire novel of *Until* is an extended initiation: only at the very end of the over-800-page book does Jack begin to approach a semblance of maturity.⁴⁴¹ In no other novel does Irving devote as many pages or as many years of story time to the protagonist's development. As Irving himself claimed in a 2005 interview:

It's a novel about the whole life of a character. Here it is my eleventh novel, but I think this character, Jack Burns, is more fully developed than any character in any novel I've written, by which I mean the experiences of his childhood and his youth, his young adulthood, create a kind of forgiveness or sympathy for who he becomes as an adult. I think I've never grounded a character so realistically in a childhood and adolescence as I have this one.⁴⁴²

If we continue our examination from the perspective of the protagonist for the moment, we glean further insights concerning to what extent *Until* fits the *Bildungsroman* genre, and to which particular subgenres. If we refer back to the criteria laid out by Jeffers, the *Bildungsheld* must have both the potential for greatness and aspire to greatness.⁴⁴³ Jack Burns fulfills these requirements, but with a decidedly postmodern twist: while it is clear from his early childhood on that he is a gifted actor, and though he even goes on to win an Oscar for his big-screen performances (i.e., he does achieve a measure of greatness), this acting is the result and manifestation of all that is wrong in his life. As Jack is forced to recognize over the course of his therapy, he *only* knows how to act; those around him are uncomfortable because they often don't know whether or not he's acting, and Jack is uncomfortable simply being himself. In short,

⁴⁴⁰ Campbell, pp. 9, 16

⁴⁴¹ This is one of many elements placing *Until* firmly in the camp of modern *Bildungsromane*, as Schöneich has ascertained; namely, that the protagonist's development continues much later in life (and much later into the novel). Schöneich, p. 93

⁴⁴² Powells (2005), p. 8

⁴⁴³ Jeffers, pp. 16-17

he certainly is extraordinary, but his extraordinariness is essentially an expression of his lack of identity.

If we turn our attention to further “classic” traits of the *Bildungsheld*, we see that Jack Burns only partly possesses them. For example, Schöneich has claimed that a *Bildungsroman* protagonist must be capable of both self-criticism and self-acceptance.⁴⁴⁴ Yet Jack is only capable of the former; he is mature and discerning enough to recognize his own fundamentally flawed character, and (in the form of five years of therapy) takes concrete steps to remedy it. But there is precious little to indicate Jack’s self-acceptance. At best, in working to build a family with his half-sister and long-lost father, Jack shows promise of forming an identity and purpose he can finally live with; there is hope for Jack, but only hope. Further, as Shaffner has put forward in his analysis of the genre, *Bildungsromane* are populated by protagonists who succeed in learning “how to live,” and their direct or indirect goal is always humanitarian in nature.⁴⁴⁵ But as just discussed, Jack does not appear to have learned how to live: Finding Heather and with her their father is Jack’s *deus ex machina*; otherwise his life shows no real prospects of improvement. And, though Jack does dedicate himself to caring for and supporting his newfound family at novel’s end, having finally found a purpose, it is debatable as to whether this “good resolution” alone counteracts an otherwise selfish and hedonistic life.

In short, it rapidly becomes clear that *Until* is very much a postmodern *Bildungsroman*. This is in part evinced by the combination of a deeply introspective protagonist on the one hand and the realization that the development of said protagonist’s self seems a largely irrelevant undertaking on the other.⁴⁴⁶ The protagonist expends great effort in analyzing and improving his own character, but in the case of Jack Burns enjoys precious little success in doing so, as his consistently unhealthy and acquiescing relations with women prove. Equally disturbing, it seems to make little difference to anyone but himself whether Jack does right or does wrong by the various women in his life; indeed, given his meteoric fame and the fact that it was largely gained by playing androgynous / cross-dressing roles, people seem to expect strangeness and amoral behavior from him. As such, the protagonist’s *Bildung* can at best represent “growth for growth’s sake,” yet in this too Jack fails.

Schöneich has identified two further elements crucial to recognizing the postmodern *Bildungsroman* when we see it: first of all the presence of disembedding mechanisms⁴⁴⁷ that further sabotage the *Bildungsheld*’s search for identity. While in the broader sense these mechanisms may include the breakdown of comforting universal truths such as religious faith, in

⁴⁴⁴ Schöneich, pp. 87-88

⁴⁴⁵ Shaffner, foreword, p. 25, see also Jeffers, pp. 52-53

⁴⁴⁶ See Moretti in Schöneich, p. 47, see also Schöneich, pp. 62-64

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71

a far more concrete and essential sense they are represented in the utter absence of any family in a meaningful sense. Ironically, though Jack – in contrast to an Oliver Twist or a Homer Wells – has not only a mother but also a father, in terms of the love and nurturing vital to the healthy development of children and individuals (vital to their *Bildung*), he has neither. From a very early age, his mother begins distancing herself from him and filling his head with lies about a father he has never known. Other adults who could have supported him instead systematically strip away his innocence, be it to sate their own sexual needs as in the case of Mrs. Machado or because of their general contempt for males and their so-called innocence, as was the case with Leslie Oastler. Sadly, even Jack's surrogate sister Emma contributed greatly to Jack's physical and emotional deflowering.

Secondly, and perhaps surprisingly, Schöneich claims that, with the degradation and devaluation of so many classic elements in the postmodern *Bildungsroman*, the quest, far from joining its fellow aspects in obsolescence, becomes more important than ever before, essentially determining whether the protagonist progresses or regresses.⁴⁴⁸ This approach is of particular interest when applied to *Until*, as there are essentially three different quests in the novel: one on the part of Alice, characterized far more by its mounting desperation and immorality than any apparent nobility; and *two* on the part of Jack. Notably, Jack undertakes his own quest to retrace the steps of the journey he took with his mother as a very young boy, in the process learning a great deal about the truth of what happened in his childhood. Yet what he learns does not prompt him to find his father; at best, it leads him to start seeing a therapist. It is not until five years later that Jack, upon hearing of his half-sister Heather's plight, sets off on his second and far more meaningful quest: to get to know her and their father.

Significantly, in so doing Jack is acting in accordance with the instructions of his female therapist, and the entire situation presenting the opportunity for his second quest, which, more than any other development in the novel, holds real promise for his personal growth, is set in motion by two other women: Caroline Wurtz, who has come to serve as a conduit⁴⁴⁹ of sorts between Jack and his father; and Heather, who, as a benevolent counterpart to Alice's obsession, nonetheless exerts a similarly strict control over access, in this case the son's access to his father. In this way, Irving not only provides new iterations of a pervasive and largely deleterious predominance of female control in the novel, he also masterfully perpetuates and undermines the quest motif: Jack's initial quest is effectively a feint, breaking the reader's expectations. Though essential information *is* revealed to the protagonist, especially as regards

⁴⁴⁸ Schöneich, pp. 89-90

⁴⁴⁹ Indeed, Caroline Wurtz fulfills a similar role to that of Freud in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which Josie P. Campbell has astutely recognized as the tale type of the magical guide. See Campbell, pp. 96-97

his provenance, this information is not acted upon⁴⁵⁰ in any real way: far from catalyzing change, it promotes little more than further introspection. Yet the quest is not wholly defused: the second quest redeems the form, and does so in a minimalist and postmodern fashion. Gone are the sweeping revelations and dramatic climaxes; in their stead are the more delicate, more everyday and more authentic turns from the deeply conflicted and ultimately pointless existence Jack had known to one in which he learns to put the needs of others before his own. In the novel's final arc, Jack's quest is essentially a commitment to forming in his adulthood the family he never knew as a child, not solely for his own growth, but also in order to be there for his bereaved and broken yet loving father, and for the sister who grew up only with his shadow, and who has borne the brunt of caring for their ailing father.

Variation and Departure

As a penultimate section on the analysis of the novel, it is worthwhile to examine *Until I Find You* in comparison to its predecessor, *A Widow for One Year*.⁴⁵¹ Though the novels tell two very different stories, a comparison reveals a number of aspects in which they are quite similar and/or essentially serve as counterparts to one another, illustrating the later novel's role as a variation on certain themes, and as a departure in other regards.

Firstly, Irving has a penchant for populating his novels with characters who are writers; there is a writer in some way, shape or form in every novel discussed to this point. Further, the storytelling process itself is examined and discussed, often made concrete in the form of internal texts. As has been discussed in the preceding chapter, *Widow* is a novel practically overrun with writers, and we are provided revealing insights into Ruth Cole's (Irving's mouthpiece's) approach to and views on writing.

In *Until*, however, we see a very different story. While Irving apparently can't bring himself to wholly ban writers from the story (though he did so in *The Fourth Hand*), he comes very close to doing so: the only writer involved is Emma, who, like Irving himself, attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Though Emma does complete two successful novels, next to no time in the novel is spent discussing how she did so or the creative process as a whole, nor can a single internal text be found; in *Until* Irving appears to have held himself to the bare minimum of

⁴⁵⁰ In one of his final points on the postmodern development of the *Bildungsroman*, Schöneich summarizes this as the crux of the postmodern quest, a criterion that Jack (initially) fails to fulfill. Schöneich, p. 331

⁴⁵¹ Here I am intentionally disregarding *Until*'s direct predecessor, *The Fourth Hand* because, as previously explained, it essentially represents an experiment on the part of Irving and is to be seen as a separate entity from the remainder of his novels. Working from this premise, *A Widow for One Year* would then be *Until*'s immediate predecessor.

metafiction. This not only represents a new turn for the author, but also complicates the novel's classification somewhat: though Schöneich has recognized that postmodern *Bildungsromane* are characterized by a lack of verisimilitude⁴⁵² and a preponderance of internal texts, *Until* fulfills neither criterion.

We would also do well to bear in mind the extreme importance to Irving of familial structures and gender roles. In this regard, if we take *Widow* to be a fairly dark novel, then *Until* represents a yet darker and more painful mirror image. For example in *Widow* the villains (both literal and figurative) were to a man fathers: Ted Cole, Scott Saunders and the serial killer Ruth came to think of as the "moleman" all had children of their own, and each in his own way victimized women. In *Until*, we can very clearly see the tables turned: the three most destructive influences in the life of young Jack Burns are his own mother, Leslie Oastler, and Mrs. Machado. Once more we witness the decay of familial structures as mothers, once the Victorian moral guardians, themselves become the perpetrators of abuse.

At the same time not a single benevolent, married and female character is to be found in the story: the two women who serve as Jack's mentors throughout his years at St. Hilda's, Mrs. McQuat and Caroline Wurtz, are essentially both old maids. The former, an elderly woman in Jack's childhood, simply adopted the "Mrs." at some point; she would never marry. As for Caroline, for whom William Burns was her one great love, she shows no signs of moving on (or wanting to) in the thirty years Jack knows her. As for Dr. García, the no-nonsense therapist who encourages Jack to look for his father, she was married, but her husband had died years ago and she had never remarried.

Making matters even more complex, two of the women Jack regularly slept with as a child, Mrs. Adkins at Redding and Mrs. Stackpole at Exeter, were both unhappily married. And, years after Jack had graduated Redding and moved on to Exeter, Mrs. Adkins would commit suicide by drowning herself. The unfortunate Mrs. Stackpole would be murdered, possibly strangled by her jealous husband.

In short, Irving would seem to take (or at least to present) a very dim view of women in *Until*. While there are certainly rays of hope in the form of the spinsters and widow, namely Mrs. McQuat, Caroline Wurtz and Dr. García, each is to a greater or lesser extent a damaged person; though beneficial as spiritual guides for the protagonist, their own stories are sad ones. The behavior of the married women who choose to sleep with the young Jack borders on the criminal and is certainly reprehensible; and they seem to "pay" for that trespass with their lives. Here, the mothers are clearly in the camp of the evildoers.

⁴⁵² Schöneich, pp. 66-67

Further, through 90% of *Until* it is the actions of women combined with the passivity of a male protagonist that dictate the progression of events, yet the novel's finale is dominated by male choice: namely by Jack's commitment to care for his father and attempt a fresh start at a productive life with a half-sister he has never known. This forms a clear pendant to the development of gender and power roles in *Widow*, which moves from the dominance of male choice to women (Ruth and Marion) as the pivotal characters.

Carrying the comparison a bit further, we see that in the earlier novel progress comes with the literal marriage of strong men and women (Ruth and Harry) and that romantic love is the catalyst for change. Further, it would seem necessary for the old patriarchal generation (Ted) to die before a new beginning is possible for his daughter. In *Until* in contrast the goal is not for the "next generation" to build a new family unit; rather, a patchwork family consisting of an extremely damaged father, a son without an identity of his own, and a fairly well-adjusted but lonely daughter is formed, the nuclear family essentially being "re-fused." Not romantic but fraternal and filial love are needed for change. Lastly, just as Ted's suicide paved the way for Ruth to make a new start, Alice's succumbing to cancer finally rids Jack's life of her influence, bitterness and lies; perhaps more importantly, her patriarchal control over the father's and son's access to and information on one another is finally at an end.

As a final note here, we may observe that in both novels dysfunctional family structures are abandoned and replaced with or repaired to form new ones, the apparent message being that the family itself is a necessary, even vital and natural part of the human experience, yet dysfunctional families not only fail to provide shelter and support for their members, they actively do harm and must be combated. We need only consider the aforementioned family ventures undertaken at the end of both novels: just as Ruth risks a new start with Harry and her little boy, so do Jack, William and Heather – each of whom is missing some vital aspect of what families should offer – make their own attempt to form a family for one another.

Autobiographical Links

In 1986, nearly twenty years before he published his eleventh novel, Irving was quoted as saying: "Writing a novel is actually searching for victims. As I write I keep looking for casualties. The stories uncover the casualties."⁴⁵³ In *Until*, the victim seems to finally be Irving himself, the autobiographical connections between author and work being more pronounced than in any of its predecessors. Rather than examining the specific ties exhaustively, I find it far

⁴⁵³ The Art of Fiction No. 93 (1986), p. 1

more worthwhile to consider Irving's own statements on the issue, and particularly on the evolution of those statements.

First of all we should recognize that, when examining the autobiographical aspects of Irving's works, we are actually confronted with a complex of topics, namely: the relative importance of the "father question" in Irving's development; the impact of his being molested as a small child; the influence of these two factors on his writing; and the experience and significance of his writing *Until*.

Prior to the release of *Until*, Irving generally downplayed the importance of the mystery of his father. In a 2001 interview, he claimed: "I have never lost a single night's sleep wondering or imagining who my biological father is. I passed up several opportunities I could have had to meet him or confront him. I wasn't interested."⁴⁵⁴ In actuality, however, Irving was already writing *Until*, a novel that would make such claims almost ridiculous, at the time of the interview. Indeed, in another interview held in the same month Irving more candidly reflected that "the theme of the missing parent is recurrent, to such a degree you'd imagine I was obsessed by this unknown father. The irony is, I liked my stepdad so much I never really thought about it. I don't think. But I must have, mustn't I?"⁴⁵⁵

While it becomes clear, as Irving himself⁴⁵⁶ would also confirm, that a key factor holding him back, both from pursuing his biological father and likely from admitting his importance as well, was the fear that in the process he would harm or even betray his stepfather, whom he loved very much. Once the book was released, however, such considerations essentially became moot: Through his fictional depiction, Irving had effectively laid bare his own life story to the world at large. Accordingly, he became far more open in later interviews, revealing that:

If, like me, you don't know who your father was for decades, then you're forced to invent him, time and again. I kept asking myself: Who is my father? Does he know that I write books? Has he seen me wrestle? I thought about these things day and night.⁴⁵⁷

Irving, who had on more than one occasion professed his general apathy towards learning the whereabouts of his father, would now more openly admit his years of frustration, of

⁴⁵⁴ Barnes & Noble.com (2001), p. 4

⁴⁵⁵ The Observer (2001), p. 2

⁴⁵⁶ New York Times (2005), p. 1

⁴⁵⁷ Das Erste.de (2006), p. 1 Originally published in German: "Wenn du wie ich jahrzehntelang nicht weißt, wer dein Vater ist, dann bist du gezwungen, ihn dir immer wieder aufs neue hierbei zu fantasieren. Ständig fragte ich mich: Wer ist mein Vater? Weiß er, dass ich Bücher schreibe? Hat er mich mal im Ring gesehen? Das hat mich Tag und Nacht beschäftigt."

wondering why his father never came looking⁴⁵⁸ for him, something Irving claims he surely would have done, were their roles reversed. The only excuse for his not doing so, in Irving's eyes, is the fact that, eerily similar to William Burns, his biological father suffered from depression.⁴⁵⁹

As we sadly know, not only did Irving grow up without his biological father, and his mother strictly refused to speak of him whatsoever, but he was also molested by a female friend of his mother's at age eleven. Similarly to Jack Burns, this tainting of Irving's first sexual experiences would mark him for life; the "older woman thing" Emma accuses Jack of having was precisely what Irving himself experienced, though he could not at first explain it to himself. And Irving, like Jack, felt ashamed of this obsession, not only with older women but with secret relationships, but for years felt powerless to end it.⁴⁶⁰

Amazingly, even after the novel's release, Irving would alternately admit to how painful it was for him to write it and very much make light of his childhood traumas, portraying them as factors that did little more than help make him a better writer. In another 2005 interview, Irving explained that "it was probably a gift to my imagination that my mother wouldn't talk about [my biological father], because when information of that kind is denied to you as a child, you begin to invent who your father might have been, and this becomes a secret, a private obsession, which I would say is an apt description of writing novels and screenplays, of making things up in lieu of knowing the real answer," later adding succinctly that "I think it probably is the most central or informative part of my childhood, is what I didn't know about it."⁴⁶¹

While in light of the development of his unique style this claim is a plausible one, it nonetheless avoids the far more essential issue of the emotional suffering and lifelong repercussions of Irving's youth. In perhaps less guarded moments, Irving has provided ample evidence of just how hard he found it to complete *Until*. He has for example revealed that he had planned to write such a book for several years but kept putting it off, only to realize at some point that if he waited too long, he would be too old to muster the energy for the ordeal. He has by his own admission also never taken more time to rewrite a book, due largely to the fact that he very consciously interrupted his work on several occasions, turning to other projects when the novel became too painful.⁴⁶²

Further proof of Irving's personal difficulties with the novel are the fact that, after having submitted it to his publisher for printing, he subsequently recalled the manuscript – unthinkable

⁴⁵⁸ Irving also admits that he went so far as to put clues in his novels, *The Cider House Rules* being the primary example, in the hopes of drawing out his father. See titel-magazin (2006), p. 5, New York Times (2005), p. 2

⁴⁵⁹ titel-magazin (2006), p. 5, buchjournal (2006), pp.1-2

⁴⁶⁰ New York Times (2005), p. 1, rheinischer merkur (2006), p. 2, Das Erste.de, p. 1

⁴⁶¹ Academy of Achievement (2005), p. 1

⁴⁶² The Austin Chronicle (2005), p. 3, titel-magazin (2006), pp. 3-4

were it not for his status – and rewrote the entirety from the first-person to a third-person perspective, partly because he felt it improved the story, but partly because it would have otherwise been too confessional in nature; and that he slightly changed the age at which Jack Burns was molested (ten) from the age at which it happened to him (eleven), stating bluntly that “I couldn’t bear to make him my age at the time.”⁴⁶³ For a time, Irving even took antidepressants while working on the novel.

For all the pain and suffering, however, and regardless of the extent to which Irving is prepared to admit what a tremendously personal undertaking writing the story was for him, both its ending and the fact that he found the strength to complete it, and in so doing to share such intimate aspects of his own background with millions of readers, are grounds for optimism. Though Irving furnishes his protagonist with the happy reunion he himself will never have – although Irving was contacted by his own half-brother while working on the novel, the latter informed him that his biological father had died four years earlier – the years, story length and depth of text point to a mammoth and committed effort on the part of the author, which in turn make it all the more likely that, by finally addressing what happened to and shaped him in a nearly unadulterated form (as opposed to the more and less distant “copies” to be found in his previous works), he is right in saying that he has now “written it out.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ New York Times (2005), p. 1

⁴⁶⁴ New York Times (2005), p. 3

Chapter Six

Putting Together the Pieces: Rebuilding John Irving

Breaking down the myriad themes touched upon to those most prevalent and representative, we arrive at seven core points, namely: initiation; abandonment; extremism; women (their choices and the double standards they are subject to); random versus deliberate evil; healing and hope; and writing and fiction.

As a crafter of modern *Bildungsromane*, Irving's novels invariably concern themselves with initiation in one form or another.⁴⁶⁵ Further, his protagonists are very often the victims of abandonment: simultaneously perpetuating and "modernizing" the genre, various Irving *Bildungshelden* are not only abandoned as a result of contingent forces beyond their control (in keeping with the Victorian model), but also simply because their parents (if they ever knew them at all) either choose to leave them or are consciously or unconsciously emotionally unavailable.

Extremism in all its forms is an evil in the world of John Irving, and its protean character is perhaps its most dangerous aspect. Were its representation in Irving's works limited to an examination of terrorism and/or political fanaticism, one might easily relegate it to yet another call for moderation. Yet Irving also makes it clear that extremism is most perilous when it lures in otherwise good people who are unaware of their wrongdoing.

Those who have been deeply wounded are the most susceptible to engaging in extremism. And in John Irving's world, it is predominantly – though by no means exclusively – women who are done the most grievous harm. What he reminds us of, and what he explores in ever-new variations, is the unique set of choices faced by women, as well as the double standards often imposed upon them. Both women and men (and boys and girls) are beset by various dangers, both in the form of the contingency inherent to the world we live in, and in the more quiet evil done to them in their own families.

Finally, in light of the various factors at work against protagonists in the novels of John Irving, and of the serious harm often done them, the question arises as to how they cope; the answer lies in a healing process that permits the characters to hope again, a process often very closely tied to writing and the creation of fictions.

If we examine for a moment the five novels discussed from the perspective of these seven aspects, we can very quickly recognize that each makes a unique contribution to their

⁴⁶⁵ This is categorically true of the five novels examined here. Furthermore, it is also broadly applicable to the remainder of Irving's work to date.

treatment. *The World According to Garp* examines quite closely, even intimately, the writing process. One of the most metafictional of Irving's works, it shows how difficult and personal that process can be, and the necessity of the individual vision Garp strives to find in his short but happy life.

The Hotel New Hampshire in contrast – beyond the character of Lilly – hardly concerns itself with writing and is far more focused on the central theme of initiation. Not only do we accompany the first-person narrator John Berry on his journey to manhood, we are also witness to the painful sexual initiation of his sister Franny. Through Franny's terror, her sexual experiments with Susie the bear and the radical Ernst, and her eventual return to normality and emotional health, we are also given excellent and far deeper insights into the issue of women's choices first touched on in *Garp*. Though John is the protagonist, the travails of Franny and Susie leave a far more lasting impression on the reader.

Focusing as it does on the story of the orphan Homer Wells, *The Cider House Rules* is among the most "classic" *Bildungsromane* among Irving's novels to date. In terms of the key themes recurrent in Irving's books, abandonment is a core motivator in *Rules*. As a child and into his teens, Homer is understandably preoccupied with the question of who his parents are and why they chose to give him to an orphanage. Further, once Wally and Candy offer him the chance to escape St. Cloud's – which he accepts wholeheartedly – Homer is notably struck by a character he sees in a film during one of their first outings to the drive-in: a Bedouin. Wally explains to Homer (who had never seen either an Arab or a camel before) that Bedouins are nomadic, travelling from one place to the next with no true homes. Over the years, Homer struggles with the fear that his fate may also prove to be that of a Bedouin. Initially overwhelmed by the hospitality and warmth extended to him by Wally's mother Olive and Candy's father Ray, once Homer and Candy become romantically involved and Candy gets pregnant, it is fear of being rejected (and thus abandoned) by their loved ones that move both Homer and Candy to lie to Ray and Olive – neither of whom is ever told the truth before their death – and later to Wally, with whom they share a house but continue to deceive for over fifteen years.

Dr. Wilbur Larch and Homer's fellow orphan Melony offer further perspectives on abandonment, representing as they do nearly opposite responses to it. Larch, though he feels a (surrogate) father's pain when Homer leaves and opts to stay at Ocean View orchards, does nothing to stand in his way, even going so far as to suggest to Homer that he try to find a way to stay on there. It is only when Larch recognizes the very real possibility that he will soon die and the Maine state board of medical examiners will replace him with a doctor unwilling to perform abortions that he calls upon Homer to return; though he loves and misses him like a son, Larch never attempts to force him to come "home" for selfish reasons.

Melony in contrast refuses to take Homer's exodus lying down. Homer had promised never to leave St. Cloud's without her, yet when the unhopd-for chance to go with Candy and Wally presented itself, he went without so much as a goodbye. Giving us a first taste of Irving's examination of obsession (a close relative of extremism), Homer's departure sparks in Melony a drive to find him wherever he may be.

Ironically, it is the combination of Larch's sense of duty and Melony's refusal to let Homer Wells go – i.e., of the selfless and the selfish – that conspires to shake Homer back to his senses. Through Larch's example and Melony's no-nonsense appraisal of the lie he's been living, Homer recognizes that his sense of decency had been lost to him, overwhelmed by his fear of abandonment. In opting for a life of duty, and accepting the cost of losing exactly what he had so feared to, Homer Wells shows his true mettle to be that of a *Bildungsheld*.

Turning to *A Widow For One Year*, we find one of Irving's most masterful novels, for a variety of reasons. As previously mentioned, it is the first and to date only one of his novels to be written from the perspective of a female protagonist. Further, it revisits the writing process examined in *Garp*, the approach here being slightly less personal but far more mature. Indeed, in its frank insights into Irving's perennial favorite topic in real-world literary debates, the relation between imagination and memory, there is something of the confessional in Ruth's radically changed credo.

While by no means condoning parents abandoning their children, *Widow* also shows us that such developments are rarely as cut and dry as they seem; as the years go by, Ruth slowly begins to grasp why her mother did what she did. Hence she forgives Marion, who finally returns to her daughter at novel's end, while also recognizing what a horrible human being her father, the parent who did not abandon her until his suicide in her thirties, was. Hence when parents abandon their children, while it is always a sad and inarguably traumatic experience, they are not categorically monsters to be despised; indeed, the question arises as to which did more harm: Marion's absence or Ted's pervasive presence.

At various stages in their lives, we are allowed to share in Marion and Ruth's private thoughts: in Marion's case, through her conversations with Eddie and later through her own novels; in Ruth's through various outlets, including her diary entries.⁴⁶⁶ What is unique in the portrayal of women's choices in *Widow* is that Irving shifts from a more "blatant" and external approach ("now I'm going to tell you something about women") to a far more convincingly internal one. Further, Irving's "standard" controversies surrounding women, such as rape and

⁴⁶⁶ Here we should bear in mind that, while T.S. Garp held that art is and should be useless, i.e., that it should not perform any concrete function, *Widow* very clearly shows that it can indeed have a beneficial real-world function, as it is reading Marion's novels that allows Ruth to finally start to grasp her mother's behavior, allowing the healing process to begin. Cf. *Garp*, pp. 179-80.

abortion, are largely marginal here; much greater attention is paid to the two women's more quiet choices, such as if and whom to marry, or how to be a good mother (and what to do when you discover you can't). Yet this thematic transition from the dynamic to the more subtle is not done at the cost of losing emotional involvement; if anything the story gains in emotional heft from Irving's leap of faith in seeking to authentically narrate a story that is largely about women using a female voice.

Though the last novel examined in this work, *Until I Find You*, garnered its fair share of criticism – one reviewer dubbing it a “flabby belly-flop of a book,”⁴⁶⁷ another complaining that “there is something lackadaisical and weary about this entire novel”⁴⁶⁸ – this invective does nothing to detract from its unique status as a turning point in Irving's work. Further, it incorporates nearly every important thematic element discussed: it is without a doubt the most complete story of initiation produced by Irving to date, as we painstakingly (and often painfully) accompany Jack from his earliest memories to well into his thirties. Of further interest is the fact that Jack's story is also the most complete case of abandonment we have seen. Though for the majority of the novel both his parents are alive, his father has sworn never to attempt to contact him, forcing Jack to grow up without any father figure – unlike Homer Wells, he does not share the blessing of a benevolent surrogate like Wilbur Larch. What is more, though his mother Alice dies when Jack is in his thirties, she began the process of making herself unavailable to him as soon as she sent him off to St. Hilda's at the tender age of five.

We begin to see that, unlike his predecessors, Jack is largely alone in this world; not gifted with a loving natural parent (as e.g. Garp and Ruth were) or caring surrogate (like Homer Wells was), nor can he turn to his siblings for support (as the Berry children did). The closest approximation to family, to a sister, is his best friend Emma, whose role in his sexual initiation was questionable at best.

It is worthy of mention that women's choices are to a considerable extent responsible for Jack's emotionally unhealthy situation: though Jack's father consents to never seeing him again – a devil's bargain he never forgives himself for making – he is forced into this course of action by Alice's increasingly desperate and immoral attempts to blackmail him into returning to her. Further, it is Alice who initially works to put such emotional distance between herself and her son; the fact that, years later, Jack is unwilling to reverse the process is understandable. Finally, the depredations Jack suffers – both physical and emotional – at the hands of Mrs. Machado, Leslie Oastler, and even Emma are testament to the damage that can be done when women make the wrong choices, especially as regards physical intimacy and children.

⁴⁶⁷ House, Christian, Independent on Sunday, September 18, 2005

⁴⁶⁸ Tripney, Natasha, New Statesman, August 15, 2005

This abuse in turn re-opens the examination of quiet evil initiated in *The Cider House Rules*. As in *Rules*, it is not contingency that most threatens the protagonist, but rather the less dramatic, less obvious but no less deleterious harm done behind closed doors. Indeed, the all-pervasive feel of *Until* is that, while human beings are capable of overcoming tragedy, including sudden losses for which there is no explanation, it is infinitely more difficult if possible at all for them to overcome mental and emotional traumas – again, especially when subjected to them as children.

As a final but also essential thematic aspect, let us consider how *Until* approaches healing and hope. Though such a predominantly dark novel might lead us to assume the worst about its conclusion, we should bear in mind that Irving never begins a novel without knowing how it will end. In a 2005 interview, he stated:

“If you’re going to put somebody through this kind of travail, if you’re going to torture somebody over this period of time, if you’re going to take a boy who is beguiling and innocent as a child and abuse him repeatedly until as an adult he almost disappears, until as an adult he’s more comfortable being anybody else, including women, than he is being Jack Burns, there’s no way to redeem that except to, at the end of the story, give him a sister and the possibility that he might have the first normal relationship with a woman he’s ever had, and give him a father, someone who needs him to be what he is, a good son, instead of all the people he’s played.”⁴⁶⁹

It is certainly of interest to note that, while Jack makes some limited progress in his five years of therapy, and learns more about the truth of his childhood by returning to Amsterdam, he is essentially saved by a “happy end.” Further, the precise nature of that happy end holds a fairly unique status among the resolutions of Irving’s novels. In brief, Garp succeeds in learning how to be a good husband and father, though his life is cut short. John Berry would seem to have found a good wife by novel’s end; he, too, takes the traditional path of marriage and family; Homer Wells, in contrast, must part from his one true love for the sake of duty.

It is particularly interesting if we examine the resolution of Ruth Cole’s story in relation to Irving’s own life. Like Irving, she finds happiness in her second marriage. Just as he was both tormented and (by his own admission) shaped by his mother refusing to say anything about his biological father, Ruth is plagued by her father’s silence on the deaths of her brothers, and is poisoned by his skewed presentation of her mother. And Ruth not only finds a good spouse; her mother miraculously returns after a thirty-seven-year absence.

Finally, if Jack Burns’ youth is disturbingly similar to that of Irving and is, in fact, not only the most detailed but surely the darkest of any of his protagonists, his ultimate happy end,

⁴⁶⁹ UNH (2005), p. 3

similarly to Ruth's, is surely the one most attuned to what Irving might wish for himself: rather than the legacy of Garp or the noble if also demanding good works of Homer Wells and John Berry, it is Ruth who introduces a modus of fulfillment more in line with Irving's own agenda, which comes to fruition in the form of Jack's idyllic, *deus ex machina* reunion with the father he had never known. Whereas John and Homer to a great extent arrive at healing through self-sacrifice, sometimes at tremendous personal cost, Garp heals through his writing; for Ruth, the answer lies in a combination of writing out her traumas, in reading about (and in so doing finally comprehending) the pain her mother suffered, and in the serendipity of Marion's sudden return. Yet Jack Burns is the protagonist who fits this pattern least. Significantly, he is the only Irving *Bildungsheld* to date who does *not* save himself; he must instead *be saved*, a special status that will be reexamined in the course of this closing chapter.

Technique

In examining John Irving's technique and its development, one would do well to first recall the author's own priorities in this regard as detailed in the first chapter of this work. In short, Irving has long believed and continues to believe in the essential importance of research, revision and repetition in producing worthwhile storytelling. That this holds true is demonstrated in the stories he has chosen to tell in recent years, how he has gone about doing so, and his statements on those stories. His penchant for "real-world" research shows no signs of flagging; just as he researched the history and practice of abortion for *The Cider House Rules*, dwarfism for *A Son of the Circus*, and prostitution and police work (in Amsterdam) for *A Widow for One Year*, for *Until I Find You* he delved into the microcosm of tattooing and "ink addicts."

Similarly, Irving has if anything grown even more comfortable with his affinity for repetition and revision. The themes that have always moved him constantly reappear, in ever-new variations and without any apologies. Irving himself has made it clear which themes he feels to be central:

"I don't think the physical detail of wrestling, or the use of bears, or the settings in New England – I don't think those things matter much. I think the part about a missing parent, the part about imagining who someone is because they've been removed from your life – in *The Cider House Rules*, everybody's an orphan; Garp doesn't know who his father is – the serious things that repeat themselves thematically all have to do with loss and how you handle it."⁴⁷⁰

Elsewhere, he equally clearly states that

⁴⁷⁰ boston.com (2005), p. 1

"I think it probably is the most central or informative part of my childhood, is what I didn't know about it. And as friends and critics have been saying of my novels for some time, I've been inventing that missing parent, that absent father, in one novel after another."⁴⁷¹

As regards revision, it should be borne in mind that Irving took over six years to complete *Until I Find You*, including its aforementioned complete rewrite from first to third-person voice. In the specific case of *Until*, Irving often took breaks to work on screenplays and *The Fourth Hand*, both in order to gain creative distance from *Until* and because of the emotional pain⁴⁷² writing it caused him. More generally, part of Irving's growth as an author and storyteller is the need to step back from the solitary process of writing novels to engage in the more "social" undertaking of creating screenplays, a method he has found to be extremely healthy and a worthwhile contribution to the quality of his novels:

"For that reason alone, I love the existence of these screenplays in my life. They have, beginning with *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, improved my novels. I keep interrupting them and coming back to them and seeing things I never would have seen."⁴⁷³

Further, though Irving still manages to produce a steady stream of literature, he has also learned the value of taking his time; though he still feels the drive to write, he no longer puts himself under pressure to finish new novels at any price:

"I've become more comfortable about the patience, about how long the project takes. You could ask a tennis player or a skier or a boxer, whomever: you're not as patient when you're younger as you are when you get older. I'm never rushing, that's all. I just feel like, *Take your time. Just take your time.* That's something I've learned. There's no point in being in a hurry to do something."⁴⁷⁴

In the three aspects of research, repetition and revision, then, Irving seems to have remained fairly constant in his philosophy, if anything having become more comfortable with the kind of writer he is, and the kind he is not. A final pillar of his writing to be considered is that of the responsibilities of the storyteller. As mentioned in the first chapter of this work, Irving feels that good storytellers have an obligation to deal with uncomfortable topics. The question I would like to examine in this section is the extent to which Irving has upheld those responsibilities, in three major aspects – the balance between social commentary and fiction in his novels; between metafiction and fiction; and between random and deliberate violence – in the novels discussed.

⁴⁷¹ Academy of Achievement (2005), p. 2

⁴⁷² Austin Chronicle (2005), pp. 2-3

⁴⁷³ Powells (2005), p. 2

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 3

As regards the balance between social commentary and fiction and Irving's own goals, let us first examine his own statements. In a 1989 interview with the *New York Times*, Irving described himself as a "comic novelist," elaborating: "I'm not a political commentator. A social commentator? You bet. A moralist? Sure. But I would like to be judged by how well I set up the shop."⁴⁷⁵

In short, for the most part Irving has done an extremely good job of including vital social commentary in his work without letting it get in the way of telling the story. *Garp* for example does not superficially but rather palpably incorporates the (at the time) budding feminist movement, the quiet evils of adultery and child neglect, and the ongoing and hardly resolved war of the sexes, while remaining at its heart a *Bildungsroman*. Though the marriage is not quite as harmonious in *Hotel*, which addresses political extremism and the sadly perennial issue of rape, here, too, Irving succeeds in telling the story he wants to tell while incorporating important social realities and threats.

Many critics feel that in *The Cider House Rules* Irving lost his way to some extent; and it certainly is true that he himself has dubbed it his first novel with a polemic.⁴⁷⁶ Yet in making the social message – which is clearly pro-choice – somewhat heavy-handed, Irving was if anything following in the footsteps of his inspiration Charles Dickens, of whom Irving has admitted: "Sometimes he bangs the drum more than he writes the book."⁴⁷⁷ Yet here, too, the story remains the story: though readers cannot help but absorb the grim realities of abortion, and the miserable dilemmas of many of the women seeking them, the key thematic aspects of *Rules* remain that of a (surrogate) father and son, and of that prodigal son's coming of age.

In *Widow*, readers once enthralled by the world of T.S. Garp saw their faith rewarded. Whereas *Garp* addressed socially volatile issues directly and unflinchingly, what was to some extent missing was subtlety. To elaborate, though readers were never given the feeling of being spoon-fed what to think on social issues, they nevertheless could become cognizant of being deliberately shown those issues, which can be seen as a slight imbalance in the age-old practice of *prodesse et delectare* ("be useful and entertain") in favor of the former. I mention this not to detract from *Garp*, but to emphasize that *Widow* does away with even this minor drawback, as the quiet evils emanating from Ted Cole – the number of his seductions being matched only by their utter meaninglessness to him – so aptly show. In the stead of the child molester Garp heroically helps capture, only to see him released when the little girl he assaulted is too scared to testify, we are presented the equally perfidious womanizer Ted, whose hedonistic

⁴⁷⁵ New York Times (1989), pp. 2-3

⁴⁷⁶ USA Today, 23 May 1985, 1D, cited in Harter & Thompson, p. 126

⁴⁷⁷ NPR (2004), p. 1

manipulations ruin countless families. What is more, we also examine less dramatic but ultimately no less important choices on the part of women in *Widow*: not only Marion's decision to abandon her child, but even more rewarding is Ruth's soul-searching as to whether or not to marry, and why.

Unfortunately, in *Until I Find You* this balance is lost; the formula simply doesn't work. While the entire novel is an extended examination of child abuse and neglect, readers are not compelled as in previous novels, perhaps because there is no dividing line between the social problem and the story. As the two become intermingled, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain interest in either. Depicting as it does how embittered and damaged women – Alice, Leslie, Mrs. Machado and even Emma – can inflict irreparable harm on a young boy, distorting the man he would become, the novel leaves readers feeling drained and saddened, but none the wiser, the miraculous happy end doing little to dispel the inherent darkness and sadness of the story.

In turning to the balance between metafiction and fiction, we should recall that, while Irving has repeatedly used elements of metafiction in his storytelling, his first and continuing inspiration lies with the Victorian novelists, as he quite bluntly confirmed in a 2005 interview:

"I hate the twentieth century, and what I've seen so far of this one. The novel that made me want to write novels is that of the nineteenth century, Dickens especially, but not only Dickens; also Hardy, George Eliot. The novel has not been improved in the twentieth or the twenty-first century.

[...]

Are you going to go on a long trip and take *Ulysses*? Are you going to go on a long trip and read *Finnegan's Wake*? It's bullshit. No, you want to read a book, you read something by Dickens, you read something by George Eliot, you read something by Thomas Hardy, not some self-indulgent, intellectual onanism."⁴⁷⁸

In other words, while Irving has often included metafiction in his novels, it has always been his goal to ensure that such elements only enrich the main story and do not hinder its unfolding, a balance he strikes masterfully in *Garp*, where we are offered compelling insights into the development of a struggling but gifted novelist who, in the course of the story, also makes great strides in his emotional and moral growth. Jumping ahead a bit in Irving's bibliography, we see the same metafictional blend in *Widow*, where it is equally convincing but also enjoys the benefits of Irving's own maturity; in *Garp*, we have the feeling that, just like the eponymous protagonist, Irving is still finding his way, and are all too glad to accompany him on that journey. In *Widow*, five novels and several years later, we once more are part of an artist's development

⁴⁷⁸ Powells (2005), p. 7

– Ruth Cole’s – but sense a more seasoned, perhaps more sober but inarguably more refined hand guiding the story.

Interestingly, in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Cider House Rules*, and *Until I Find You*, metafiction *per se* is not to be found, with very minor exceptions: the glimpses into Lilly Berry’s doomed efforts to become (in her own eyes) a novelist of substance; and Dr. Wilbur Larch’s manipulations of fact in his annals of St. Cloud’s orphanage. Yet that is not to say that Irving simply dismisses the metafictional in these novels; rather, in each he transforms the function of fiction. In *Hotel*, unlike all other Irving novels, the entire story resembles nothing so much as a dark fairy tale, clearly setting it apart from the convention of the *Bildungsroman*. In *Rules*, which in contrast is the Irving story closest to the traditional nineteenth-century apprenticeship novel, fiction in the form of Larch’s aforementioned manipulations, and in Homer’s ultimately agreeing to perpetuate them, is a very palpable and largely benevolent force. To elaborate, the fiction of Dr. Fuzzy Stone and the lie Homer and Candy live with Wally for fifteen years are the two key fictions at work in the novel. The resolution at novel’s end consists in Homer and Candy finally doing away with their lies to lead emotionally open and honest lives; this coincides with Homer’s acceptance of the mantle of responsibility prepared for him – and woven of carefully spun fictions, an ultimately benevolent and selfless lie supplanting a surely detrimental and self-serving one.

Until is surely related to *Rules* in this regard, though the lies prevalent in it are far more one-sided in nature. Instead of the beneficent Wilbur Larch, the character telling the lies in *Until* is Jack’s mother Alice who, consciously or unconsciously, very much twists her son’s half-knowledge of his father, her fabrications leading the boy to demonize him. While in *Rules* the “good” lies ultimately outlast and replace the “bad” ones, in *Until* there are *only* harmful lies. While Jack ultimately does see through them, it is not until he is in his thirties, his entire childhood having revolved around a fabrication.

Over the course of his career, John Irving has been both celebrated and rebuked for his depiction – or what some consider his glorification – of random violence. Though the depiction of such unsavory elements is surely within the scope of Irving’s self-proclaimed duties as a novelist, what has not been examined to date is the balance between random and deliberate violence in his works.

Judging his novels from this perspective, new constellations form: we see that *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *A Widow for One Year* are extremely similar in their balance between contingency and “quiet” – which is to say deliberate and normally occurring behind closed doors – violence. In all three novels, the protagonist and other characters are often victims of forces wholly beyond their control: T.S. Garp’s father, a ball turret

gunner, is rendered a vegetable and ultimately killed by a shell fragment in his head; little Walt Garp is killed in the same accident that partially blinds his brother; Jenny Fields is assassinated by an enraged hunter. In *Hotel*, not only do Mother and Egg die in a senseless plane crash, but the Jewish Freud is blinded in a Nazi concentration camp. In *Widow*, the Coles lose both their teenage sons to a car crash in a single night, and years later Ruth is witness to and ultimately helps to solve a murder.

All of this is in keeping with the work of Irving's inspirations, not only the English Victorians but also German authors such as Günter Grass. As Irving stated in an interview held in 2005: "[...] In Grass, too, there is this combination of tragedy and comedy – someone can die from one minute to the next; Grass is simply very 'Dickens-esque.'"⁴⁷⁹

Yet it would be false to assume that Irving solely includes random violence in his novels, in which controlled, domesticated and domestic forces can be equally potent. This is especially true when we accept a broad definition of violence that encompasses both physical and emotional harm.

In *Garp*, we see a very good mixture of domestic and random harm: though there is no domestic violence in the traditional sense, there is surely domestic *evil* in the various cases of adultery presented; what is more, there is surely at least an implicit causality between this type of evil on the one hand and harm that would otherwise seem wholly random on the other. The clearest case in point is the car wreck scene: though no one is exclusively to blame for it, the combination of conditions – namely, the presence of Michael Milton's car, in which Helen was fellating him when the car containing her husband and their two children careened into it – would never have come about without Helen's affair, which was itself nothing more than an embittered response to Garp's string of one-night stands with family babysitters. As such Garp, whose fear for the safety of his children had always bordered on the neurotic, is ironically a catalyst – albeit one of many – of one son's death and the other's partial blinding.

Just as in the discussion of the balance between metafiction and fiction, here too we see clear parallels between *Garp* and *Widow*; again we witness types of violence and of evil that are simultaneously "domestic" and random, or which bridge the two categories. While Ruth's being raped by Scott Saunders is perhaps easiest to recognize as stemming from her efforts to retaliate against her womanizing father (whom she had just discovered had also slept with her best friend), other aspects are quite murky. Did Thomas and Timothy have to die, or could Marion and/or Ted have avoided the accident? Taking this line of argument to the extreme, did

⁴⁷⁹ Originally published in a German interview: "[...] auch bei Grass gibt es diese Kombination von Tragödie und Komödie – da stirbt auch jemand von einer Minute auf die andere. Grass ist eben sehr ‚dickenshaft‘." eineStadtteinBuch (2005), p. 4

Rooie have to die, strangled by the moleman, or was her death in a sense of her own making? After all, had she never become a prostitute, this fate could never have befallen her. *Widow*, like *Garp*, provides no comforting demarcations between the pain we have control over (and thus bear responsibility for) and that which is beyond our influence.

Hotel in turn takes a very different if equally rewarding approach: though there are once again threats to the nuclear family both from within and without, they are more clearly delineated. The random violence that besets the Berry family comes in the form of the terrorists, whose extremism allows them to have no qualms about kidnappings or bombings; in Franny's rape at the hands of Chipper Dove; and in the sudden and senseless loss of Mother and Egg. In the last case, no one is to blame: indeed, by taking two separate flights for the one-in-a-million chance that the plane should crash, the Berry's are exemplary in their foresight, which sadly proves to be not so absurd after all.

In clear contrast to *Garp*, and indicative of *Hotel's* status as a modern fairy tale, the internal threats to the family are not associated with questions of culpability: Father's willingness to purse – if not to say his obsession with pursuing – his dream of running a successful hotel, no matter the cost, and the incestuous feelings that develop between and threaten to consume John and Franny, are masterfully presented to the audience as simple facts of life. While we recognize the dangers these drives represent, the actual characters are never portrayed as villains; if anything, they are the victims of feelings they themselves cannot fully grasp. In *Hotel*, the key lies not in seeking blame but in finding survival strategies for all threats, as can be seen in the immolating but cleansing consummation of John and Franny's desire for one another and in the benevolent manipulation of one man's (Father's) dream into a reality that will help countless women, the third Hotel New Hampshire.

A testament to Irving's creativity, *The Cider House Rules* is essentially devoid of random violence. While this may be rightly recognized as a departure from previous novels, it also represents a new challenge for Irving, which he rises to extremely well. That is to say, by removing an element that had by this time essentially become his calling card, he was able to break new ground personally. Further, doing so brought domestic violence and quiet evil – the rape of Rose Rose perpetrated on her by her own father, Herb Fowler's deliberately sabotaged condoms, and Homer and Candy's betrayal of Wally – into even starker relief.

Just as *Widow* and *Garp* share common traits, *Rules* and *Until* are also sister works, the latter novel also focusing wholly on deliberate, quiet evil: Jack's being molested by Mrs. Machado, the harm done his sexual initiation by Leslie and Emma Oastler, and ultimately the lies and emotional distancing of his own mother. Yet this formula, so effective in its predecessor, is curiously dissatisfying in *Until*, the reason being that here Irving loses the

delicate balance between hopelessness and hope otherwise evident in his storytelling. Whereas in *Rules*, the evil perpetrated by men like Mr. Rose, Herb Fowler, and the butchers “off Harrison” are ultimately balanced by the unsung but enduring sacrifices of men like Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells – and of women like Larch’s old nurses and the young Nurse Caroline – there is precious little counterweight to the evils young Jack Burns is subjected to; no one saves him, and after five years in therapy it remains doubtful whether he can save himself. Though the “magical” entrance of his half-sister Heather and broken but loving father into Jack’s life provides the book with a modicum of hope, this alone hardly suffices to dispel its generally dark if not outright despairing tone.

Bildungsroman Elements

The final aspect to be considered in reviewing Irving’s development to date is that of its connection to the *Bildungsroman* genre, to which he has made an important contribution. First, let us briefly review what types of *Bildungsromane* he has written. In this regard, it becomes clear that each of the novels essentially does “double duty,” i.e., each combines the apprenticeship novel with another genre or another function. *Garp*, though indisputably a novel of initiation in light of the protagonist’s personal moral growth, is also (nearly) an artist’s novel, allowing Irving to not only portray T.S. Garp’s journey to maturity, but also to include absorbing metafictional and quasi-autobiographical elements on how storytellers find themselves. *Hotel* in contrast is simultaneously a novel of initiation and fairy tale, the fabulistic worlds of the Hotel New Hampshire in its three incarnations all stretching the bounds of the believable.

Though *Rules* is quite deliberately reminiscent of *David Copperfield*, going so far as to make various direct references to the latter in the course of the story, it is also a polemic piece. *Widow*, like *Garp*, combines *Bildungsroman* and artist novel, though it also revives a classic *Bildungsroman* element found sporadically in Irving’s works, that of the detective story.⁴⁸⁰ Finally, *Until* is nearly equal parts initiation novel and confessional autobiography.

Bearing in mind John Irving’s having found his inspiration in the nineteenth-century novel, to what extent has he kept that type of novel alive, and to what extent has he contributed to its tradition?

⁴⁸⁰ Interestingly, we see not only the actual detective story surrounding the “moleman” and Rooie’s murder, but are also given parallel insights into the written detective stories penned by Marion during her time in Canada. The detective story element can to some extent be found in Irving’s *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, in which the protagonist Johnny Wheelwright and his best friend seek to unravel the mystery of who Johnny’s biological father is; and can also be seen in a much more pronounced and crime-related form in the later novel *A Son of the Circus*.

Simply put, he has done so by walking a fine line between the Victorian and the postmodern. To clarify, it would hardly be practical if possible at all for a storyteller of this day and age to produce a Victorian *Bildungsroman* without the inescapable element of artifice: our world has simply gone through too many changes, changes that – consciously or unconsciously – indelibly inform the way we view it. It would as such be a fool’s errand for John Irving to seek to directly emulate Charles Dickens or Thomas Hardy; being born when he was precludes any meaningful sharing of their outlooks on life.

That being the case, what Irving has very successfully done is to breathe new life into the *spirit* of the Victorian apprenticeship novel, to keep its core values and tenets intact, while modifying the characters and story to reflect our own, deeply flawed and postmodern world. For Irving’s protagonists, from T.S. Garp to Jack Burns, the chief evils plaguing them are the diverse guises of abandonment and loss. Further, at the heart of Irving’s novels as at the heart of his predecessors’ lies the family, both as a source of warmth and protection and as one of the main perpetrators of evil. In *The Cider House Rules*, *A Widow for One Year*, and *Until I Find You*, the protagonist must break with, escape or overcome a family that is at its heart *wrong*: in Homer’s case, this is true of the dishonest relationship he had maintained with Candy for fifteen years; both Ruth Cole and Jack Burns must escape the manipulations of their parents.

Further, Irving’s protagonists nearly universally move on to form honest and nurturing relationships, though they do so in vastly different ways. Indeed, here we can already see a divergence from the traditional *Bildungsroman* progression of the protagonist entering into a “wrong” and foolish relationship, followed by a more sober but also healthier one, the story resolving in marriage and parenthood. While T.S. Garp does start a family and learn to be a good husband and father, he is shot and killed at a tragically young age. Both Garp’s female counterpart Ruth Cole and John Berry fit the classic pattern better, each finding happiness with their second love and marrying, though in an ironic twist John and his wife Susie agree to raise the child of Franny Berry, who was also John’s first love.

In *The Cider House Rules*, however, Homer Wells has no such luck; on the contrary, in order to live up to his responsibilities he must give up the woman he loves, choosing instead the cold comfort of St. Cloud’s orphanage. However, in doing so he makes it possible for Candy and his best friend Wally to resume a truly honest marriage. As for Jack Burns, at novel’s end he still shows no signs of being able to lead a healthy romantic relationship, instead investing his energies into being a good son and brother.

In similar vein, all of the novels discussed in this work deal with the most classic and essential themes of the apprenticeship novel: the struggle for freedom, and the development and growth of the protagonist. The male and female *Bildungshelden* propagate the legacies of their

progenitors, or create new legacies of their own; similarly, they succeed in forming identities of their own by connecting to their pasts. Yet this takes on many forms. In *The Cider House Rules*, for example, Homer certainly does grow emotionally, and the pinnacle of that growth is his sacrificing his own freedom for the greater good, lending the novel's resolution a noble if bittersweet note. Further, the incorporation of metafictional elements, generally more associated with the postmodern, serves to enrich and make more convincing the initiation stories told in *Garp*, *Rules* and *Widow*; in effect, the trappings of the postmodern are utilized to strengthen stories that are largely Victorian in nature.

In other regards, however, Irving's writings to date do reveal certain postmodern tendencies. Broadly speaking, these can be seen in the protagonists' personal challenges and personal goals. Above all, it is the crumbling institution of the family – here revealing itself as a simultaneously Victorian and postmodern element – that seems perhaps the greatest challenge, and at times greatest threat, to the protagonists. This is due in no small part to the heterogeneous, patchwork familial constellations increasingly to be found in our day and age, and in a breakdown of familial ties. These range from the unconventional but beneficent – John Berry marrying Susie and agreeing to raise Franny's child – to the clearly dysfunctional – Jack Burns' mother Alice, who refuses to admit to her son that she is in a committed lesbian relationship, and who only admits the truth about his father when she knows she'll soon die. Irving's protagonists rarely enjoy the comfort of anything approaching a conventional nuclear family.

Further, while many of John Irving's protagonists, to greater and lesser extents, pursue the traditional goals of founding families of their own and leading meaningful lives, the nature and scope of their successes and failures are by no means Victorian. Garp certainly succeeds in both senses, only to be cut down in his prime; Homer Wells chooses a life of duty that, while immensely meaningful, also robs him of the chance for a normal life. At the end of *Widow*, Ruth Cole does seem to have found the right husband and a (new) father for her child; we should bear in mind, however, that Ruth and Harry are only *one* of the love stories being told; Eddie and Marion are also magically reunited, after thirty-seven years, the former housewife and her teenage lover now in their seventies and fifties respectively.

If we turn to *Until*, the question arises as to just what Jack Burns succeeds at. In a 2005 review for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani complains that Irving's earlier stories "were framed by a larger, philosophical enquiry into the relationship between reality and art, life and the imagination. In contrast with those earlier characters, who were brightly drawn, vigorous creations, Jack Burns emerges from this book as a passive, curiously vacant fellow about whom

it's difficult to care."⁴⁸¹ And it is difficult to rebut this criticism. Though we accompany Jack through an extremely detailed and lengthy maturation process, the results of that process leave much to be desired: someone who clearly has the potential for greatness but at the same time no real personality of his own. And what little development he can claim to have made seems to be of little interest, either to his fellow characters or to the reader.

Writing in 2006, a German reviewer was equally disappointed with the novel; more importantly, his article reveals that – in Germany, at least – reviewers were also provided an accompanying, explanatory essay on the novel:

Stolze 20 Seiten jedenfalls zählt der erklärende Essay, der den Rezensenten gern zur Verfügung gestellt wird. Darin gibt Irving vor, den biographischen Hintergrund des Romans zu erläutern. [...] Zweifellos sind diese Informationen von Belang – jedoch kaum für den neuen Roman. Wenigstens als Verdacht also sei es formuliert: Irvings Bekenntnisse erleichtern nicht nur den Autor, der sich seinem Publikum gegenüber aussprechen will – sie schreiben diesem Publikum darüber hinaus auch eine Lesart vor [...].⁴⁸²

This highly peculiar practice takes on a new level of meaning when we refer back to *The World According to Garp*, where Irving's mouthpiece T.S. Garp rails against writing that is essentially autobiographical:

It was, in Garp's opinion, the cheapest reason to read of all. Garp always said that the question he most hated to be asked, about his work, was how much of it was "true" – how much of it was based on "personal experience." [...] Usually, with great patience and restraint, Garp would say that the autobiographical basis – if there even was one – was the least interesting level on which to read a novel. He would always say that the art of fiction was the act of *imagining* truly – was, like any art, a process of selection. [...] And he consistently detested what he called "the phony mileage of personal hardship" – writers whose books were important because something important had happened in their lives. He wrote that the *worst* reason for anything being part of a novel was that it really happened.⁴⁸³

We should bear in mind that this refers to the period in Garp's life following the tragic car wreck that cost him one son and blinded another. Further, the very point that so angers Garp in the passage above is that his editor, without his knowledge, designed a dust jacket for *The World According to Bensenhaver*, the immensely dark and nearly pornographic novel Garp had written to channel his own (self-)destructive feelings following the wreck, for which he blamed himself and his wife Helen in equal measure. The book's dust jacket text (again selected by the

⁴⁸¹ New York Times (2005), p. 1

⁴⁸² Berliner Morgenpost (2008), p. 1. Translated: "In any case, the accompanying essay so readily supplied to reviewers weighs in at no less than 20 pages. In it Irving claims to explain the novel's biographical background. [...] Without a doubt, this information is relevant – but hardly relevant for his new novel. If only as a suspicion, let me say the following: Irving's statements serve not only to unburden the author, who wants to speak out to his readers – they also tell those readers how the book should be read [...]."

⁴⁸³ *Garp*, p. 328

editor, again without Garp's knowledge) describes him as "a father who has recently suffered the tragic loss of a five-year-old son," effectively if also shamelessly capitalizing on Garp's personal tragedy, and is accompanied by a grainy black-and-white front cover photograph of an ambulance unloading a small patient (presumably a child) on a rainy and desolate night.⁴⁸⁴

Despite the many fine books Irving has since crafted, *The World According to Garp* remains a novel impressive both in its masterful storytelling and its intimate – though not autobiographical – expression of Irving's true voice as a writer. If anything, its worth in understanding the author has grown and not diminished over the passing years, representing as it does a genesis of both his successes and failings. A later passage from the novel could just as easily describe the feelings of many readers upon completing *Until I Find You*:

Helen was perhaps the only one who knew why he couldn't (at the moment) write. Her theory would later be expressed by the critic A.J. Harms, who claimed that Garp's work was progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history. "As he became more autobiographical, his writing grew narrower; also, he became less comfortable about doing it. It was as if he knew that not only was the work more *personally* painful to him – this memory dredging – but the work was slimmer and less imaginative in every way," Harms wrote. Garp had lost the freedom of *imagining* life truly [...] According to Harms, Garp could now be truthful only by *remembering*, and that method – as distinct from imagining – was not only psychologically harmful to him but far less fruitful.⁴⁸⁵

Amazingly, the fictional reviewer Irving invented for his fictional author in 1976 hits the nail on the head in his criticism of Garp's reversion to autobiography, writing a novel (*Bensenhaver*) that was personally and emotionally necessary but which also robbed him of his vision. In 1998's *A Widow for One Year* Irving takes a somewhat more moderate stance: Marion Cole works through the pain of her own loss in (badly written) detective novels, a practice readers are led to have sympathy with if not to wholly condone, while her daughter Ruth learns to successfully blend imagination and memory, avoiding the trap of "memory dredging" mentioned above. Yet in 2005 Irving himself writes a book that is clearly meant to heal the traumas of his lost childhood.

And Irving's departure from fabulation to writing-as-therapy bears a similar cost: just as his fictional authors before him, Irving creates a work that fulfills a vital personal need, but which is otherwise largely lacking. In contrast to his predecessors, Jack Burns is a protagonist who at best elicits sympathy, and at worst is simply pathetic. In fact, the criticism unfairly leveled at *The Cider House Rules* is far more appropriate to *Until*: namely, that the novel is ultimately not life-affirming. Unfortunately this overall disheartening tone also effectively sabotages Irving's writing: whereas depth of character and detail are among Irving's most central strengths, in

⁴⁸⁴ *Garp*, pp. 328, 338-39

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 376, italics in original.

combination with this tone they become a weakness, the book's own mammoth length turning against it. As one review succinctly brought the problem with the depiction of Jack Burns to a point, "Dickensian character-drawing is supposed to be larger than life, not just longer."⁴⁸⁶ Tellingly, even the conversion of Patrick Wallingford in *The Fourth Hand* – as previously mentioned, by far the shortest and generally least engaging Irving novel to date – is far more convincing than any dubious moral growth on the part of Jack Burns.

What went wrong here? If we return to the comments of Elke Weiß, for whom, we may recall, the later novels of John Irving are of comparatively little interest, it is revealing of certain aspects of the problem. She feels that, in *The Cider House Rules* and subsequent works, Irving's penchant for interweaving elements of contingency and tragicomedy is increasingly lost, a claim which *Until* certainly supports. This development goes hand in hand with a loss of the "transformation of the mimetic" Weiß so praised in *The World According to Garp*. If we take Weiß's criticism at face value, these two trends reflect the loss of the delicate balance between fabulation and mimesis so successfully attained in *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire* and, more broadly speaking, a reversion to *Bildungsromane* that are "purer" in their makeup, but which are accordingly far less experimental in nature.

As interesting as this thesis is, it fails to do justice to Irving's works and contribution to date: while a certain degree of their experimental nature may seem to have been lost – which could just as easily be attributed to reader expectations as it could to Irving's actual storytelling – what we in fact see is an evolution, a shifting of goals and not a regression. Irving's latest novels indeed display less contingency, less random violence, their focus lying predominantly on the harm perpetrated by the familiar, not the foreign. Yet Weiß's bemoaning the loss of fabulation is premature to say the least, the plethora of eccentric, disturbing and heart-warming characters populating the worlds of *The Cider House Rules* and *A Widow for One Year* dispelling any concerns as to the continued potency of Irving's imagination.

Much earlier in his career, John Irving was praised for using modern tools to tell classic stories. As Harter and Thompson put it,

Our argument here is not, however, with Barth, the brilliant and obvious successor to Joyce. Rather, it is with those who fail to see that Irving – Dickens' distant heir – also does "what literature is supposed to do" by probing "new methods of perception," perception about life and art, and does so in unique ways in *Garp*. [...] Thus, Irving successfully integrates "fiction about fiction" with powerful (and more traditional and universal) human struggles to live life meaningfully.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁶ Observer (2005), p. 1

⁴⁸⁷ Harter & Thompson, pp. 90-91, previously mentioned in Chapter One.

That was in 1986. The simple question that presents itself is whether, more than twenty years and seven novels later, Irving is still deserving of such praise. And the answer is a resounding “yes.” While it is certainly valid and necessary to recognize the weaknesses in *Until I Find You*, this step alone does little to detract from his overall contribution; in seeking to carry on his shoulders the burden of perpetuating and revitalizing the narrative tradition of Charles Dickens, if Irving should stumble along the way he is in the best of company, as the development of the *Bildungsheld* – regardless if character or storyteller – is one marked by wrong turns on the path to self-discovery. We should also recall that, if we accept finding a connection to the past⁴⁸⁸ as an essential step along that path, writing *Until* was inevitable; more precisely, Irving had to overcome his past by finally confronting it in an unadulterated form.

In essence, the fact that Irving was insightful enough to address the weaknesses inherent in “confessional,” autobiographical storytelling in two separate novels, yet was ultimately unable to resist engaging in the same practice is a testament to his intelligence and skill as an author, which were working at odds with his own human frailties. Yet this speaks to the same humanity he has so amply demonstrated, so convincingly and enduringly imagined and portrayed for over four decades.

In *The World According to Garp*, T.S. Garp’s imagination was able to flourish once more, to regenerate itself, only *after* he had freed himself of the crushing emotional weight of guilt, bitterness and bile surrounding the loss of his son. In *A Widow for One Year*, which followed twenty-two years later, it was only revisiting the deaths of her sons in novel after novel that finally allowed Marion Cole to overcome her trauma, giving her the strength to return to her daughter. Both characters had to first mourn the loss of children, to purge the pain they felt in writing; in a very real sense, Irving has had to do the same, laying to rest the ghosts of his own childhood. And we have every reason to believe that, now that he has done so, one of the most poignant and passionate crafters of modern *Bildungsromane* will be restored to us.

⁴⁸⁸ Here I am once more indebted to the insights of Christoph Schöneich on the *Bildungsroman*, cf. Schöneich, pp. 76-79

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What explains readers' continued fascination with the novels of John Irving? How does Irving blend storytelling inspired by the likes of Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy with the harsh realities of the 20th and 21st centuries? Is such a thing even possible, or only a fool's errand? **DARK APPRENTICESHIPS** explores Irving's evolution as a significant American author, his overall contribution, and key motifs in his writing – which range from examinations of the art of storytelling itself, to the seemingly eternal war of the sexes, the horror of crimes intentionally or unintentionally perpetrated against children, and the unsung hardships faced by minorities of all kinds, all the while upholding the key tenets of the *Bildungsroman*: growth and hope. By examining in-depth five essential novels – *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Cider House Rules*, *A Widow for One Year*, and *Until I Find You* – it presents a unique portrait of the author, his personal growth, and his rightful place in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* or apprenticeship novel.