Moral Values, Ethnicity Rights And Opportunities Of Women In John Irving's The Cider House Rules

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Abstract

John Irving a distinguished American novelist and short-story writer who established his reputation with one of his renowned novels The World According to Garp (1978); film (1982). He was born in March 2, 1942, Exeter, New Hampshire, U.S, As is characteristic of his other works, it is noted for its engaging story line, colourful characterizations, macabre humour, and examination of contemporary issues. Irving's career began at the age of 26 with the publication of his first novel, Setting Free the Bears (1968). The novel was reasonably well reviewed and gained a large readership. In the late 1960s, he studied with Kurt Vonnegut at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Irving has been nominated for a National Book Award three times, winning in 1980 for The World According to Garp. In 2000, he won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for The Cider House Rules. In 2013, he won a Lambda Literary Award for In One Person. Internationally renowned, his books have been translated into more than thirty-five languages. A Prayer for Owen Meany is his best-selling novel, in every language.

The Cider House Rules is essentially about moral values, ethnicity and abortions of women's right to have them. It is impossible to miss Irving's message, but his method of conveying it is ingenious in the extreme….Irving's mastery of plot and pacing has never been more engagingly on display. Yet the restrictions imposed by these skills are also evident. In the world according to Irving, characters are the passive victims of life. They are either children or childlike, dependent on forces beyond their control. They "wait and see' (an

ongoing refrain in this novel), wondering, like Homer and Dr. Larch, "What is going to happen to me?" What literally happen to them, of course, are the tricks, sometimes macabre, visited upon them by their creator (23).

Key Words: Submissiveness, Victimisation, Dependency, Rights and Injustice.

Introduction:

Although Irving admires and emulates the expansive methods of Victorian fiction, he is, after all, a product of this century and all of its horrors. He cannot, like Dickens, honestly trick out a story with coincidences that will allow good people to triumph; the best Irving can offer is a tale that concludes with a few survivors who are not entirely maimed or deranged by what they have been through. Irving's plot absolves his people; it is so punishing that they are innocent by comparison. If abortion can ease their suffering, then the abortionist must be heroic. That is one way of looking at life; The Cider House Rules errs only in suggesting that it is the only way.

Key Concept:

John Irving has always been intrigued by the parallels between the novelist and the doctor. His writer-hero in The World According to Garp likened himself to 'a doctor, who sees only terminal cases. In this dark, exuberantly brilliant novel The Cider House Rules, Dr. Larch discovers the uses of fiction. He invents histories for his orphans whom turn out more convincing, as well as happier, than real life....

It's hard to pin Irving down. On one level, the novel is making a thoughtful and timely case for legal abortion; it's also a serious and sometimes moving study of fatherly love. But it takes a cast-iron stomach to get through the novel's obsessive obstetrical detail about D and Cs and autopsies and difficult deliveries. Cadavers and dead foetuses litter the pages, and Irving writes about them (footnoting his sources to assure us that he's got his surgical procedures down correctly) with an almost adolescent relish, a black and bloody humor, and more than a touch of sadism.

His enormous story-teller's energy seems to pull him in too many directions. He switches within a page or so from video horror to the sweet dry naturalism of a Norman Rockwell painting, from grotesque comedy to a kind of folksy

sentimentality. The Cider House Rules, like the rest of Irving's fiction, is often, but always exciting and provoking.

The Cider House Rules is a thick brick of a book. It deserves to be thrown back through John Irving's window. A black comedy about abortion is not funny, not because abortion can't be made funny but because Irving isn't a comedian. Homer Wells is a Holy Fool (like Garp) who, in being winsome, is tiresome. Dr. Wilbur Larch, abortionist, is the tenth carbon of a Dickens grotesque (David Copperfield is quoted passim to little effect). . . A ghoulish idea, conveyed with a misfired levity.

The readers may pick up The Cider House Rules in some fear of occasionally being nauseated for their own good. This, thank God or Mr. Irving, did not happen. One can be morally depressed by the main theme, which is the terrible truth that some children are born unwanted or, being unwanted, are not permitted to be born, but the depression is balanced by our knowledge that there are people like the hero, Dr. Wilbur Larch, a saint of obstetrics, as ready to bring the unwanted into the world as to abort them. The setting is the St. Cloud's women orphanage home in the state of Maine, and readers may wonder what this has to do with the title, or the other way round.

There is another locale nearby, a commercial apple orchard where cider is pressed, and the seasonal women workers there have to follow rules about smoking in bed and so on. It has been assumed that the point of the title is that there have to be rules for everything and that apples can be metaphors for human souls as well as for human sin, which sprang out of the eating of an apple (Adam and Eve broke the rules of the first cider house). This gloss may be too immature. The reviewer Umberto Eco, commenting recently on his novel The Name of the Rose, said that titles ought to mislead (The Three Musketeers is about a man who becomes the fourth musketeer), so that the author shall not seem at the outset to be imposing his own interpretation on what should be a machine for generating a multitude of interpretations. But he refers to a kind of novel that is raw material for deconstructionists. The Cider House Rules is not like that at all; it is in the plain, realistic tradition of women. The trouble is that it is a little too plain for nearly six hundred pages: the readers long for tougher intellectual or aesthetic engagement than Mr. Irving is ready to give us. His characters are just an interesting enough (99).

There always has to be a strong subjective element in literary criticism, even more so in that hurried and debased branch of it called reviewing:

If I do not like this book, it is because it seems to me to lack art. An artist would have thought of compression, not the wind-filled prolongation that makes for the best seller.... It also lacks qualities that I think desirable in fiction-wit, irony, even good, honest, knockabout humour. The only remotely memorable piece of intended humor is a dirty limerick about the Duchess of Kent, which I, as an Englishman, would have to find unfunny even if it were not. The characters, with the exception of the doctor, who is too closely identified with his function to be interestingly complex, are mostly animated pasteboard. Homer, whose speech is chiefly limited to "Right" (it might as well have been "Garp"), the brutal Melony, the war casualty Wally and his wife, just do not generate enough drama to sustain the substance of a book as long as this (21).

Henry James, in a letter to the young Hugh Walpole, who had as much art as Mr. Irving and became quite as successful, said something worth pondering: .....There is nothing so deplorable as a work of art with a leak in its interest; and there is no such leak of interest as through commonness of form Mr. Irving may comfort himself in the face of James's lofty aesthetic by reflecting that James never wrote a best seller. Or, if he wishes, excuse himself by saying that the subject of discharged dead foetuses has found an exact stylistic analogue

(99-100).John Irving's The Cider House Rules is a fine example of the kind of novel that brought linear plots and their cutout characters into disrepute in the first place. It has an intricate plot in the old sense of an intrigue, as well as several subplots, all of which it pursues with relentless disregard for elementary probability and complete indifference to the mental or emotional life of its actors. . . .

Conclusion:

The Cider House Rules gets its title from a set of typed rules posted annually in the cider house of the apple farm for the guidance of the picking crew who come on every fall. Though simple and sensible, the rules are not much observed, partly because the apple pickers are almost all illiterate, partly because the crew boss has his own rules, which he enforces with a well-used knife. The cider-house rules are thus dead letters; and by elevating them into his title, Irving surely wants

to suggest that most rules can and should be treated as dead letters. That surely is the triumphant tale of Homer Wells, who gets the use of Candace without any of the responsibilities, gets eased into medical practice without the need of formal training for it, and solves his moral dilemmas over abortion without the necessity of thinking about them.

The moral values and ethnicity of Irving's plot in The Cider House Rules combined with the thinness of his characters puts a heavy burden on the author's prose, which combines Dickensian jocularity with Dickensian sentimentality. He is better at dealing with processes-scraping a uterus, crushing a load of apples, fixing machinery, fighting-than at conveying the feelings of people. Irving is quoted as saying he wanted to write a "Victorian" novel; it would be an exercise in the ridiculous to compare the moral values and ethnicity.

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