

## Parallel Structures and Meanings in *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*

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### I . Introduction

John Irving is well-known as a writer who likes to recycle certain things, places, and character types within his novels. This recycling is obvious without being repetitive because Irving uses these elements in unique ways in each novel. Looking at Irving's use of bears, Austria especially Vienna, and doctors/nurses in his first five novels illustrates this point. In Irving's first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, several bears in the Heitzinger Zoo are released from their cages along with other zoo animals, the two main characters are Austrian, and most of the action takes place in and around Vienna. In Irving's second novel, *The Water Method Man*, adjectives such as "bearlike" are used to describe some characters, the main characters make trips to Europe and Vienna, and there are two urologists, the protagonist's father and his personal physician. Characters are also occasionally compared to bears in Irving's third novel, *The 158 Pound Marriage*, two of the main characters are born in Austria, and all four main characters end up living in Vienna at the end of the novel. In Irving's fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, there is a trained circus bear, the two main characters travel to Vienna and stay for a year while they learn to become writers, and the mother of the protagonist is a nurse. Irving's fifth novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, contains a performing bear, a woman dressed in a bear costume, and a large part of the action takes place in a pension in Vienna. In addition to subtly changing recurring elements such as these, Irving has created unique plots for each of his novels, even though most of them are *bildungsroman* type novels. Only two of Irving's novels have strikingly similar plot structures, his fourth and most successful novel, *The World According to Garp*, and his sixth novel, *The Cider House Rules*. Examining the plot similarities between these two novels provides insight into Irving's writing techniques and his social concerns as an author of modern American fiction.

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Key words : Garp, Cider House Rules, Plot, Social Concerns

## II. The Plot Structure

Although the surface details of characters, settings, and events in *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules* vary greatly, these two novels follow a strikingly similar basic plot. A young male protagonist is raised by a single parent, who is a medical professional. The parent forms certain strong moral beliefs based on events in her or his early life and then raises the son in an unorthodox fashion according to these beliefs. The parent passes on her or his life-view to the son through direct interaction and through writings which the son reads later in life. Although the son deeply loves his single parent and appreciates how he was raised, he goes through a period of physical and ideological separation from his parent during which he matures. In spite of being raised by a single parent, the son seeks and finds happiness in marriage. After the death of his parent, the son, with help from a sexually deviant friend, decides to return to the place of his childhood and carry on the work of his parent.

Here is a closer look at how this basic plot is carried out in these two novels. Both novels begin with a detailed description of the mildly unhappy childhood and the formative events of the parent figure who becomes a medical professional: Jenny Fields, a nurse in *The World According to Garp*, and Wilbur Larch, a doctor in *The Cider House Rules*. Jenny Fields grows up in a wealthy family that completely lacks frank and factual communication between parents and children. "Jenny felt she had grown up on a large ship without having seen, much less understood, the engine room" (Garp 5). Jenny rebels against her parents' narrow-mindedness and becomes a nurse, a practical job that requires direct and personal interaction with people and their problems, but one which her parents consider below her level in life. Wilbur Larch grows up the son of an alcoholic father and prohibitionist mother. He rises above his parents' poverty and contradictory social views by going to college and medical school. As a young intern, he meets a variety of women—prostitutes, wealthy women, poor women, child victims of incest—who have difficulties or who die because they cannot get a safe abortion. These experiences convince him to work at a rural orphanage where, in his clinic and unseen by the legal authorities, he can perform abortions for women who want them.

Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch both share a strong personal aversion to sex but happily accept the responsibilities of raising a child. As a young woman, Jenny rebels against the confining role of wife/mother that she feels her parents and society in general are forcing upon her. She says, "I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to have to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too" (Garp 15). Jenny conceives her son, Garp, by having sex just one time with a nearly comatose soldier who dies soon afterwards. She then happily and successfully raises Garp by herself while working as a live-in nurse at the Steering School. Similarly, Wilbur Larch's unpleasant first-and-only experience with a prostitute, his subsequent gonorrhea infection, and his variously successful and unsuccessful attempts as an intern to help women who want an abortion, when abortion was illegal in most parts of America, convince Wilbur to live without sex for the rest of his life. He thought, "He could quite comfortably abstain from having sex for the rest of his life, but how could he ever condemn another person for having sex? He would remember, too, what he *hadn't* done for Mrs. Eames' daughter, and what that had cost. He would deliver babies. He would deliver mothers, too" (Cider 67). While running the St Cloud's Orphanage, Dr. Larch becomes the "father" of Homer Wells, the first orphanage boy not to be adopted. Although Dr. Larch is not Homer's biological father, Irving makes it clear that they come

to consider themselves as father and son: "When Wilbur Larch felt indecisive, regarding Homer Wells, he knew he was suffering from the natural feelings of a father" (*Cider* 84-85). As a father figure, Dr. Larch becomes the major influence on Homer Wells during the first 20 years of his life, when Homer lives at St. Cloud's orphanage. Coincidentally, both Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch begin practicing medicine at hospitals in Boston.

Garp and Homer both benefit from the special nearly undivided attention they receive while growing up with their nonconformist single parent, and they also learn from their parent's writings, which were not written explicitly for them. Jenny Fields writes an autobiographical novel entitled *Sexual Suspect*, and throughout *The World According to Garp*, snippets of Jenny's books are quoted, giving Garp, and the reader, extra insight into Jenny's personality and personal moral code. Wilbur Larch keeps a semi-fictional journal called *A Brief History of St. Cloud's*. Quotations from this journal are scattered liberally throughout *The Cider House Rules*, and the fabrications that Dr. Larch mixes in with his factual observations become a key element in the conclusion of the novel.

Garp at age 19 and Homer at age 20 each leave their parent, with the parent's blessing, in order to find their own way in the world. Among other things, they both seek and find a happy marriage. After Garp and his mother return to America from Vienna, Garp decides that in order to pursue his career as a novelist he needs to put some distance between himself and Jenny, who has become a literary sensation with her first book. He keeps in touch with his mother through occasional visits to her house at Dog's Head Harbor, but his own writing career, his marriage to Helen, and the birth of his two sons become the central concerns of his life. In similar fashion, Homer leaves St. Cloud's because he longs to know the world outside the orphanage and because he has moral qualms about Dr. Larch's plan to make him an abortion doctor. Homer falls in love with Candy, and they conceive a son. Although theirs is not a legal marriage, Homer thinks of it as a true marriage and he cherishes the son, Angel, that Candy bears him. While Homer and Wilbur Larch are separated, they continue their debate about the morality of abortion through the letters they write to each other.

In both novels, the death of the parent causes each son to re-evaluate his life and then return to the place of his childhood to carry on the work of his parent. Both sons are helped in this moment of decision by an old friend with a deviant sexual orientation. When Jenny is killed by a sniper at a political rally for a woman gubernatorial candidate, Garp returns from Vienna to America and settles at his alma mater, Steering School. There, Garp is assisted by Roberta Muldoon, a transsexual who used to play tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles but who as a woman was Jenny Fields' most trusted companion. Roberta protects Garp during Jenny's funeral and then convinces Garp to accept Jenny's wish that he become involved in the management of Jenny's house at Dog's Head Harbor, which has become a retreat for abused women. In addition, Garp moves from writing pure fiction to writing political pieces about women's social issues. Similarly, just before Homer learns of Wilbur Larch's death due to an accidental overdose of ether, he meets his old girlfriend Melony, who was Homer's first sex partner and who now is living in a lesbian relationship with Lorna. Although Homer tries to deny his true relationship with Candy and Angel, Melony immediately perceives that Angel is Homer and Candy's son, and her condemnation of Homer's deceitful lifestyle forces Homer to realize that he should no longer live behind the lie that Angel is his adopted son. Soon after this confrontation with Melony, Homer must decide whether or not to give the field worker Rose Rose, who is pregnant after being raped by her

father, an abortion. Homer concludes, "If Melony were pregnant, I would help her . . . And with that thought he realized that he was willing to play God, a little" (Cider 561). After Melony opens Homer's eyes to the reality of his situation, Homer gives Rose an abortion, tells Angel the true story of his birth, and then returns to St Cloud's Orphanage, where as Dr. Fuzzy Stone, he takes over Dr. Larch's practice, giving the women what they want, "An orphan or an abortion" (Cider 568).

### III. Irving's Fictional Techniques

When writing *The World According to Garp*, his breakthrough novel, Irving used a lively mixture of omniscient narration, dialogue between characters, internal monologue, and writings-within-writings to tell the story. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Irving returned to the same type of narrative mixture and the same basic plot for his sixth novel, *The Cider House Rules*. Looking at the plot similarities of these two novels reveals several fictional techniques that are important to Irving's writing style.

Although Irving rarely refers to actual historical events or people in these two novels, he uses a detailed biographical description of the parent of the main character to give each novel historical depth and social context. Irving writes what amounts to a short story about the parent early in each novel: chapter one about Jenny Fields in *The World According to Garp* and chapter two about Wilbur Larch in *The Cider House Rules*. These chapters firmly establish the American social milieu in which Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch grew up: pre-WWII for Jenny Fields and pre-WWI for Wilbur Larch. According to Gabriel Miller, "Irving's novels are very much products of their time, and if the reader is not clued in with specific references to history, there is yet enough 'felt reality' to give the novels a striking and dramatic sense of verisimilitude" (19). When Irving then introduces the son, the protagonist in each novel, the reader sees the son as both a product and a continuation of his parent's life and of American society in general. Irving uses this plot to mold the fictional stories of Garp and Homer into explorations of the historical story of America. At the end of each novel, the son's decision to conform to his parent's choices is compelling on several levels because the reader feels that the son's decision confirms his own personal beliefs, the beliefs of his parent, and the moral possibilities of American society.

Irving uses the parent-son relationship in these novels as a device to create dramatic tension in the plot and to express contrasting opinions about certain social issues. Because Irving introduces Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch so thoroughly and lovingly near the beginning of each novel, the reader understands these characters and develops sympathy for their strongly moral yet decidedly atypical beliefs on social issues such as sex, women's rights, education, and child rearing. Irving thus creates the expectation and the hope that the son will live up to the high ideals of his parent, and he then creates dramatic tension by having the son go through a maturing period of rebellion against his parent's lifestyle and ideals. Irving also uses this period of physical and ideological separation between son and parent to create a parent-son dialogue that discusses various sides of difficult social issues. For example, each time Garp visits his mother at her house at Dog's Head Harbor he and his mother argue about whether the Ellen Jamesians are forwarding or hindering the public debate about the causes and consequences of rape. Homer and Wilbur Larch discuss, among other topics, the ethics of abortion in the letters that they exchange during their fifteen-year separation. One small weakness in Irving's execution of these parent-son stories is that both Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch are so

faithful to their ideals and so successful in their idiosyncratic lifestyles that they border on being caricatures rather than fully developed realistic characters.

Irving uses the autobiographical writings of each parent to add an additional voice to both novels. Similar to parents and children in real life, Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch cannot or choose not to tell certain things directly to their sons; however, by having both parents write extensively about their personal life and about life in general, Irving allows the sons, and the readers, to see an extra dimension of these parents. In her autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect*, Jenny Fields grapples with the sexual and social prejudices that often confine women to second-class status in America. Her book begins with the wonderfully direct sentence, "In this dirty-minded world ... you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore-or fast on your way to becoming one or the other" (Garp 157). In his journal, *A Brief History of St. Cloud's*, Wilbur Larch mixes fact and fiction to describe, among other things, the social pressures that can force women to choose abortion instead of giving birth to a child. In the concluding scene of the novel, Homer reads Wilbur Larch's final entry, "There is absolutely nothing wrong with Homer's heart" (Cider 587), which is poignantly both a confession and a blessing from father to son. The written voices of Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch are lively and different from their spoken voices. They give the novels extra richness and authority that would be missing if these two characters were limited to expressing themselves through dialogue.

Giving both Garp and Homer a sexually deviant friend who comes to their aid, especially at the time of their parent's death, allows Irving to approach accepted social mores from a unique point of view, and it gives these novels moral and social broadmindedness. In *The World According to Garp*, Irving creates the character of Roberta Muldoon, a transsexual former football star, as a foil against sexually normal Garp. Roberta is physically impressive, intellectually sharp, emotionally sensitive, and full of humor. Because she has lived on both sides of the sexual divide, her conversations with Garp become a thorough and convincing comparison of men's and women's understandings of and reactions to various issues. As Jenny Fields' most trusted companion, Roberta helps Garp think through the consequences of his "normal" marriage, which has included numerous affairs and other problems. Roberta also convinces Garp of the importance of continuing Jenny Fields' work with abused women. In *The Cider House Rules*, Homer's first girlfriend, Melony, is as sullen and standoffish as Roberta is impressive and lovable, but she is an important counterweight to Homer throughout the novel. While they are still at the orphanage, Melony introduces Homer to physical sex, providing him with a valuable lesson in the differences between the sex act and emotional love. Later, after they drift apart, Melony forms a strong, open, and lasting lesbian relationship with Lorna that parallels Homer's secret relationship with Candy. Melony's straightforward confrontation with Homer about the truth of his relationship with Candy and his son, Angel, forces Homer to reevaluate his relationship with Candy, tell Angel the truth about his birth, and return to St. Cloud's Orphanage to take over Dr. Larch's position. Irving uses Roberta's many strengths and Melony's bluntness to shed light on the pitfalls and the possibilities of modern marriage and other sexual relationships.

Finally, Irving concludes both novels by bringing the son home and tying up all the loose ends of the plot with an epilogue type ending, which resembles the endings of nineteenth century novelists such as Charles Dickens whom Irving so admires. Although these essentially happy endings may seem at odds with the pain, violence, and death that occur throughout the novels, Irving uses the endings to affirm the power of moral decision making and the potential of life. Edward Reilly notes, "Despite the pain and tragedy, Irving's

novels end affirmatively because his characters have meaningful, happy lives" (8). Irving's plot drags Garp and Homer through societies that are a confusing mixture of sorrow and joy, stupidity and understanding, but in the end Irving brings these two sons back to their childhood homes, having them physically and ideologically return to the life vision of their parent. Irving uses these endings to affirm the essential goodness of life in spite of its many problems and sorrows.

In addition to sharing remarkably parallel plots, these two novels also contain numerous smaller similarities that serve as good examples of Irving's seeming compulsion to rework certain themes and elements in his novels. Both novels contain poignant anti-rape scenes: Garp helps the girl who was raped in the park, and he writes the anti-rape novel *The World According to Bensehaver*; Wilbur Larch provides an abortion for the girl "Off Harrison" who was raped by her father. In both novels, soldiers are shot down during a war, and their injuries have serious sexual implications. Garp's father, Technical Sergeant Garp, is shot down over France, and lives just long enough to impregnate Jenny Fields. Wally, in *The Cider House Rules*, is shot down over Burma and returns home impotent and paralyzed from the waist down. He then marries Candy, thus depriving Homer of his chance for a real marriage. Characters in both novels travel to Europe where the foreign environment helps them discover certain elemental truths. Jenny finds her writing voice while in Vienna and produces her masterpiece, *A Sexual Suspect*. Wilbur Larch serves as an army doctor during WWI in France, and there he becomes even more firmly convinced that performing abortions is not "the Devil's work" (as it was sometimes called). He concludes that the real Devil's work is war: "The Devil worked with shell and grenade fragments, with shrapnel and with the little, dirty bits of clothing carried with a missile into a wound. The Devil's work was gas bacillus infection, that scourge of the First World War" (Cider 68). The most hauntingly similar scene in these novels involves a car being driven with its engine in neutral and its lights tuned off. In *The World According to Garp*, Garp has a childish habit of putting his Volvo into neutral and cutting the lights as he pulls into the driveway of his house. The feeling is described as, "They coasted up, into the black rain. It was like that moment when you feel an airplane lift off the runway" (Garp 374). The last time Garp does this, however, he crashes into the back of Michael Milton's car. The horrific crash, born of Garp's anger and his childish habit, kills Garp's youngest son, Walt, injures all the other members of his family, and almost destroys Garp's marriage. Near the end of *The Cider House Rules*, Wally asks Homer to drive their car along a straight stretch of road with the engine in neutral and the lights off. As they drive over a dip in the road, Wally describes the sensation saying, "That was flying" (Cider 503). Flying in WWII was the ultimate thrill of Wally's life, and it also caused him to live the rest of his adult life as a cripple. These scenes show Irving's fascination with and skill at reworking similar scenes in order to fit them into new plots and give them different meanings.

#### IV. Irving's Social Concerns

Just as the plot similarities between *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules* allow Irving to use similar fictional techniques in these two novels, they also allow him to explore similar social issues that are of special importance to him. According to Josie Campbell, "Despite Irving's interest in sexuality, scatology, body parts, and bawdy jokes, he is not only one of our most serious writers but also one of our most moral. His themes generally are associated with shared human experiences" (15). In these two

novels, Irving gives special attention to the parent-child relationship, acquiring skills to live a purposeful life, marriage, rape, and learning morality from real life experiences rather than from abstract moral codes.

Although Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch are both single parents, they do an excellent job of raising their sons. Irving uses these single parents to gently argue against the idea that only a couple can raise a child well, and to provide an example of what an ideal parent is like. Irving's ideal parent is someone who truly loves the child, who is always available when the child needs help, attention, or protection, who speaks truthfully and frankly to the child, and who has lived a life that the child can emulate. Jenny Fields and Wilbur Larch are both live-in parents, Jenny working as the school nurse at Steering School and Dr. Larch running the St. Cloud's Orphanage; thus, they are available to help Garp and Homer twenty-four hours a day. Irving describes Jenny Fields saying, "She was never distracted, she was simply all for little Garp—and for being a good nurse" (Garp 35). Both parents are unremittingly frank and truthful when dealing with their sons. For example, Jenny purposely brings Garp along when she asks a prostitute in Vienna to describe her feelings about lust and sex. When thirteen-year-old Homer discovers an aborted fetus for the first time, Dr. Larch explains everything to Homer because "he realized that this was also the Lord's work: teaching Homer Wells, telling him everything, making sure he learned right from wrong. It was a lot of work, the Lord's work, but if one was going to be presumptuous enough to undertake it, one had to do it perfectly" (Cider 70). Jenny loves Garp and Dr. Larch loves Homer steadfastly and deeply, and each parent's love is recognized and rewarded when the son carries on the work of his parent after his parent's death.

In both of these novels, Irving stresses the need for people to diligently develop specialized skills which will enable them to accomplish their purpose in life. Jenny Fields and Dr. Larch are medical professionals, doing work that requires specialized training. When Garp, who is about to graduate from high school, tells Jenny that he wants to go to Europe and become a writer, she says, "I'll find out the best place for a writer to go in Europe" (Garp 107). Garp and his mother then travel to Vienna where they live for fifteen intense months, Jenny writing her autobiography and Garp writing short stories. They devote all their time and energy toward mastering their new skills, learning to write by writing, and by the end of the novel, Garp becomes a successful professional novelist. Although Homer never attends formal school, he becomes a skilled doctor under Dr. Larch's tutelage. Irving writes, "By 194\_, Homer Wells (not yet twenty) had been a midwife to countless births and the surgical apprentice to about a quarter as many abortions; he had delivered many children himself, with Dr. Larch always present" (Cider 115). Later, when Dr. Larch and Homer argue about the morality of abortion, Larch tells Homer, "You are welcome to disapprove. But you are not welcome to be ignorant, to look the other way, to be unable to perform—should you change your mind" (Cider 188). The parents and sons in these novels undergo rigorous training to develop their specialized skills as doctors, nurses and writers; and with these skills they try "to be of use" (Cider 7) to the people around them. They strive to make the world, at least the small part of the world where they happen to live, a better place.

Although Irving uses the single parents Jenny Fields and Dr. Larch to illustrate his image of the perfect parent, Irving also affirms the value of the traditional family by having Garp and Homer search for and find happiness in marriage. Soon after Garp and his mother return from Vienna, Garp marries his high school sweetheart, Helen. They are both nineteen. Most of the remainder of *The World According to Garp* revolves around their marriage, which lasts and grows stronger in spite of Garp and Helen's extra-marital affairs and the terrible car crash that kills their youngest son, Walt. Irving describes the newlywed Garp and Helen

saying, "They hardly new each other but they had their hunches—and in their stubborn, deliberate ways they fell in love with each other sometime after they had married" (Garp 182). In *The Cider House Rules*, Homer and Candy fall in love, have sex, and Candy becomes pregnant. Candy refuses to marry Homer because she is still uncertain about whether Wally, who she still loves, will return from the war; however, Candy agrees to have Homer's baby, and while Homer, Candy, and their newborn son, Angel, are living together in the St. Cloud's Orphanage, Homer experiences the joy of marriage: "Homer and Candy loved how they fit together in the bed again and how Angel could fit between them when Candy was nursing him, and how Candy's milk would sometimes wake them both up before Angel's crying would. They agreed: they had never been happier" (Cider 429). In both novels, Irving uses the image of a father watching a sleeping child to express the joy of parenthood. One night Garp checks on his youngest son while he is sleeping. "Garp watched Walt, and this calmed him. Garp relished having such close scrutiny of the child; he lay beside Walt and smelled the boy's fresh breath" (Garp 275). Describing Homer and his son, Irving writes, "When Angel had been smaller, Homer had occasionally encountered Candy in the darkness of Angel's room, and they had even shared a few evenings of that silent wondering parents engage in while watching their children sleep. But Homer had fallen asleep, many nights, in the empty twin bed besides Angel's bed, just listening to the breathing of his son" (Cider 478). Garp and Homer are not products of a traditional family, but they, like Irving, are believers in the traditional family.

With the same vigor that Irving praises marriage and parenthood, he vilifies rape. Pondering the pervasiveness of rape, Garp thinks, "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" (Garp 209). *The World According to Garp* contains several scenes and characters that explore the horrors of rape, always unequivocally condemning it. Garp helps catch the rapist of a 10-year-old girl one day when he is jogging in a park. Two men rape 11-year-old Ellen James and cut out her tongue so she cannot identify them; in reaction to this crime, a group of women form the Ellen James Society and have their tongues surgically removed in sympathy with Ellen. And in Garp's novel *The World According to Bensenhaver*, Hope Standish successfully defends herself against a rapist by slicing his throat with his own knife while he is trying to rape her. Irving's complete abhorrence of rape is expressed clearly by Inspector Bensenhaver when he arrives on the scene to help Hope. Bensenhaver says, "It's good that you killed him ... We couldn't have done nearly enough to him ... Nothing like he deserved. Good for you" (Garp 435). The climax of *The Cider House Rules* is triggered by the pregnancy of Rose Rose who has been repeatedly raped by her father, Mr. Rose. When Candy arrives at the cider house to rescue Rose Rose from her father, the other picking crew members "were more frightened than Candy was; the men didn't know what to say—they knew only that what Mr. Rose was doing to his daughter was wrong, and they were too afraid to do anything about it" (Cider 564). Candy leads Rose Rose to the safety of the big house where Homer performs an abortion to remove Rose Rose's unwanted child. Two days later, Rose Rose stabs her father and runs away. Although the stab wound may or may not have been fatal, Mr. Rose chooses to die rather than to ask for medical help. He tells the others, "My daughter run away ... And I so sorry that I stuck myself. You better say that what happened" (Cider 577). Irving has Mr. Rose accept death as the consequence of his terrible actions, echoing Inspector Behsenhaver's opinion about the just deserts of rapists.



Irving makes the parents and their sons in these novels lead purposeful lives directed by moral principles that they learned through first-hand experience. Jenny forms her opinions about sex, marriage, children, and personal responsibility as a hospital nurse tending both fatally wounded soldiers and women in the maternity ward. Wilbur Larch devotes his life to caring for orphans and performing abortions, illegally, after becoming involved with women who suffered or died because safe and legal abortion was not available to them. Garp becomes a writer whose novels spring from his personal experiences as a young man in Vienna, as a husband and father, and as the famous son of Jenny Fields. Garp also helps manage Jenny's house for battered women at Dog's Head Harbor. Homer spends fifteen years away from St. Cloud's Orphanage trying to avoid becoming the doctor that Dr. Larch would like him to be and trying to hide the true identity of his son. Finally, the pressing need to help Rose Rose opens his eyes to his purpose in life. As Homer operates on Rose Rose Irving describes his thoughts, "If he could operate on Rose Rose, how could he refuse to help a stranger? How could he refuse anyone? Only a god makes that kind of decision. I'll just give them what they want, he thought. An orphan or an abortion" (*Cider* 568). Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack write, "As with Dr. Larch's initial decision to perform an abortion, Homer's return to St. Cloud's and all that it entails finds its origins in his genuinely human relationships with women — with Candy and Melony and Rose Rose — not out of any ideologically pure ethic" (*Bloom* 137). Jenny Fields, Garp, Dr. Larch, and Homer are independent, talented, and dedicated to helping people around them because life has taught them that real people and their real problems are more important than any abstract system of morality.

The bittersweet yet affirmative endings of both novels confirm Irving's belief in the potentials of a moral life, even though the dangers of sorrow and death are ever present. One critic has noted, "It is in the affirmative nature of Irving's comic-tragic vision that his very essence may be found" (Harter 19). In his own words, Irving says, "I feel that I am a very life-affirming person. I mean, of course, I believe in blackness, you would be an idiot not to, you see it everywhere; but at the same time, I believe that literature is a sign of life, not a sign of death. If a novel doesn't say something about human value, there isn't any worth in it" (Miller 13). Jenny Fields, Garp, Wilbur Larch, and Homer all live vigorous, generally optimistic lives, and through them Irving urges his readers to do so too.

## V. Conclusion

In *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving uses the same basic plot to tell two significantly different stories. The detailed descriptions of a large cast of characters, the varied settings, the sweep of time, the numerous plot twists, and the underlying social commentary in these two novels are testimony to Irving's rich imagination, broad interests, and writing talent. Looking carefully at the underlying similarities of these two novels reveals some of the techniques that make Irving's writing so vigorous and compelling. These similarities also point out several social issues that Irving feels compelled to address in his fiction. *The Cider House Rules* is in no way a remake of *The World According to Garp*, yet the fact that these two successful novels share more basic plot similarities than Irving's other novels would seem to indicate that Irving found this plot especially compelling; at the same time, this plot has brought out the best in Irving as a novelist writing about contemporary America.

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[Abstract]

Parallel Structures and Meanings in  
*The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*

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Although the surface facts of characters, setting, and events in John Irving's fourth and sixth novels, *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules*, are quite different, these two novels share a strikingly similar plot structure which centers on the story of an atypical single parent raising a son. Examining the plot similarities between these two novels gives insight into some of Irving's writing techniques such as providing historical and social context, creating dramatic tension among the characters, using writings-within-writings, and concluding with an epilogue type ending. Comparing these two novels also reveals several social issues that Irving wants to emphasize: child-raising, marriage, rape, and the formation of personal moral codes.

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