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Responding to Fate's Disguises:
Affirmation in The Novels of John Irving

Elizabeth Arnot

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
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ABSTRACT

Responding to Fate's Disguises:
Affirmation in The Novels of John Irving

Elizabeth Arnot

The world of John Irving's novels is characterized by a sense of danger, underlying tragedy and inevitable unhappy endings. The reaction of many of his characters to this world, however, suggests a strong feeling of affirmation that life is worthwhile despite this impending doom.

Irving's thematic focus is the struggle of characters to come to terms with violence and chaos in the world, the deaths of their loved ones and their own mortality. To do this they must find some positive meaning in life to counteract its danger and doom. Irving's characters seek such affirmation by attempting to find structure in the world around them, either by classifying their experiences and perceptions into coherent personal philosophies and visions, or by indulging in creative acts, most often the creation of family units or works of art. This study concentrates on Irving's treatment of the themes of fate, death and affirmation in The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire, The Cider House Rules and A Prayer for Owen Meany.

Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
I. Introduction	1
II. <u>The World According to Garp:</u> Is Life a Ludicrous and Doomed Effort at Reclassification?	11
III. <u>The Hotel New Hampshire:</u> "Sorrow Floats, but So Does Love."	38
IV. <u>The Cider House Rules:</u> An Orphan or an Abortion?	58
V. <u>A Prayer for Owen Meany:</u> God's Instrument?	83
VI. Conclusion	116
Bibliography	121

I

Introduction

The world of John Irving's novels is characterized by a sense of danger, underlying tragedy and inevitable unhappy endings. The reaction of many of his characters to this world, however, suggests a strong feeling of affirmation that life is worthwhile despite this impending doom.

Irving's thematic focus is the struggle of characters to come to terms with violence and chaos in the world, the deaths of their loved ones and their own mortality. To do this they must find some positive meaning in life to counteract its danger and doom. Irving's characters seek such affirmation by attempting to find structure in the world around them, either by classifying their experiences and perceptions into coherent personal philosophies and visions, or by indulging in creative acts, most often the creation of family units or works of art. Irving most admires those characters who react defiantly to their awareness of danger and doom by affirming the value of life in spite of their unavoidable fates. An examination of how such affirmation can exist in a world as dark as that which Irving creates will reveal that his vision of the human spirit is ultimately optimistic.

Critical response to John Irving's work has to date been somewhat limited. Critics have tended to focus on Irving's use of violence or his narrative technique; or have interpreted Irving's theories of art by analyzing his fiction

about writing fiction. I have chosen to concentrate on his treatment of the themes of fate, death and affirmation because it is central to Irving's overall vision.

I intend to focus on Irving's vision of affirming the value and meaning of life while recognizing its ultimate tragedy by analyzing its treatment and development in Irving's four most recent novels: The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire, The Cider House Rules and A Prayer for Owen Meany. I will include some discussion of Irving's three earlier novels: Setting Free the Bears, The Water-Method Man and The 158-Pound Marriage. I believe that these novels are apprentice work and lack the substance of the later four. Therefore, I will refer to them only where incidents and themes developed in them may shed light on elements that recur in the later novels.

Irving has sometimes been dismissed by critics who accuse him of a preoccupation with sex and violence. Although Irving states that he sometimes writes "x-rated soap opera" (Sheppard 51), he does not use sex, violence, or human tragedy merely for the entertainment value inherent in soap opera. His treatment of sex serves a thematic purpose because sex is a potentially creative or destructive force in his fiction, capable of both healing and causing pain. There is violence in the world of Irving's fiction because it is concerned with the means his characters use to cope with violence in the world. That violence exists cannot be ignored, but, as Irving

has stated, this does not mean that the experience of living is ultimately negative:

I feel that I am a very life-affirming person... 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.

(quoted in Priestly 498)

Irving has stated that "art has an aesthetic responsibility to be entertaining" (quoted in McCaffery 10). The entertainment value of his fiction does not result from his use of explicit sex and violence, but, rather, from the strength of his narrative momentum, which he claims should take precedence over all aspects of his fiction except character development ("The Narrative Voice" 89). In this respect he writes traditional novels following a nineteenth century model. Irving has also been criticized for the simple, coherent writing style which is characteristic of his fiction, and has responded quite forcefully, rejecting fiction which is difficult to read and understand and virtually without plot. He states in an essay defending the fiction of Kurt Vonnegut:

The assumption that what is easy to read has been easy to write is a forgivable lapse among non-writers, but it is self-incriminating how many critics, who also (in a fashion) write themselves, have called Vonnegut "easy" [T]here are many "serious people who take fiction seriously"... who think that [Thomas] Pynchon's kind of writing is the easiest to write. And the hardest to read: a struggle with ideas and language where we, the readers, provide much of the struggle: where the

writer, perhaps, has not struggled hard enough to make himself more readable.

("Kurt Vonnegut" 41-2)

The fact that Irving struggles to do this work for his readers does not mean, however, that neither they nor he is faced with themes that require no struggle.

Irving develops the notions of lurking danger and underlying tragedy by using symbols or personifications which can be seen as "disguises" of fate. His most vivid symbol of lurking danger, the Under Toad, so named by Garp's son who misunderstands his parents when they tell him to beware of the undertow in the ocean, appears in The World According to Garp. In The Hotel New Hampshire fate is disguised as "Sorrow", the protagonist family's pet dog. In these two novels, Fate is portrayed as a random, dangerous and external force. In The Cider House Rules fate appears in the form of Doctor Larch, an abortionist who runs an orphanage, and so decides the fates of unborn and unwanted babies, and who also invents biographies for his orphans. In A Prayer for Owen Meany fate is represented by the title character, who believes that he is its instrument. In the two later novels, the disguises of fate are human characters who are able to act on their environments and perhaps control fate, rather than personifications of random, uncontrollable chaos.

Irving relies heavily on foreshadowing, most frequently in the form of glimpses into the future by narrators who know that bad news lies ahead, and in the form of dreams of death experienced by different characters. Dreams that

foreshadow the deaths of major characters occur in The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire, and A Prayer for Owen Meany. The Cider House Rules also contains ominous and frightening dreams, although no deaths are foreshadowed. The World According to Garp and The Cider House Rules both have omniscient third-person narrators who hint that there are unhappy events in the future of their stories. The Hotel New Hampshire and A Prayer for Owen Meany are told in the first person by characters who are major participants in the main action. They tell their tales in the past tense. The benefit of hindsight allows them to comment on events before they occur and to hint at future developments without fully revealing the complete outcome of their stories.

Irving reveals his belief in the need to find structure in the world by describing the development of the personal philosophies of characters as they attempt to impose meaning on their experiences in life. Each of Irving's novels is in some sense a Bildungsroman. He traces the development of his protagonists' philosophies as they are exposed to life's experiences while growing up. In The World According to Garp Irving explores how various characters classify their perceptions of people and experiences as they develop individual visions of how the world operates. The members of the Berry family in The Hotel New Hampshire bring their family philosophy that an unhappy ending does not undermine a rich and energetic life into all the tragic situations which they encounter. In The Cider House Rules the main characters

reflect upon the nature of the human soul while they consider the moral issues surrounding the question of abortion. Here the "apparent" rules which society believes it imposes on people are contrasted with the "real" rules that the characters follow in their lives. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, the title character and his best friend, the narrator John Wheelwright, debate the issue of free will versus predestination as they contemplate their own spirituality and attempt to define it in Christian terms.

Irving plays on the paradoxical relationship between tragedy and comedy throughout each of these novels. His original title for The World According to Garp was Lunacy and Sorrow and indeed Garp's life is filled with both. In that novel the protagonist states: "I have never understood why 'serious' and 'funny' are thought to be opposites" (233). Irving appears at times to find humour in the tragic aspects of life and at other times injects comic situations with the sense of underlying tragedy that is so often lurking in his fiction. The juxtaposition of apparent opposites -- comedy and tragedy, lunacy and sorrow and serious and funny -- functions to remind us that we, like Irving's characters, choose our own perceptions and classifications for our experiences. The world can be seen either pessimistically or optimistically, and Irving's characters often choose to be optimists.

The paradoxical connection between apparent opposites is also reflected in Irving's treatment of the notion that creative acts can affirm the meaning of life. Language, when

used to create imaginative fiction, is a positive creative force, but it is destructive when used as propaganda or pornography. Sex can be constructive when used to express love or for procreation, but is destructive in such forms as rape and child molestation. In Irving's world one must be very careful about how one uses one's creative ability.

Irving often uses characters who are artists of some form, to show how art can provide life with meaning. These characters use their art in different ways to attempt to find meaning in their worlds. Garp is a writer who at his best "imagines truly" and gives his creations a vividness which mimics life. At his worst, he uses art as an outlet for a violent imagination or to describe his autobiographical experiences. The reaction of some of his readers to his "bad" work is an indirect cause of his death. Lilly Berry, in The Hotel New Hampshire, becomes a writer in an attempt to deal with the grief she feels when her mother and younger brother die in a plane crash. She commits suicide because she is unable to accept her own artistic limitations. In The Cider House Rules, Doctor Larch imposes structure on the world of the orphanage he runs by creating a fictional written history for it. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, the narrator's cousin Hester becomes a rock and roll performer, and the narrator tries to make sense of Owen's death by structuring his experiences with Owen into a story, or prayer, for Owen Meany, which is the novel itself.

Irving's characters often attempt to protect themselves from the chaos of the world by having children in the hope that their family units will provide them with a haven from the violent world outside their families. This rarely works, because one cannot hide from chaos in Irving's world. Having children gives his characters hope, however, because the continuation of life is affirmed through the birth of a new generation. Garp's greatest creative act is having children. Ironically, it is the tragedy which occurs within his family unit which causes him the greatest heartbreak of his life. In The Hotel New Hampshire the strength of the Berry family unit remains constant despite their numerous encounters with negative forces and the deaths of some of their family members.

The affirmative power of the family is felt by Irving's characters, not only in the literal creative act of having children, but also in the striving of characters to find lost or unknown parents. Knowing where one comes from, as well as creating offspring to live on after one is gone, appears to be important for one seeking to find some structure and security to make life bearable. In The Cider House Rules Irving shows us the negative effects of not knowing who one's parents are. The orphans at St. Cloud's do not have any family histories and have no family units which can help them cope with the world. The protagonist, Homer Wells, himself an orphan, has a child, Angel, with his friend Wally's girlfriend, Candy, when Wally is away at war. Candy and Homer then concoct a

story that they have adopted the child. Irving makes it clear, however, that Homer cannot be a hero in this novel unless he acknowledges publicly that he is Angel's natural father. This reflects Irving's preoccupation with fatherlessness, which is perhaps the result of the author's own natural father's failure to return to his family after serving in World War II ¹. Some of Irving's protagonists, such as Garp and Homer Wells, never know their fathers, while others, such as John Berry in The Hotel New Hampshire and Owen Meany, have fathers who are psychologically or physically crippled. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, John Wheelwright's mother dies without revealing to him the identity of his father. John and Owen are compelled to search for John's father, but the results of the search make John less, rather than more, secure about his family history. He is not only disappointed at his father's identity, but his search also shows him that he never really knew his mother either. Unable to find the structure he needs in his life, either by seeking his family roots or by having his own children, he instead looks for it in religion.

Each of Irving's major works contains the elements of fate wearing different disguises, dreams of death,

¹Irving was raised by a stepfather and his mother and claims to have had a normal childhood in a conventional family. (Sheppard 49-50.). Irving's natural father was (like Wally Worthington in The Cider House Rules) apparently shot down over Burma during his World War II air force service. (Reilly, Understanding John Irving, 3)

foreshadowing and the affirmation of life through classification or creation. A study of the development of different aspects of this vision in his major novels can lead us to a better understanding of the world according to Irving.

II

**The World According to Garp:
Is Life a Ludicrous and Doomed
Effort at Reclassification?**

The World According to Garp is the story of a writer, T.S. Garp, ² and his family. In this novel, Irving traces the development of the protagonist's art and his vision of the world from his childhood experiences at an exclusive private boys' school to the time of his murder at the age of thirty three. He also examines the ways in which people classify their perceptions and experiences in such a way that the resulting classifications form the basis of their personal philosophies. Garp's perceptions evolve into a vision which, although preoccupied with death, asserts that a person must bring energy and imagination to all that he or she undertakes in life. Garp understands that the world is a violent and dangerous place and he is profoundly affected by life's horrors and tragedies, but he nonetheless recognizes that he must find a way to live in the world despite this awareness. Garp attempts to counteract the underlying tragedy and violence of the world around him by building a family and by writing fiction that recreates life imaginatively.

The plot involves a bizarre cast of characters: Garp, a writer, wrestler and househusband; Garp's mother, Jenny

²Garp is given no first name. The initials "T.S." stand for "Technical Sergeant", the only name by which Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, knew his father.

Fields, a nurse who writes an autobiography that is mistakenly read as a feminist treatise; Garp's wife Helen Holm, a professor of English and a compulsive reader; and the Garps' children: Duncan, Walt and Jenny. Other significant characters are Ernie Holm, Helen's father; the Percy family, an example of everything a family should not be; Roberta Muldoon, a former tight end with the Philadelphia Eagles who has undergone a sex-change operation; Ellen James, a young girl who has been brutally raped and afterward maimed when her tongue is cut out; and the Ellen Jamesians, an extremist group of feminists who cut their own tongues out as a form of protest for what has happened to Ellen. The plot follows the lives of these characters and their deaths. Both Garp and Jenny Fields meet violent fates as a result of being misinterpreted by their readers. Jenny is assassinated by a man who hates women and Garp is killed by a woman who hates men.

In this novel, Irving repeatedly juxtaposes lunacy and sorrow and comedy and tragedy in the lives of the characters. There are often tragic elements in comic situations and comic aspects to tragic events, but the reader always suspects that potential tragedy lurks everywhere in Garp's world. Irving's original title for The World According to Garp was Lunacy and Sorrow (Sheppard 51). Those around him understand that "[i]n the world according to Garp, an evening could be hilarious and the next morning could be murderous" (565). Garp experiences great tragedy in the central incident of the novel: a car

accident, caused by his and his wife Helen's negligence, in which his son Walt is killed, his son Duncan is blinded, his own jaw is broken and Helen's lover Michael Milton is emasculated. The accident shows Garp that he can be not only a victim of danger and violence, but also its agent, and this causes him terror and guilt.

To raise our suspicions that tragedy and sorrow could manifest themselves at any time, Irving uses an omniscient third-person narrator who repeatedly hints that there is tragedy ahead, about which he has knowledge, but which we must wait to learn about. Irving had never used this narrative technique in any novel prior to Garp, but it is a voice which serves him well here because it allows him to fulfil what he believes the role of the narrator in fiction should be. He has stated that:

the voice [of the narrator], in the beginning is full of promises - full of bluffing, full of threatening, full of hints. What the voice seeks to establish is a situation in which the possibilities for good stories are rich; the voice also needs to establish a character, or characters, to whom good stories can happen - people who seem vulnerable enough to have big things happen to them, yet sturdy enough to withstand the bad news ahead.

("The Narrative Voice" 89)

Throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly foreshadows future events by dropping hints in the narrative. We are told at the beginning of the second chapter that "Garp always suspected he would die young" (33). Little Walt announces before the accident that he is never going to grow up (361). When Garp first meets a woman who is a member of the Ellen

Jamesians, we are told that "Garp would see more of the Ellen Jamesians" (191). He is later killed by an Ellen Jamesian, but we are told before this that the Ellen Jamesians haven't murdered anyone yet (537). Chapter 16, in which Jenny Fields is killed, is entitled "The First Assassin," thus suggesting that there will be another. Helen tells Garp that a new haircut makes his hair look like that of a corpse. The final chapter "Life After Garp" begins even before he dies, but there has never been any real doubt from the beginning of the novel that Garp will die, and that his death will likely be dramatic and premature.

The omniscience of the narrator is established immediately because the story is put into a context larger than the time frame of Garp's life. By giving an account of Garp's prehistory, the narrator shows us that his perspective includes much more than just the lifetime of Garp. The first chapter is devoted to establishing what the world is like according to Garp's mother, Jenny Fields. This chapter describes the unusual manner of Garp's conception when Jenny deliberately impregnated herself with the sperm of a comatose, dying, aerial gunner in the hospital where she works as a nurse. The narrator's omniscience is enhanced when he makes it known in the first chapter that he has access to the writings of both Jenny and Garp. The narrator throws quotations from the works of Garp and Jenny into the narrative to remind us that these sources provide him with inside knowledge.

Irving has stated that he had hoped in Garp to achieve a narrative tone of "deadpan omniscience" (Priestly, 503). The narrator achieves this tone when he describes thoughts of the characters while at the same time maintaining a distance from them which allows him a comic, ironic perspective. This is often achieved by juxtaposing written statements made later by Garp with stories about Jenny's youth. For example, the narrator describes Jenny's fascination with clams:

She read all about them: how they ate, how they bred, how they grew. It was the first live thing she understood completely - its life, its sex, its death. At Dog's Head Harbour, human beings were not that accessible. In the hospital, Jenny Fields felt she was making up for lost time; she was discovering that people weren't much more mysterious, or much more attractive, than clams.

"My mother," Garp wrote, "was not one for making fine distinctions." (6)

In the passage which follows this one, the narrator describes a joke which foreshadows the tragic accident which will occur in Garp's family. He states that one important difference that Jenny might have seen between clams and people was that "most people had some sense of humour" (6) and might find this joke funny. It involves a hospital in Boston nicknamed The "Peter Bent":

One day, the joke goes, a Boston cab driver had his taxi hailed by a man who staggered off the curb toward him, almost dropping to his knees in the street. The man was purple in the face with pain, he was either strangling or holding his breath, so that talking was clearly difficult for him, and the cabby opened the door and helped him inside, where the man lay face down on the floor alongside the back seat, tucking his knees up to his chest. "Hospital! Hospital!" he cried. "The Peter Bent?" the cabby asked. That was the closest hospital.

"It's worse than bent," the man moaned. "I think Molly bit it off!" (6-7)

The situation described in the joke appears to be one involving great lunacy, but we will later hear tragic echoes of it in the accident in which Michael Milton loses two thirds of his penis. There a similar story results in great sorrow. It cannot be said that there is no sorrow in the joke itself, however. The description of the man's pain makes it clear that what has happened is no laughing matter to him.

The narrator self-consciously plays on the idea of a reader's anticipation of the outcome of a story. When Garp tells Walt a bedtime story about a dog, the narrator comments: "What is the instinct in people that makes them expect something to happen? If you begin a story about a person or a dog, something must be going to happen to them" (265). The narrator's awareness of the powerful lure of a good story is again reflected in his description of Jillsy Sloper, the cleaning woman whom Garp's editor John Wolfe uses to test whether a book will be a bestseller. Jillsy hates Garp's novel, The World According to Bensenhaver, but reads it anyway, to "find out what happens" (452) and because "[it] feels so true" (453).

The narrator frequently jumps out of the chronology of the narrative to describe the ultimate fates of characters who die at a much later time. We are introduced to the Percy family, an important influence on Garp's early life at the Steering School, when all the Percy children are very young.

At this time the narrator tells us that years later little Cushie Percy's "young life would terminate in childbirth while she tried to deliver what would have been only her first child" (61). The deaths of Jenny Fields' brothers, of Garp's favourite English teacher, Mr. Tinch, and of Jillsy Sloper, the cleaning woman, are described in a similar fashion.

Those characters whose deaths are not described using this jumping-ahead technique, either die in the course of the narrative, or are disposed of in the epilogue in the final chapter. The narrator provides an epilogue because Garp loved epilogues:

"An epilogue," Garp wrote, "is more than a body count. An epilogue, in the disguise of wrapping up the past, is really a way of warning us about the future." (567)

The epilogue is thematically important because it fulfils Garp's philosophy that "we are all terminal cases" (609). The characters all die because this is the only possible ending to the story of the world according to Garp. Thus, the warning about the future is that one day we must all come to terms with our own mortality.

There are, however, some characters who do not die in the novel. Jenny Garp's children are left alive so that the novel ends on the affirmative note that a future generation lives on. Donald Whitcomb, the scholar who writes Garp's official biography, entitled Lunacy and Sorrow, and Michael Milton, who reappears at the end of the novel, telling Duncan Garp he is writing a critical biography of Garp, do not die either.

Dreams of death foreshadow tragedy in The World According to Garp. At the beginning of his story, these dreams appear only in Garp's fiction, but they soon find their way into his life as well. In Garp's early fiction, "there is very little about death" (139) and in the beginning, "Garp had only a dream of death" (139). His first short story, "The Pension Grillparzer", is the tale of a family whose father works for the Austrian Tourist Bureau, rating and classifying hotels, pensions and restaurants. The grandmother of the family has a dream of death. A mysterious circus man staying at the hotel reveals that many years ago, while staying in a castle, the grandmother had a recurring dream about Charlemagne's horses, who were very thin, thirsty and congested. Soon after, her husband died of a respiratory infection. The grandmother herself dies sometime after the circus man tells her dream, but not before her daughter begins having the same dream and her grandson Robo also meets his death. Garp again uses a dream of death in his first novel Procrastination. Here an old woman has a death dream in which a couple of Asian Black Bears escape from the Schönbrunn Zoo. This is only her imagination, however, and the novel ends with the woman's death and the death of a diarrhetic bear which she earlier attempted to set free from the zoo.

Just as dreams foreshadow death in Garp's fiction, they begin to do the same in his real life. After Garp tells Walt an instructional story about a teasing cat and a mean dog who is chained to a truck, the story turns into a nightmare Walt

has later that night. Garp comforts him by saying: "It's just a dream, Walt" (276). Before Garp is awakened by Walt's clutching his armpit, he is having his own nightmare in which he and his son Duncan are sucked through a door of an airplane into the sky. Garp's dream occurs after his first awareness of Duncan's mortality, when he smells "that Duncan's breath [is] stale and faintly foul in his sleep" (275). The dream is thus connected with Garp's awareness of his children's mortality.

Chapter 13, which ends with the accident that kills Walt, begins with a description of another dream Garp has. In this dream, Garp is looking at a pornographic magazine when he hears a group of children crying as they march hand in hand into a bomb shelter. Duncan and Walt are at the end of this group, holding hands. Walt cries, "I'm having a bad dream," (339) but Garp is unable to wake him up. In the dream Duncan and Garp know that "it was not a dream, and that Walt could not be helped" (340). This dream is echoed in Walt's last words in the last sentence of the chapter, as Garp pulls up the driveway immediately before the accident: "'It's like a dream,' said Walt; he reached for his brother's hand" (374).

The accident which kills Walt and maims Duncan and Michael Milton is a manifestation of "The Under Toad," the Garp family's "code phrase for anxiety" which they evoke "as a way of referring to their own sense of danger" (475). A symbol of the underlying danger and potential tragedy in life, the Under Toad takes its name from Walt's misinterpretation of

his parents' warning to "Watch out for the undertow!" (474) in the ocean. The name also plays on the German word "tod" which means "death" (Miller 92 .

Although the Under Toad is not explicitly named until Chapter 16, its presence is felt from the beginning of the novel. In the first chapter, we are made painfully aware of the dangers and destruction caused by the "non-accident" (18) of World War II, through descriptions of the injuries of the patients at the hospital where Jenny Fields serves as a nurse.

When Garp is growing up at the Steering School, where his mother is the school nurse, he meets the Under Toad when he crawls out on the roof of the infirmary and nearly falls to the ground, and in an encounter with Bonkers, the Percy family dog, who bites off part of Garp's ear.

Garp's first sexual experience is with his childhood friend Cushie Percy. Garp and Cushie are at "the cannons" near the mud flats of the Steering River when they are forced to hide from some golfers, one of whom is Cushie's father, Fat Stew. As Fat Stew's partner gets stuck in the mud trying to retrieve a ball, an "awful slopping noise pursued him through the mud flats, as if beneath the mud some mouth was gasping to suck him in" (103). Although Garp and Cushie laugh, the Under Toad is present, and their sexual encounter is thus also associated with danger and death. Soon after his first sexual encounter with Cushie, Garp goes to the Percy house to find Cushie, whose younger sister Pooh "came to the window like a ghost" (112). Pooh asks: "You want Cushie don't you?" (112)

and when she encounters Garp many years later at Jenny Field's funeral she accuses him of "fucking [Cushie] to death" (499). Pooh's misunderstanding of her sister's sexual relationship with Garp leads her to hatred and then to violence since it is she who murders Garp.

After Garp begins his career as a writer and starts a family, he becomes more aware of violence and horror in the world, most particularly in the form of rape and child molestation. As he begins to use sex constructively to express love and to have children he begins to see its destructive potential as well. When he meets his first Ellen Jamesian and learns that Ellen James was raped and her tongue cut out at the age of eleven, he is deeply disturbed by what happened to Ellen. While out jogging one day he helps the police catch a man who has molested a child in the park. He comments: "I feel uneasy ... that my life has come into contact with so much rape" (209). In the novel he writes later, The World According to Bensenhaver, rape, violence and murder figure prominently.

Up to this point the Under Toad's presence has been felt in only what Garp perceives to be the malevolent world around him. It starts to creep into his own home, however, as he begins to imagine the many horrible things that could happen to his family members. He is terrified about Duncan riding his bicycle and staying overnight at his friend Ralph's house, overly-anxious about Walt when he catches a cold, and fearful that his mother might become a victim of violence. Garp knows

that he has "too much imagination left over for other things" (338) because he is not writing enough. In addition to fearing that the Under Toad might sneak in from the outside world to harm his loved ones, Garp begins to fear that he himself might be its manifestation: "What if [the children's] most dangerous enemy turned out to be him?" (275)

The presence of the Under Toad in the actions of Garp and Helen can be seen in the description of the series of minor potential dangers which when combined make the accident and all its damage possible. This freak accident, like many disasters, looks like an elaborate "setup" by malevolent forces, when viewed in hindsight. The narrator describes Garp's driveway trick, in which he would cut the lights and the engine and coast into the garage (314). Helen is thinking about her irritation at this when the knob on the stick shift of Garp's car breaks off. She neglects to get it fixed. Garp takes the children to a movie on the stormy night he discovers Helen's affair with Michael Milton. Michael comes to Helen's house against Garp's wishes and, trying to accommodate her husband at least to some extent, Helen will only speak to Michael in his car in the driveway. To try to get rid of him before Garp and the children return, she performs oral sex on him in the car. Although none of these events alone could have resulted in the tragedy that occurs, the combination of them does, and both Helen and Garp blame themselves for the accident. Helen eventually comes to terms with it more easily because "she was strong enough to believe that she was a good

woman, which she was, who had been made to suffer disproportionately for a trivial indiscretion" (380). Garp continues to be haunted by his guilt, however. The Under Toad "was neither green nor brown, Garp thought. It was me. It was Helen. It was the color of bad weather. It was the size of an automobile" (475).

The Under Toad is explicitly named and described immediately prior to the assassination of Jenny Fields and the publication of Garp's novel The World According to Bensenhaver. Garp feels a chill while looking at the cover of his new book; a book which will cause much controversy and lead his opponents, the Ellen Jamesians, to try and kill him. He also feels a chill during his last glimpse of his mother raised above the crowd waving goodbye as Garp and his family fly to Vienna. The Garps stay in Vienna to avoid the publicity surrounding the publication of Garp's new novel, and there Garp senses "the froggy belching of the Under Toad, the foul and warty beast whose sticky nearness he felt like breath" (480). When they receive the telephone call with the news of Jenny's death "Garp felt he followed the Angel of Death - midwife to the Under Toad whose swampy smell he sniffed at the mouthpiece of the phone" (481).

When Garp first meets Ellen James, he believes she is the Under Toad. Perhaps he is mistaken, but Ellen does later write an essay denouncing the Ellen Jamesians that starts a series of nasty written exchanges between Ellen, the Ellen Jamesians and Garp which results in Garp's death. The Ellen

Jamesians assert that Ellen has been "brainwashed into her anti-feminist stance by the male villain T.S. Garp" (552), so Garp decides to take them on himself. After he writes a vicious attack on them, an Ellen Jamesian tries to kill him. As he lies on the ground after jumping out of the path of the woman's car, "he [hears] the croak of the vile-tasting Under Toad in his dry throat" (557). The Under Toad is again not only felt all around Garp, but also inside him, this time in the voice which inspired his writing.

When Pooh Percy, who has recently become an Ellen Jamesian, shoots Garp in the wrestling room of the Steering School, Garp is surprised by his reaction to the Under Toad's presence:

If he could have talked he would have told Helen not to be frightened of the Under Toad any more. It surprised him to realize that the Under Toad was no stranger, was not even mysterious; the Under Toad was very familiar - as if he had always known it, as if he had grown up with it. (575)

He had, of course, grown up with it. As he lies dying in the wrestling room, he realizes that there is no point in being afraid of the Under Toad, because its ultimate manifestation, death, is unavoidable. The Under Toad represents his fate, which he now knows he can no longer avoid. Garp wishes he could reassure Helen:

...don't worry - so what if there is no life after death? There is life after Garp, believe me. Even if there's only death after death (after death), be grateful for small favours - sometimes there is birth after sex, for example. And, if you are very fortunate, sometimes there is sex after birth! And if you have life, said Garp's eyes, there is hope you'll have energy. And never forget, there

is memory, Helen, his eyes told her. (576)

Garp finally understands the Under Toad, and has managed to find an approach to living which acknowledges the presence of tragedy and violence in the world, but advocates affirming the positive value of life nonetheless. Garp's life-affirming philosophy results from his reflecting upon and classifying his experiences, and his impressions of people in his own mind. Throughout the novel Irving uses the notion of classification to describe how his characters create philosophical structures that help them determine how the world around them operates. A character can choose a pessimistic or optimistic outlook of life, depending on how he or she classifies his or her impressions of people and the world.

We first see Irving's use of the notion of classification in the observation by Jenny Fields that human beings were not that much different from clams. In the hospital where she works she classifies the patients into categories based on the nature of their injuries: Externals, Vital Organs, Absentees and Goners. Later in life, her autobiography is misunderstood by many and she herself is mistakenly classified as a feminist leader by the Ellen Jamesians and others like them who are incapable of thinking for themselves. The Ellen Jamesians are portrayed as narrow-minded and flawed because their philosophies reflect the reactionism of group thinking, which

can be seen in sharp contrast to the individualism extolled by Garp and Jenny (Nelson 169).

Garp, like his mother, creates classifications for the things around him. Garp's classifications are closely tied to his theories about art and the function of literary creation. Garp's philosophical development parallels his development as an artist. Before he himself writes any fiction, however, he studies other writers. At the age of eighteen he goes to Vienna with his mother to write. Vienna appears in each of Irving's first five novels and always represents a place where characters are initiated into the adult world (Miller 133). There, Garp reads and contrasts the works of Franz Grillparzer, a famous Austrian whom he classifies as a "bad writer" (127), and those of Dostoevsky. Between the two, Garp concludes "the difference was not subject matter. The difference ... was intelligence and grace; the difference was art" (126). The subject matter of most serious writing, Garp concludes, is the same as the subject matter of the "dreary observations" (126) of the stoic Roman philosopher, Marcus Aurelius:

"In the life of a man," Marcus Aurelius wrote, "his time is but a moment, his being an incessant fling, his sense a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, his fame doubtful. In short, all that is body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors." (126)

When Garp is writing "The Pension Grillparzer" in Vienna, he is unable to find an ending for the story because he feels he lacks "[a]n overall scheme of things, a vision of his own"

(156). He is unable to find the vision he needs to finish his story until he experiences the death of someone close to him (McCaffery 4). Charlotte, a prostitute with whom he has spent a substantial amount of time, dies, and in his thoughts about the ending of her life, Garp realizes some things about what the function of his art is. After learning of Charlotte's death, Garp wanders around the zoo, remembering the gloomy philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, making observations about the world around him, and savouring "a writer's long-sought trance" (166):

Garp discovered that when you are writing something, everything seems related to everything else. Vienna was dying, the zoo was not as well restored from the war damage as the homes the people lived in; the history of a city was like the history of a family - there is closeness and even affection, but death eventually separates everyone from each other. It is only the vividness of memory that keeps the dead alive forever; a writer's job is to imagine everything so personally that the fiction is as vivid as our personal memories (167)

Garp repeats his conviction that a writer's job is to breathe life into his fiction in order to keep "the dead alive forever" to Donald Whitcomb, just before his death, when he states that a writer's task is "like trying to keep everyone alive, forever. Even the ones who must die in the end. They're the most important to keep alive" (570). Garp adds to this that "a novelist is a doctor who sees only terminal cases" (570). Garp's awareness of the ending of life has led him to concentrate on endings in his fiction. In this respect, Garp's work can be contrasted to that of Alice

Fletcher, the Garps' friend and Garp's partner in a ménage à quatre. Alice writes beautifully, but can never finish anything:

Unlike Alice, Garp was a real writer - not because he wrote more beautifully than she wrote but because he knew what every artist should know: as Garp put it, "You only grow by coming to the end of something and by beginning something else." Even if these so-called endings and beginnings are illusions. Garp did not write faster than anyone else, or more, he simply always worked with the idea of completion in mind. (223)

Alice cannot be classified as a real writer because a real writer always works with an anticipated ending in mind. Garp's fiction, then, is a means by which he deals with his awareness of mortality. He knows that he cannot keep everyone alive for ever in his life, so he tries to do so through his writing.³ Although Garp states that art has "no social value whatsoever" (251), it clearly has philosophical and spiritual worth for him.

The notion of classification is picked up by Garp in "The Pension Grillparzer" in the classifications that the protagonist family makes of hotels. Helen states that "it is in the conclusion of 'The Pension Grillparzer' that we can see what the world according to Garp would be like" (170). The Pension that the narrator in Garp's story describes and remembers is a lively, seedy place filled with peculiar, fascinating characters. When he returns to the Pension

³Lilly Berry in The Hotel New Hampshire would not be classified as a "real writer" because she is unable to face the tragedy of the deaths of her mother and brother and write about these experiences.

Grillparzer many years after the main events of his story, the hostess of the Pension describes the deaths of these characters in a resigned, sad tone. The narrator comments:

I was thinking I had noticed a curious lack of either enthusiasm or bitterness in the account of the world by [the hostess]. There was in her story the flatness one associates with a story-teller who is accepting of unhappy endings, as if her life and her companions had never been exotic to her - as if they had always been staging a ludicrous and doomed effort at reclassification. (180)

We are surprised that the surviving character, the hostess, does not seem to find her life and companions exotic, because to us they were. It is as if she believes that because they all died, their lives meant nothing. The story's message, however, is that the meaning of the character's lives is affirmed. One cannot hope for reclassification, but one can try to perceive one's life and companions as exotic. An appreciation of them will give life meaning.

In the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases and cannot be reclassified as anything else. Any classification into categories, such as his mother's Externals, Vital Organs, Absentees and Goners, ignores the inevitable fact that we are all ultimately Goners and that the Under Toad will finally get us. Any attempt at reclassification is therefore doomed. The futility of seeking reclassification is symbolised in "The Pension Grillparzer" by a circus bear, Duna, who is treated like a human for many

years and then sent to a zoo. Unable to withstand being reclassified as an animal, Duna dies (Miller 104).⁴

Irving does not suggest in "The Pension Grillparzer", however, that because ultimate reclassification is impossible one should give in to inevitable doom or believe that life is not worthwhile. The characters in the story have a vividness and energy which holds our interest and makes them seem alive. Garp has succeeded in his writer's task of imagining them so personally that the fiction is as vivid as personal memory. At the end of Garp's own life he appreciates the energy and joy of life, despite his recognition of its tragedies and its inevitable end.

Unfortunately, Garp's life experiences cause him to lose sight of his personal philosophy and artistic vision, before he finally regains his perspective prior to his death. Helen's theory of Garp's fiction is that it is "progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history" (522). One of Garp's critics later argues that he "lost the freedom of imagining life truly", and later in life "could .. be truthful only by remembering" (522). Garp moves

⁴Although ultimate reclassification is impossible, smaller reclassifications do occur. Roberta Muldoon, who once played football for the Philadelphia Eagles, is reclassified as a woman after a sex-change operation. Vienna, when Garp first goes there in 1961, is still "in its death phase" (123) after the Anschluss of 1938 and the Russian occupation following World War II. When he returns there with his family many years later, the Viennese appear "well-fed and comfortable" (475) and "something new ... had grown in the old city's place" (475). Vienna is thus reclassified as a living city.

from writing imaginative fiction such as "The Pension Grillparzer" and his first novel Procrastination, to the more autobiographical Second Wind of the Cuckold, his second novel, which parodies the wife-swapping relationship which the Garps have with Harrison and Alice Fletcher, and a short story "Vigilance", about his acting as his children's watchdog against dangerous drivers.

The deteriorating quality of Garp's work as his fiction becomes more autobiographical than imaginative reflects Irving's belief that autobiographical fiction is often the least interesting. Irving maintains that a writer should use things that happen to him as a starting point for imaginative fiction, but not simply write about personal experience (Priestly 490, McCaffery 2). Garp is a mouthpiece for Irving's beliefs about what constitutes good art: "Memories and personal histories", such as those recollected by Jenny Fields in her famous autobiography, are "suspicious models for fiction" (457) Garp believes. He claims that his mother's work has "the same literary merit as the Sears, Roebuck catalog" (13). Garp and Irving classify a "real" writer as one who uses his imagination to create fiction as vivid as personal memory. He can include descriptions taken from personal memories but must "translate" his experiences into something imaginative (Marcus 71).

Imagination can also be very dangerous, however. After Walt's death, Garp can imagine only horror and tragedy, so at first he attempts to block out his imagination. He is unable

to write. The loss of his artistic voice is symbolised by the broken jaw he suffers in the accident, which leaves him unable to speak. Ironically, his voicelessness puts him in a similar predicament as the Ellen Jamesians whom he so despises. Notions concerning appropriate uses for language and the voicelessness that results from its misuses are repeated throughout the novel, as is the idea of good and bad uses of sex. Irving uses mutilated and severed body parts to symbolize powerlessness here and in his subsequent novels. Penises are cut off when sex is not used constructively, and mouths are maimed when language is used as a destructive tool. Just as Garp is horrified that his life has come in contact with so much rape, he also asks himself, "Why is my life so full of people with impaired speech?" (506). He wonders whether it is only because he is a writer that he focuses on the speech impediments of Mr. Tinch, Alice Fletcher, Ellen James and the Ellen Jamesians. In The World According to Garp, "any rape of one's sensibilities involves, ultimately, an inability to communicate" (Miller, 108). This is the sad result of the horrible rape that Ellen James has suffered and the heartbreaking loss of a child which Garp has experienced. The Ellen Jamesians represent a perversion of such a rape of sensibilities because they have mutilated themselves for a cause. "[If] the perversion of sex is rape, the perversion of language is propaganda, hysteria, and other forms of voicelessness" (Miller 108).

When Garp finally does begin to write again, the results are horrifying. He writes The World According to Bensenhaver knowing "what terror [will] lurk at the heart of this book" (389). Bensenhaver is an outlet into which the troubled writer pours all the violence and chaos that his imagination can conjure up. Garp writes this book, a story of rape and murder, in an attempt to exorcise destruction and tragedy from his imagination. One of Irving's critics has argued that Bensenhaver represents Garp's attempt to create within his fiction a structured world which he can understand, in contrast to the real world in which he lives (Priestly "Structure" 92). This view is flawed because The World According to Bensenhaver is just as chaotic and violent as Garp's world and thus provides no understandable structure at all for Garp. Garp writes this novel not to contain his perception of horror and tragedy in the world, but rather to release it from his imagination.

Because Bensenhaver is a gory, x-rated soap opera , it is a huge commercial success which makes Garp rich and famous. This is his intention because he believes that with money he can "buy a sort of isolation from the real world" (442) and thus protect his family from its horrors. Ironically, it does just the opposite, because the anger of the Ellen Jamesians in response to Garp's novel leads Pooh Percy to murder him. Irving never supports the efforts of his characters to hide from the Under Toad in this manner.

At the end of The World According to Garp, Garp has regained the vision he found at a young age in Vienna. When he is murdered, he is writing a new novel entitled My Father's Illusions. He has his imagination in check and is able to act constructively as a parent just as he is now able to write constructively. Unfortunately, he does not get the opportunity to complete the novel he is working on, or watch his children grow up.

If language through fiction attempts to "keep everyone alive forever" (608-9) then procreation through sex has the power to do the same by creating life for new generations. The life-affirming force of children is first felt by Jenny Fields, who decides to have a baby but not to share her life with a man. "A baby with no strings attached," she thinks (14). "An almost virgin birth", (15) the narrator adds. "Old Virgin Mary Jenny" chooses as her child's father Technical Sergeant Garp, a fatally-wounded gunner, who resembles both the ball turret gunner of Randall Jarrell's poem (Griffith 20) and those of Joseph Heller's Catch 22 (Karl 174). Here, as in Jarrell's poem, the ball turret is a deceptively safe womb-like place, where the occupants brush with death while having the appearance of fetuses in the womb. The wrestling room at the Steering School is also described as an apparently safe womb-like place, where the characters are protected, but Garp dies there.

This paradox of birth-in-death is reflected in the description of Garp, Senior in the hospital where, as he

deteriorates, he appears to be reversing normal fetal development. Jenny wonders whether, on his return trip, the womb, the sperm and the egg and possibly his soul would divide at the moment of his death. At the same time, however, he is described as extremely fertile. "Under the sheet it smelled like a greenhouse in summer - absurdly fertile growth gotten out of hand. You could plant anything in there and it would blossom" (27). Jenny decides to impregnate herself with his sperm. "That was the best thing for both of us, *the only way he could go on living*, the only way I wanted to have a child" (29). Having a child, then, is one way of defying one's mortality because some part of one's living being continues on into future generations.

Garp Junior is a househusband and an indulgent, over-protective father, but building a family is his most successful creative act. In Garp's excessive imagination about the horrors that could occur to his children, there is a paradox of death-in-birth. Garp's fears reflect the potential for tragedy which concerns all parents, who fear they could lose their children. The realization of those fears in the death of one of his children reminds us that the creative act of birth must at some time inevitably lead to death. The birth of children, then, is potentially tragic, and their deaths bring great sorrow, but Irving never suggests that one should avoid having them to avoid this pain. After Walt dies, Helen decides that she wants to have another baby. With the birth of baby Jenny "Helen was grateful; she felt for

the first time since the accident that she was delivered from the insanity of grief that crushed her with the loss of Walt" (443). Having children, then, can also be a healing experience and one which offers hope for the future. Before Helen dies, she sees Jenny Garp pregnant and imagines being a grandmother. At the end of the novel, Jenny Garp has three children who do not die in the epilogue, and thus provide hope that life continues in a new generation. This helps make the epilogue life-affirming, even though almost everyone else dies. Death does "eventually separate everyone from one another" (167) as young Garp realizes in Vienna, but we must "be grateful for small favours" (576) such as birth, as he wishes to tell Helen before he dies.

At the end of the novel, we, like Garp, recognize that the Under Toad has been there since the beginning of the story. We have not, in the end, read Garp's story for the reasons Jilly Sloper suggests, "to find out what happens", because there is only one possible ending to this story, and to life itself. We are interested instead in *how* the end comes about and *how* the characters deal with their awareness of the Under Toad's presence. At the time of his death, Garp's philosophy of life reflects Irving's own. He believes that people should live energetically, in defiance of tragedy, sorrow and the ultimate fate that awaits them. The story of Garp's life is, like his fiction, told with an end in mind. Irving's narrator is not one who is accepting of unhappy endings, as Theobald's sister is, because he makes Garp's life

and Garp's companions exotic to us, as they are, finally, to Garp himself. Irving's statement in this novel is that although we cannot be reclassified, our lives will have meaning to us if our experiences and companions are exotic to us. Our efforts at reclassification may be doomed, but they are not ludicrous.

III

The Hotel New Hampshire:
"Sorrow Floats, but So Does Love."

The Hotel New Hampshire "aggressively links realism with the tone and symbolism of fable" (Sheppard 46). Irving's fifth novel appears to have grown out of Garp's short story "The Pension Grillparzer" and his unfinished final novel My Father's Illusions. Before Hotel was published, Irving described it as "the most self-contained work I've ever written, the most a world unto itself, the least reliant on the outside world to be completely visualized or understood." (McCaffery, 17) The fact that this work does seem to exist in a world of its own where its own rules operate has led some critics to analyze it as a straightforward fairy tale (Miller) or as a romance (Harter and Thompson). These approaches tend to ignore the realistic elements of the modern world, such as political terrorism, plane crashes and gang rapes, which creep into the story. The closeness of the protagonist family, the Berrys, and their isolation from other people, which results from their life in hotels, creates the self-containment of which Irving speaks. The Berrys cannot, however, avoid violence or tragedy by hiding in their hotels. This novel is concerned with the contrast between the characters' dreams or illusions about life and its cruel realities. The Berrys must find values which help them to cope with these realities in a dangerous world. The story outlines the children's

initiation to adulthood through some cruel and painful lessons. This novel ultimately affirms the power of family as a healing force and a source of hope, comfort and security in a chaotic world.

The Hotel New Hampshire focuses on the lives of the Berry family from Dairy, New Hampshire. Throughout the novel the father, Win Berry, attempts to manage both his own dreams and three different hotels, each called "The Hotel New Hampshire". Berry is inspired to live a life in hotels by an early adulthood experience working in a summer job at a resort hotel in Maine called "The-Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea". There he falls in love with his future wife, Mary, and he befriends an Austrian Jew named Freud, whom the Berrys call "our Freud" to distinguish him from "the other" famous Freud. Freud owns a performing bear which he sells to Berry before returning to Europe just prior to World War II. Win Berry is portrayed as a dreamer whose illusions lead him to believe that he can create fine hotels out of an old girls' school in Dairy, then a seedy hotel in Vienna, the sole residents of which are a group of terrorists and several prostitutes, and finally the old "Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea", which has been closed for many years, Win Berry believes, because it was not "democratic enough". (44) In fact, the hotel was too exclusive, and when Win Berry buys it many years after he first worked there, his son John and a woman named Susie run a rape crisis centre there without Win's knowledge. John becomes "the caretaker of [his] father's illusions" (417) because Win is blind and

believes the people staying there are hotel guests. Berry's illusions about hotels and life remain intact throughout the novel despite the failure of his hotels, the loss of his wife and youngest son in a plane crash, and an encounter with terrorists in Vienna in which Freud is killed and Berry is blinded.

Win and Mary Berry are indeed fruitful, producing five children, mostly during Win's breaks from his road shows and studies at Harvard. The eldest child is Frank, so named because "that was what [Win and Mary] would always be to each other and to the family" (35). The second child is a daughter named Franny because "it somehow went with Frank" (40). John, "the middle child, and the least opinionated" (2), was named after John Harvard. He is the narrator of Hotel. The fourth child is called Lilly, "for no specific reason" (32), which appears to contribute to her tiny size and inability to find her identity. The baby of the family is called Egg, the name the other children had for him when he was in his mother's womb. We are repeatedly reminded that "Egg isn't a human being yet" (56), which adds to our suspicions that he will never grow up enough to become one. He is, however, a charming, cute child who, in contrast to the comments of his siblings, does have a lot of character, but it is not surprising that he is killed with his mother in a plane crash on his way to Vienna.

The three hotels in which the Berry children live symbolize "the various stages in the education of the family

and the narrator" (Miller 132). The first hotel is a womblike, protective haven for the children, from which they can look at the cold world outside in the park. This haven is deceptive, however, because living there cannot protect Franny from being raped at school by Chipper Dove, a boy with whom she is infatuated, and two of his friends. Nor can the hotel prevent the children from experiencing the death of a loved one: their grandfather and Win's father, Iowa Bob, who dies of a heart attack in the hotel. These incidents show again that in Irving's world, one cannot hide from tragedy in a protective, womblike world because tragedy can strike just as easily there, as it does in the Steering School Wrestling room in Garp, as it can in the cruel world.

The second Hotel New Hampshire, in Vienna, is run by the Berrys' old friend Freud, now blind, and is associated with the old-world decadence which Irving sees as characterizing post-World War II Vienna (Reilly 100). Here the children live their teen and early adult years, exposed to different types of sexual decadence and deviance, and the extreme political views of a radical group who live at the hotel. They also try to deal with the deaths of their mother and youngest brother who are killed in a plane crash on their way to Vienna to join the rest of the family. When the family experiences an attempted hostage taking by the radical terrorists, the children witness the death of Freud and the blinding of their father, as well as the deaths of some of the radicals, one of whom John kills himself. The third Hotel, the old Arbuthnot,

symbolizes the narrator's maturation to a state of mind where he decides to do something productive with his life, by running a rape crisis centre.

The first-person narrative of Hotel makes the storyteller much less omniscient than the narrator of Garp. John Berry tells his story many years after the main events of the novel, however, so the narrative style does contain some of the same foreshadowing, glimpses into the future and, to a lesser extent, descriptions of the ultimate fates of some characters. John shows that he realizes at an early age that his father is a hopeless dreamer when he concludes Chapter 2 with the statement: "the first of my father's illusions was that bears could survive the life lived by human beings, and the second was that human beings could survive a life led in hotels" (70). Because we know that Earl the bear does not survive his domesticated life and is accidentally shot, we suspect that the humans living in hotels will also be in trouble. John also states that he fears that "every time someone said 'Hotel', there would be blood and sudden sorrow" (63), so that we are on guard for disaster.

When Franny is raped by Chipper Dove and two other boys, and then rescued by Junior Jones, John states that he and Franny "had not seen the last of [Chipper Dove] ... We had not seen the last of Junior Jones either" (120). He then reveals that Junior went on to be Franny's friend, a professional football player, a lawyer and an active member of an organization called "The Black Arm of the Law." He also

describes the deaths of the two other boys who raped Franny, one of whom would later be killed in a car accident and the other poisoned by a prostitute. The fate of Chipper Dove is saved until the penultimate chapter, where the Berrys' attempt to pay him back by staging his mock rape by Susie, a woman dressed in a bear suit, is described.

John Berry is, like the narrator of Garp, conscious of his role as a storyteller. He says it is his job "to set the record straight, or nearly straight" (2). He reveals that he, like Garp and the narrator of Garp, is aware of the power of imaginative fiction. He calls his mother "a truthful but boring storyteller" (3) and remembers his father telling the children the story of Earl the Bear: "You imagine the story better than I remember it" (20). Indeed, John imagines and vividly tells the early tales of Earl the bear, and his father and mother, consciously making us aware that these events occurred outside his lifetime and are reenacted in his imagination. He states that his "first memory of life itself - as opposed to what I was told happened," (46) was the death of the old bear that ends Chapter 1. From this point on, John tells the life story of his family as he remembers it. He reminds us that he is in control of his story, as well as the action in his life, when he receives a letter addressed to his father from his old friend Freud, whom the Berrys assumed had died in the War: "Like any storyteller, I had the power to end the story, and I could have. But I didn't destroy Freud's letter; I gave it to Father like any storyteller,

knowing (more or less) where we would all be going" (192). When John finally does get to the end of his story, he calls the last chapter an epilogue, although in contrast to the final chapter in Garp, the only character to die is Lilly, who commits suicide. Near the end of the chapter, John says: "I hope this is a proper ending for you, Mother - and for you, Egg. It is an ending conscious of the manner of your favourite ending, Lilly" (449-50), referring to the ending of The Great Gatsby. Nick Carraway's "so we beat on ..." (Fitzgerald 182) is echoed in John's repetition of the phrase "so we dream on" (449). The sentence "our dreams escape us almost as vividly as we can imagine them," (450) recalls Gatsby's dream seeming "so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him" (Fitzgerald 182).

The character Freud also makes statements that foreshadow the future events. First, when he tells Win and Mary to get married right away, then tells Win to go to Harvard, and tells Mary to forgive Win, he says that each of these things will cost them, but he does not say what Mary is to forgive Win for. Although it is never made explicitly clear what Freud means, we understand that Win Berry will do things that will cost Mary a lot. In fact, his illusions cost her her family inheritance, which they invest in the first hotel, and ultimately her life, as she flies to join him at the second

hotel in Vienna.⁵ When the children later ask their Father if they can leave Vienna and return to America, John observes: "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" (271). In this instance Win's illusion that he can create a great hotel in Vienna leads him to wish to stay there and subject his family to the future harm of an attempted terrorist kidnapping. What Mary and the family must forgive him for is allowing his illusions to bring tragedy to their lives.

Deaths are foreshadowed by statements made by characters who die. Freud states that during his time in a concentration camp where experiments that left him blind have been conducted on him: "Herr Tod never found me at home when he called" (289). These statements recall the Under Toad of Garp and seem futile because sooner or later Mr. Death will find him at home, which he does soon after when Freud is killed by a terrorist car bomb. Freud decides the time of his own death, however, so Herr Tod only finds him after Freud chooses to meet him. Freud is therefore an active, rather than passive, victim. Lilly's statement "maybe I'm dying" (136) has a similar effect to Freud's since it is obvious that she is dying, not from the dwarfism which makes her unable to grow,

⁵Interestingly, although Win and Mary fly separately so that in the event of a plane crash one parent would remain alive to care for the children, they each fly with some of the children, thus risking their lives too. Win and Mary's attempts to avoid tragedy seem to tempt fate in the same manner as Garp's efforts to protect his children.

but because she is human and therefore must be dying, because all humans are dying.

The deaths of Mary Berry and Egg are foreshadowed by dreams of death. Egg has a nightmare, from which John wakes him crying, "It's just a dream. You're having a dream!" (195), which were Garp's exact words to Walt. John has a dream in which his mother dies. In this dream, Mary says to Win, "No more bears," and he replies "No, one more bear" (213). There will in fact be one more bear in their lives: Susie, an American woman who dresses up as a bear and assists Freud in running his hotel, by acting as his eyes and protecting the residents from danger. Mary will never see this bear, however.

At the end of John's dream, a man in a white dinner jacket takes his mother's hand. This man is a recurring figure whose presence symbolizes the illusions of Win Berry and always foreshadows some tragedy. He first appears at the Arbuthnot-by-the-Sea as the owner of that hotel who observes: "Freud's a Jew, you know It's a good thing he got out of Europe when he did, you know. Europe's going to be no place for Jews" (16). Freud later returns to Europe and is blinded in a concentration camp. All that Win Berry notices about the man in the white dinner jacket is the glamour and money which he represents and which will always remind Win of his romanticized summer at the Arbuthnot. Later, a man in a white dinner jacket appears at the first Hotel New Hampshire after a New Year's Eve Party. Win sees him as the man is stepping

into the darkness outside the hotel, although John has tried to prevent his father from seeing the man. John has just received a letter from Freud to Win telling him that he's operating a hotel in Vienna and asking Win to come and help him. The man in the white dinner jacket here foreshadows the deaths of Mary and Egg on their way to Vienna, and the perils which await the surviving family members there. In Vienna, John and his father pass a man in a white dinner jacket on his way to the Opera. Win does not notice the man but John regards his presence as an omen. He is correct because at the same time the terrorists living at the Hotel are setting in motion their plan to bomb the Opera and hold the Berrys hostage. This appearance foreshadows a confrontation in which several terrorists are killed, Freud is killed in the car bomb explosion and Win is literally blinded (although he has always been figuratively blind). The contrast between Win Berry's illusion of the glamour of the man in the white dinner jacket and the reality of what this figure represents is finally made when Frank and John visit the old owner of the Arbuthnot, the man Win first saw wearing a white dinner jacket, before the Berrys buy his hotel. This man is dying of emphysema and appears to be rotting from the inside out. He is also revealed to be a strong anti-semite, who had no humanitarian concern at all when he made his earlier remarks about Freud.

Fate's disguise and the code name for danger in The Hotel New Hampshire is "Sorrow." Sorrow is the Berry family's flatulent dog who is put to sleep because of his foul odours

and is later stuffed by Frank, who is taking a course in taxidermy. Frank experiments with different poses for the dead dog. Sorrow's name echoes the Lunacy and Sorrow of Garp's story and immediately suggests associations with unhappiness. Sorrow's repeated appearances reflect and foreshadow the tragedies that befall the Berry family. Before Frank has completed the job of stuffing Sorrow, Iowa Bob dreams he sees the dog in his room one night. Shortly after this when Frank brings Sorrow home, Iowa Bob is literally frightened to death when he opens his closet door and Sorrow, in "Attack" pose, falls out. After Frank changes Sorrow to a more friendly pose, Egg likes the stuffed dog and decides to take him on the plane to Vienna with him. Mary Berry agrees even though she does not like Sorrow because he's dead. "I suppose he'll have to come" (217), she says and John senses the same resignation in her voice as she had in his ominous dream. After the plane crash, the rescue planes are able to locate the crash site because Sorrow is floating on the surface of the water. This fact leads to a code-phrase for danger which the Berry children repeat throughout the remainder of the novel: "Sorrow floats", indicating that tragedy and sorrow are always lurking, not far away.

After the deaths of Mary and Egg, the surviving Berrys are always on guard for new disguises Sorrow might take: "It was Franny who said, later, that we must all watch out for whatever form Sorrow would take next; we must learn to recognize the different poses" (231). Frank and John see

Sorrow again in the form of Susie the bear, who becomes Franny's lesbian lover in Vienna, when they accidentally see Franny and Susie in bed together. One critic has argued that Frank and John's conclusion that Susie is Sorrow is a premature reaction (Miller 158). However, while Susie herself does not bring sorrow to the Berry family, Franny's sexual impulses do. When the other children want to leave Vienna, Franny decides that the family should stay. Her decision is based largely on her fascination with one of the terrorists at the hotel, Ernst, who is also a pornographer. Her decision to stay is made immediately prior to her sexual encounter with Susie and it puts the family in danger. Later, Frank and John see the terrorists carrying a bomb to their car. Its "shape seemed animal in the passing car - as if Ernst the pornographer and Arbeiter held a bear between them, or a big dog" (307).

Ultimately, although we see repeatedly that "Sorrow floats", John Berry concludes that "Love also floats" (365), and this makes him essentially optimistic about life. Most of the Berrys share the same outlook on the world. Their grandfather, Iowa Bob, maintains that "You've got to get obsessed and stay obsessed" (126) which becomes another expression repeated throughout the novel. The family maxim is "that an unhappy ending did not undermine a rich and energetic life. This was based on the belief that there were no happy endings" (168). Iowa Bob points out that "Death is horrible,

final, and frequently premature" (168), but the Berrys recognize that

in spite of the danger of being swept away, at any time, or perhaps because of the danger, we were not allowed to be depressed or unhappy. The way the world worked was not cause for some sort of blanket cynicism or sophomoric despair; according to my father and Iowa Bob, the way the world worked - which was badly - was just a strong incentive to live purposefully, and to be determined about living well. (168)

The "Happy Fatalism" (168) of these words echoes the philosophy of Garp. The lines quoted are the exact comments made by Irving himself in an interview following the publication of The World According to Garp. (quoted in Williams 26). Irving again reveals here that despite the violence and tragedy contained in his work, his vision is ultimately optimistic and life-affirming.

In order to live purposefully, it is necessary to recognize both the lunacy and the sorrow in life, and Irving condemns those characters whose vision excludes some part of reality by seeing everything as either comic or tragic, and from a position of narrow-mindedness. One's philosophy must at least acknowledge alternatives. In Hotel the destructive powers of language and of sex are combined in the portrayal of the terrorists and prostitutes who live at the second Hotel New Hampshire. The views of the world of both groups are narrow-minded and surprisingly similar: "They both believed in the commercial possibilities of a simple ideal They both thought that their own bodies were objects easily sacrificed for a cause" (247). Both groups reveal their self-centredness

and lack of human caring when the terrorists attempt to take the Berrys hostage and the prostitutes sneak out of the hotel while this drama is unfolding. The terrorists, whose narrow view of the world, inability to think as individuals, and capacity for self-destruction make them as despicable as the Ellen Jamesians, are later likened to pornographers:

A terrorist, I think, is simply another kind of pornographer. The pornographer pretends he is disgusted by his work, the terrorist pretends he is uninterested in the means. The ends, they say, are what they care about. But they are both lying. Ernst loved his pornography; Ernst worshipped the means. It is never the ends that matter - it is only the means that matter. The terrorist and the pornographer are in it for the means. (354)

In a world where the highest value is placed on overcoming the cynicism which the awareness of violence can cause so that one can live a purposeful life, any philosophy which worships such violence must be condemned.

Of the Berry family members, Iowa Bob, John and Franny remain consistent believers in the family philosophy of "Happy Fatalism" (168). Although Win Berry apparently supports the family maxim, his view of the world is so clouded by his illusions that he does not have the capacity to acknowledge the sorrowful reality around him. John and Franny maintain their belief even when faced with Franny's rape and the deaths of their family members. Frank, on the other hand, becomes an atheist after the death of Mary and Egg and turns to "believing only in Fate - in random fortune or random doom, in arbitrary slapstick and arbitrary sorrow" (258). Franny and John are concerned for Frank because of his pessimism. They

refer to him as "The King of Mice", a character described to them in a letter from Freud. The King of Mice was a Viennese street clown who trained rodents. He committed suicide by jumping out of a window with all his pets in a box. On the box was written "Life is Serious but Art is Fun!" (205). The expression "Keep passing the open windows" becomes a euphemism which the Berry children use to refer to avoiding any temptation to commit suicide, or to let fatalism, doubt or despair cripple them.⁶

It is Lilly, however, and not Frank, who fails to keep passing the open window of her apartment hotel in New York. Lilly, a writer, is classified as a dwarf as a child and suffers from what Frank calls "Weltzschmerz" (258), or "worldhurt". She often says that she is "trying to grow" (295), an expression she uses as a euphemism for writing. Lilly is inspired to write by the beauty of The Great Gatsby, when the novel is read to the children by Fehgelburt, one of the radicals at the hotel who is also a student of American literature. Lilly is in awe of the literary power of the ending of Fitzgerald's novel and frightened by her realization that her father is like Gatsby: a dreamer whose illusions lead him to chase dreams he believes are in the future when in fact he is trying to recreate a lost past.

⁶In a sense, the terrorist group in this novel, like the Ellen Jamesians in The World According to Garp, is an "open window" because involvement with them requires the death of one's individual identity. The Berrys' euphemism can therefore also be taken as a warning against being "sucked in" by destructive group thinking.

Lilly writes an autobiographical first novel, called Trying to Grow, which ends with the plane crash that killed her mother and brother. She thus uses this work as an outlet for her grief, but is never able to write anything of literary merit about her life after the plane crash or about any other subjects. Her second novel is entitled Evening of the Mind and its subject is "the death of dreams" (420). Unlike her first novel this one is a critical and commercial failure because it is abstract, unfocused and plotless, although: "a certain illiterate kind of college student was attracted to the vagueness" (420) of it. Lilly compares her own writing to The Great Gatsby:

I think that if I can't ever write an ending that perfect, then there's no point in beginning a book, either. There's no point in writing a book if you don't think it can be as good as The Great Gatsby that damn ending just wipes me out before I can get started. (376)

Lilly cannot live with her limitations as a writer or as a person and her dreams die hard, as do her father's and Gatsby's. She leaves a suicide note which says, simply: "Just not big enough" (426). John concludes that "it was quality that killed Lilly" (422) because Lilly could not write as well as she dreamed she would be able to. She, like Fehgelburt, who also kills herself, is perhaps "only a sensitive and loving reader, a lover of literature who thought she wanted to write" (419).

Because the only characters in this novel who are associated with artistic creation commit suicide, it cannot be

said that Irving here advocates art as a way of affirming the value and meaning of life. This is not because he does not believe it can be, however, but, rather, because there is no character in The Hotel New Hampshire who has the talent and the approach needed to make his or her art constructive, in the way that Garp finally does. Nor does the maxim of the King of Mice reflect Irving's own view of art. Art cannot be classified as all fun and life as all serious, because both art and life for Irving are serious and fun. The fate of Lilly and of the King of Mice clearly show that art is not always fun, and it can cause the artist great sorrow if she takes herself and her work too seriously. Only John, as the narrator of the story, seems to be an artist capable of perceiving lunacy and sorrow, and seriousness and fun, in life and reflecting this in his work.

The most life-affirming element of The Hotel New Hampshire is the strength of the Berrys' family philosophy and the hope that the creation of a family unit will help one to cope with sorrow. Here, as in Garp, it is the deaths of family members which cause the characters their greatest sorrows in life, but living in a family provides the greatest joy as well.

The Berry children find comfort in having parent figures around them. When those parent figures are absent, the children seek substitutes for them, in which they try to find security. Bears represent such security blankets. When the children are very young Earl the bear is a father-substitute

for them. They knew Earl "longer, and better than we really knew our father" (46) because Win Berry had been away so often. He never really assumes the role of a protective parent because he is preoccupied by his illusions. After Mary Berry dies, the children meet Susie the Bear and "suddenly turn to her as we would turn to a mother" (243). Franny also acts as a mother substitute when she becomes the family's "shit detector" (261), stating that she must play the role of taking care of the others because her mother and Iowa Bob, the former "shit detectors" for the family, are gone. Another mother substitute is a dressmaker's dummy which Frank begins to keep in his room after his mother's death. The dummy, which will reappear as an important symbol in A Prayer for Owen Meany, is described as "a soothing presence" (323) like "a silent ghost of Mother or Egg or Iowa Bob" (323) which is "supposed to radiate signals and we were supposed to catch the signals" (323). The dressmaker's dummy is perhaps a "shit detector" or a warning device for the presence of sorrow.

Irving again makes it clear that he views sex as a potentially creative or destructive force. Like Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire contains both positive and negative images of sex. Ernst the pornographer uses sex in a destructive manner, as do Chipper Dove and his friends when they rape Franny. Although Franny insists that these boys did not manage to get "the her in her", she takes several baths a day after the rape in order to feel clean. She is cured of this habit only when she overhears her parents making love in one

of the rooms of the first hotel, because their sounds make her realize that sex can be a warm, loving and positive experience. In the process of her recovery, Franny also engages in a more positive, temporary sexual relationship with Susie the Bear, and makes some attempt to punish Chipper Dove. John and Franny have potentially destructive incestuous feelings for each other, which they finally overcome by having sex together until they experience intense physical pain. Only after Franny comes to terms with these negative aspects of her sexuality is she able to have a mature, positive sexual relationship with Junior Jones.

By the end of the novel the Berry children have stopped looking backward for parent figures and have begun to look forward to a new generation. Frank becomes a parent figure himself by running a successful agency and playing father to his clients. Franny marries Junior Jones and John marries Susie the Bear, who no longer needs to hide in the security of a bear suit. When Franny becomes pregnant she decides, because of career demands, to have her child and give it to Susie and John to raise. As the narrative concludes, the Berrys are awaiting the birth of the baby. Here, as in Garp, the birth of a member of a new generation to replace the aging one offers hope for the future. John concludes that what everyone needs is

a good smart bear. Some people's minds are good enough so that they can live all by themselves - their minds can be their good, smart bears. That's the case with Frank I think: Frank has a good, smart bear for a mind. He is not the King of Mice

I first mistook him for. And Franny has a good smart bear named Junior Jones. Franny is also skilled at keeping sorrow at bay. And my father has his illusions; they are powerful enough. My father's illusions are his good, smart bear - at last. And that leaves me, of course, with Susie the bear - with her rape crisis center and my fairy-tale hotel - so I'm all right, too. You have to be all right if you're expecting a baby. (450)

All the surviving characters have found a sense of security, and the anticipated birth of the baby ends the novel on an affirmative, hopeful note. Within the right family, the birth of a baby can be a happy ending to a story. Irving's next novel, The Cider House Rules, reveals, however, that people are not necessarily all right when they are expecting babies.

IV

The Cider House Rules:
An Orphan or an Abortion?

In The Cider House Rules, the tragedy upon which Irving focuses concerns the limited choices available to women facing unwanted pregnancies. He paints a gruesome picture of the lives and relationships of these women and of their agony as they face the decision of giving up unwanted children for adoption or having illegal and often dangerous abortions. Irving has described his sixth novel as one "with a polemic" (quoted in Harter and Thompson 126) in which the main characters debate the issue of abortion. Fate here is disguised as Wilbur Larch, an ether-addicted doctor, who runs an orphanage in St. Cloud's, Maine. Larch also provides women with safe abortions, and thus decides the fates of the unborn. He also creates a fictitious written history of his orphanage in which he fabricates stories of the lives of the orphans who grow up under his care. His favourite orphan, Homer Wells, is the most affected by Larch's creative efforts because Larch creates a fictional identity for Homer with the intention that Homer will become Larch's successor. Homer ultimately does fill this identity. Larch acts as an instrument of fate in the novel by imposing structure on events which, without his actions, would be left to random chance. The world of this novel therefore appears less chaotic because of Larch's presence in it. Homer is opposed to performing abortions

himself, although he believes that they should be legal. The debate between Homer and Larch on this issue is put into the context of a larger theme in the novel: the purpose and effect of rules on individuals and on society. Irving focuses on how rules to govern behaviour are chosen and the situations in which they should or should not be broken. The characters of the novel classify activities as acceptable or unacceptable and create rules to outline these classifications in an attempt to impose structure on their worlds. If everyone understands the rules then everyone is able to predict the behaviour of others and the world is therefore less chaotic. Irving makes a distinction between the rules society attempts to impose on people and those they create for themselves based on their personal values and beliefs. Although this novel contains many examples of the destructive effects of sexual activity, the creative power of sex to form loving families is nonetheless affirmed. The orphans find the greatest hope for the future in the possibility that they will be adopted and finally find parents to love them. Having a child to love gives Homer Wells' own life meaning. In this novel, then, the value of life is affirmed, ironically, through the very act that causes the women who have abortions or unwanted children so much pain.

The Cider House Rules is in many ways a departure from The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire and Irving's earlier three novels. Elements such as Vienna, wrestling and bears are all absent. Although there is very

little lunacy to counteract the sorrow of this novel, the overall tone is more positive because Irving's focus here is always the moral correctness of the actions of his characters. Irving has stated that "illegal abortion is simply a most sanctimonious form of violence against women" (Hansen 427). There is plenty of other violence and tragedy in The Cider House Rules as well. The character Melony, Homer's first girlfriend, is prone to wanton and random acts of violence; Wally Worthington is paralysed and made sterile as a result of injuries suffered after his plane is shot down over Burma in World War II; migrant workers engage in knife fights; women are beaten or forced into incestuous relationships; Irene Titcomb is burned as a result of splashing bacon grease on herself; and a stationmaster dies of fright. Much of this violence appears to result from the chaotic forces which the Under Toad represents.

While tragedies such as Wally's paralysis or the sorrow women face with unwanted pregnancies may be the result of chance circumstances, or destructive forces in the universe, as are the accidents which occur in the Garp and Berry families, there is some violence and chaos in The Cider House Rules that seems different, because here human action sometimes seems capable of counteracting the forces of evil. The representative of fate, Doctor Larch, does not personify the violent forces of destruction and underlying tragedy in the universe which the Under Toad and Sorrow the dog do, but, rather, the ability of a human being to intervene and

counteract these forces and thereby attempt to control them. Larch's professional role gives him the power to control the fates of women and their children. He sometimes acts in a way which combats the destructiveness of the lives of these people. Unwanted pregnancies in which children are born create the tragedy of orphans living without families and the heartbreaks of mothers who leave their children behind at St. Cloud's. Larch tries to help the mothers and find families for the orphans. Abortions, however, may be seen as random acts of destruction and violence against fetuses, and perhaps the mothers' minds. By performing them Larch controls the fates of the unborn and perhaps also acts as an agent of fate's destructive forces, as well as a positive human intervenor who helps the mothers escape their unwanted pregnancies, and prevents still more orphans coming into the world.

The Cider House Rules, like The World According to Garp, has a third-person omniscient narrator. In contrast to the deadpan tone of Garp's narrator, this one is sentimental. Irving has often defended a sentimental tone in narrative. "Sentiment", he has said, "is always vulnerable; when the fictional voice deliberately seeks to move you, it is an unguarded and completely exposed voice. It is easy to feel intellectually superior to such a voice" ("The Narrative Voice" 88). The narrator has great affection for the characters, as he tells the story of how Larch, feeling he should "be of use" (7), founds the orphanage in St. Cloud's,

Maine, before World War I, when abortion in the United States was illegal, with the assistance of Nurse Edna, who is in love with him, and Nurse Angela, who is not. Homer Wells is an orphan who "belongs" (35) to St. Cloud's because he repeatedly returns there following unsuccessful adoptions. As he grows up in the isolated inland environment of St. Cloud's, Homer learns obstetrical procedure from Larch, who hopes that Homer will one day replace him as the doctor who runs the orphanage. Homer refuses to perform abortions, however, and is unaware of Larch's plan that he be the doctor's successor. Mesmerized by a beautiful young couple, Candy Kendall and Wally Worthington, who arrive at the orphanage for an abortion, Homer travels with them to Ocean View, where Wally's family owns an apple farm on the Maine Coast. Homer takes to the life of an apple farmer easily, because the bright fertile world of Ocean View provides him with a pleasant contrast to the gloom of St. Cloud's. When Wally's plane is shot down in World War II and he is presumed dead, Homer and Candy fall in love and have a child, Angel. They lie to everyone that Angel is an orphan that Homer has adopted from St. Cloud's, where Candy and Homer have lived during Candy's pregnancy. When Wally returns from the war paralysed, Candy marries him and the couple lives at Ocean View as a family with Homer and Angel for fifteen years before Homer and Candy reveal the truth about Angel's parentage. Homer finally changes his mind about performing abortions after giving one to the daughter of the foreman of the migrant workers at the orchard, Mr. Rose. The father of

the aborted baby is Mr. Rose himself. At the end of the novel Homer discovers what Larch's plans for him have been and finally returns to St. Cloud's as Doctor Fuzzy Stone.

The narrator is omniscient, but he does not assert a feeling of superiority over the reader. He develops his tale in a manner which the protagonist of Irving's earlier work The Water Method Man believes a narrator should: "You should always tell stories ... in such a way that you make the audience feel good and wise, even a little ahead of you" (Water Method Man 340). We are not surprised that Homer leaves St. Cloud's, becomes involved with Candy, and returns to St. Cloud's to continue Larch's work, or that Wally is lost at war and then returns. We also know that the truth must at some time be revealed to Angel. There is a predictability to this story which was also present in Garp, and we read not to find out what happens, but to discover how Irving arrives at this predictable end.

The narrator of The Cider House Rules foreshadows future events, but does not jump ahead to describe the ultimate fates of characters. Nor does he provide an epilogue. The foreshadowing here is less ominous because fewer deaths occur in the course of the narrative and the future therefore seems less threatening. The narrator does, however, warn us about what will happen to Wally when he describes Wally watching a movie: "Wally - to whom this war would mean the most - watched Fred Astaire" (361). Astaire's dancing can be contrasted to Wally's later paralysis. The narrator also describes events

in nature which foreshadow events. Before Candy and Wally arrive at St. Cloud's "a rare sea breeze" (161) is blowing around Homer and Larch and they both wonder, "What is going to happen to me?" Larch has earlier told Homer, "one day you'll get to see the ocean" (26). Later on, immediately before the attack on Pearl Harbour, the wind is blowing through the trees at Ocean View, creating "a brittle click clack sound" (340). The narrator comments: "Perhaps the trees knew that a war was coming" (340).

The characters are continually preoccupied by thoughts of what will happen in the future. The narrator on several occasions reports on some superstitious methods various characters use to predict the future. As a young man in Boston, Larch visits a fortune teller, a Chinese herb doctor and a palmist, who assures him "he would live a long time and have many children" (60). When Larch finally dies at approximately one hundred years of age, it is impossible to estimate how many children have lived at St. Cloud's under his care. When Wally disappears during the war, Ray Kendall, Candy's father, "reads" his lobster pots to determine Wally's fate and Meany Hyde, one of the workers at Ocean View, believes that the birth of his baby will signify that Wally is alive. (388) Another worker, Big Dot, is "plagued with dreams that could only mean that Wally was struggling to communicate with Ocean View" (388). The birth of Meany and Florence Hyde's baby is later taken as "a definite sign that Wally [is] alive" (416), although Big Dot dreams she has no legs, which

she takes to mean that Wally is alive, but hurt. These predictions come true when Wally returns paralysed. These superstitious methods of predicting the future, like the narrator's foreshadowing, make the future appear less ominous than it does in Garp or Hotel because they foretell happy events rather than tragic ones.

There are dreams in the novel which seem more sinister, however. After Homer has been adopted for a short time by a family who beats him, he has dreams that "could awaken every living soul in St. Cloud's" (11). As a young man Doctor Larch has a terrifying dream which influences the course of his life. In his only sexual encounter, Larch visits a prostitute named Mrs. Eames, who gives him gonorrhoea. Mrs. Eames later becomes his patient at the hospital in Boston, after she has taken a poisonous tonic to abort a fetus. The tonic kills her slowly by rotting her organs. On the night she dies:

Larch had a nightmare - his penis fell off in his hands; he tried to sew it back on but it kept disintegrating; then his fingers gave way in a similar fashion. How like a surgeon! he thought. Fingers are valued, above penises. (46)

The imagined loss of his penis is reminiscent of Michael Milton's accident in Garp, and comparable to Wally Worthington's sterility, but, in contrast, Larch imagines losing an organ he does not use and so this loss is not particularly significant to him. His fingers, however, are the tools of his trade, and the loss of these, like the loss of Garp's voice, symbolizes the powerlessness that will result

if he does not practice his profession constructively. Just as the misuse of sexuality in Irving's fiction results in emasculation, impotence or infertility, and the misuse of writing leads to voicelessness, the misuse of surgery leads to the inability to use one's hands constructively to heal the sick.

When Mrs. Eames' daughter comes to the hospital asking Doctor Larch for an abortion, he hesitates and does not perform the surgery. The woman then receives a botched abortion at a shady clinic known as "Off-Harrison". She arrives back at the hospital with a note that reads: "Doctor Larch - Shit or get off the pot!" (50) pinned to her dress. After Mrs. Eames' daughter dies of peritonitis, Larch visits "Off-Harrison", shows the abortionist there some safe techniques and then himself performs an abortion on a young girl who has been impregnated by her father. The death of Mrs. Eames' daughter haunts Larch for the rest of his life because he knows that if he had performed an abortion she would not have died. From the time of her death, Larch does not hesitate to perform abortions. Soon after Mrs. Eames' daughter's death, he is invited to a wealthy family's home for dinner. He realizes that the only reason he has been invited is so that he will perform an abortion on the daughter: "He wanted to leave, but now it was his fate that held him. Sometimes, when we are labelled, when we are branded, our brand becomes our calling" (64). So, after he has been

classified by others as an abortionist, Larch fulfills his fate by becoming one.

Knowing that he will be discovered as an abortionist if he stays in Boston, Larch goes to St. Cloud's to perform "the Lord's work" (67). This is what his colleagues call delivering babies. As an abortionist, "he deliver[s] mothers too. His colleagues called this 'the Devil's work' but it was all the Lord's work to Wilbur Larch" (67). At St. Cloud's, Larch creates an ordered world which operates according to his own values to counteract the destructiveness of the larger world he has left. He explains to Homer, "I'm just the doctor. I help [the women] have what they want. An orphan or an abortion" (74). In deciding to "help" women in this way, Larch is "playing God" by controlling the fates of the unborn and the lives of the women. He recognizes this and justifies it by saying:

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 when it is possible to play God - we should seize those moments. There won't be many. (97)

Homer Wells criticizes abortion because he believes that a fetus has a soul and killing it is playing God. Larch's response to this is: "You think what I do is playing God, but you presume you know what God wants. Do you think that's not playing God?" (546). He tells Homer why Homer should perform abortions:

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. (518)

If their fates are left to chance, these women will bear unwanted children. To say that God intended this result is to play God. An abortionist at least provides these women with a choice.

In The World According to Garp Irving presents a writer as a "doctor who sees only terminal cases". In The Cider House Rules he develops the notion of a physician as artist. Larch is the "historian" of St. Cloud's, who creates and destroys in ways appropriate to God or an artist (Harter and Thompson 138). In writing his history of the orphanage, entitled A Brief History of St. Cloud's, Larch is "a revisionist" who tries "to make everything come out all right in the end" (409), just as Garp tries to keep everyone alive forever. Larch writes his fictitious history in order to ensure the continued existence of St. Cloud's as a place where women can obtain abortions after Larch either dies or is caught by the authorities and replaced at the orphanage. His story involves an orphan named Fuzzy Stone who dies at a young age. Fuzzy is a sickly boy, who like Garp's father, becomes increasingly fetus-like as he moves closer to death in an oxygen tent. When he dies, Larch and Homer tell the other orphans that he has been adopted. In his history Larch pretends that Fuzzy remains alive, and grows up to go to

Harvard to study medicine. He falsifies academic records for Fuzzy to support his fiction. "Fuzzy Stone" works for some time as a missionary doctor in Africa and becomes Larch's assistant at St. Cloud's. Larch makes certain that the history states that it is only Larch who performs abortions at the orphanage and that Fuzzy Stone is opposed to the practice, so that when the Board of Trustees of the orphanage reads the history, they will believe that there will be no more abortions being performed there after Larch is gone. In his elaborate plan, Larch types fictitious letters from "Dr. Stone" on a typewriter other than the one he normally uses, and has the initials "F.S." put on an old doctor's bag. Larch hopes that Homer Wells will become his successor by assuming the identity of Fuzzy Stone. His only problem, Larch believes, will be "How do I get Homer to play the part?" (267)

Larch reveals what he believes he is doing by writing this history when he describes why orphans tell lies:

A lie is at least a vigorous enterprise, it keeps you on your toes by making you suddenly responsible for what happens because of it. You must be alert to lie, and stay alert to keep your lie a secret. Orphans are not the masters of their fates; they are the last to believe you if you tell them that other people are also not in charge of theirs.

"When you lie, it makes you feel in charge of your life. Telling lies is very seductive to orphans I know", Dr. Larch wrote. "I know because I tell them, too. I love to lie. When you lie, you feel as if you have cheated fate - your own and everyone else's." (339)

Larch's attempts to cheat fate by lying are, at least for a time, successful and this does make him appear to be in

control of the fates of those he writes about, as well as the expectant mothers he "delivers". It appears, then, that in the world of The Cider House Rules, humans, through their "lies" or actions, are capable of counteracting chaotic forces and thus acting as instruments of fate, rather than simply being victims of it. Larch's attempts to cheat fate may be deceptive, because he cannot really control the ultimate fate of death, even though he decides whether a fetus' death will occur or not. He can also prevent untimely death through his work as a doctor and through the fiction he creates. His efforts to cheat fate can change the outcome of some events, but they cannot alter the final, inevitable fate of death.

Part of Larch's history of the orphanage is a description of a fictitious heart condition which he makes up for Homer Wells because he loves Homer and wants to keep him out of World War II. Larch believes this is a story that "a father would construct for his son - if a father could make his son believe it" (207). Larch makes sure that Candy, Wally, Wally's mother, Olive Worthington, and Homer himself knew about the defect and that its existence is documented in Larch's medical files. Homer does not find out that he has a healthy heart until the final page of the novel. Larch's lie perhaps saves Homer from a fate in the war similar to Wally's or worse.⁷

⁷Larch's action here is comparable to that of Owen Meany in A Prayer for Owen Meany. Owen cuts off part of his best friend's finger in order to keep him out of the Vietnam War.

When Homer realizes the fate Larch has planned for him, he resists taking on the identity that Larch has created, because of his stand on abortion and because he thinks he wants to be an apple farmer, not a doctor. He appears to be fated to become Larch's successor, however, not only because this is Larch's wish, but also because the events of his life make this appear inevitable. As "the boy who belonged to St. Cloud's", his many attempts to leave only end with his return. This happens on each of the four occasions when he is adopted as a child, and again when he returns to the orphanage with Candy when she is pregnant. One night when he and Candy are at St. Cloud's, Homer sees a lynx outside the orphanage and watches the animal, thinking that its movements in the frozen snow reflect his own situation:

The panicked animal tried to dash up the hill; it was less than halfway up when it began to slide down again drawn toward the orphanage against its will. When it set out from the bottom of the hill a second time, the lynx was panting; it ran diagonally uphill, slipping but catching itself, and slipping again, finally escaping into the softer snow in the woods - nowhere near where it had meant to go; yet the lynx would accept any route of escape from the dark hospital. Homer Wells, staring into the woods after the departed lynx did not imagine that he would ever leave St. Cloud's more easily. (423)

Although Homer says he doesn't want to be a doctor, he loves and admires Larch, and for a time becomes his "thirteen-year-old disciple" (74), following the doctor around St. Cloud's. Larch teaches him everything he needs to know about obstetrical practice. Homer reads Gray's Anatomy and dissects

cadavers, delivers babies and observes abortions, before working as a volunteer in a hospital during the war, where his knowledge of anatomy is noted by the doctors and nurses around him. When Homer removes Senior Worthington's rubber raft from the swimming pool, the smell of rubber it leaves on his hands reminds him of his "doctor" work at St. Cloud's. Homer fights the destiny Larch creates for him until he holds the doctor's bag with Fuzzy Stone's initials on it in his hand:

Suddenly it was clear to him. - where he was going. He was only what he always ways: an orphan who'd never been adopted. He had managed to steal some time away from the orphanage, but St. Cloud's had the only legitimate claim to him. (509)

Immediately after Homer realizes what his destiny is, Larch finishes his story of Fuzzy's life and writes an obituary for Homer Wells. Larch's lies apparently cheat fate again. He regards Homer as his "work of art" (518). His "creation" is ready to assume Fuzzy's identity when Larch turns himself in to the Board of Trustees of St. Cloud's and then shortly afterward dies. Larch's actions of creating an identity and a history for Homer and teaching him surgical procedure do suggest that Larch is an instrument of Homer's fate. It is significant, however, that Larch's attempt to "cheat fate" depends on Homer's agreeing to play the role of Fuzzy Stone, and Larch cannot control this. It is, rather, the result of Homer's either making a conscious choice, or accepting this role as his destiny.

The debate about abortion in this novel is one example of its larger theme of the effectiveness of society's rules. In The Cider House Rules, Irving again uses the notion that people classify their perceptions and experiences into recognizable categories. Here, those categories most frequently take the form of the rules which the characters understand should govern their behaviour. The idea of classification appears in more general ways as well. Unborn babies are classified as either orphans or abortions. Having choices is contrasted with leaving things to chance. Everyone at Ocean View has difficulty categorizing Mr. Worthington Senior's illness, until Larch diagnoses that he is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, thus classifying his illness. Homer as a "doctor" also classifies illnesses. The Army creates classifications for its soldiers which lead Homer to think that the Army Air Corps might have modelled itself on Gray's Anatomy, "manifesting a steadfast belief in categories and in everything having a name. It was reassuring to Homer Wells; in his mind this endless categorizing made Wally safer" (365). Being able to find the right category which defines a person, creates an illusion of safety, which counteracts one's awareness of potential danger.

The characters classify themselves according to their professions and each of these professions has its own rules. Larch is a doctor and an abortionist. As a doctor he must follow the medical code of ethics and the law. As an abortionist he must break these rules because abortion was

illegal at this point in American history. Not performing abortions would involve breaking the moral code he establishes for himself after Mrs. Eames' daughter dies, and which Larch considers more important than society's rules. Homer Wells defines himself as "a father" and "an apple farmer" (439). He rejects Larch's categorizing of him as an "accomplished midwife" (197) who should become an obstetrician and an abortionist, because according to Homer's moral code a fetus has a soul, regardless of how Larch attempts to classify it:

You can call it a fetus, or an embryo, or the products of conception, thought Homer Wells, but whatever you call it, it's alive. And whatever you do to it... and whatever you call what you do - you're killing it (169).

Although Homer will not perform abortions himself he believes they should be legal. He says: "I think it's wrong, but I also think it should be everyone's personal choice" (421). His belief is a middle-ground opinion between that of Doctor Larch and that of Doctor Harlow, a young doctor working at the hospital where Homer does volunteer work during the war. Harlow believes that "[r]ules exist for reasons" (390) and should be followed. In the end Homer changes his mind about performing abortions because there is no one else available to perform the procedure on Rose Rose, the daughter of Mr. Rose. At this time Doctor Larch has died and Rose Rose has no one else to turn to to abort her incestuously conceived fetus. When faced with the choice of helping her or refusing, Homer "knew... that he couldn't play God in the worst sense" (56) by refusing. "After the first one", he thinks, it "might

get easier" (568). He asks himself, "How could he refuse anyone? Only a god makes that kind of decision" (56). Homer then reclassifies himself as a doctor and an abortionist, although he does not have the formal qualifications, and breaks his own former rules and those of society's laws, in order to make abortions available to women.

Homer perhaps finds it easier to break his own rule of not aborting fetuses because he knows he has broken other rules as well. He and Candy continue a sexual relationship for fifteen years while Candy is married to Wally, and maintain their lie that Angel is adopted. They must be as careful in their lie as Doctor Larch is in the lies he creates in his fabricated history, because they too are cheating fate. Wally's injuries have made him sterile and Candy makes Homer promise her that he will give her an abortion if she ever becomes pregnant with his child.⁸ This further attempt to conceal the truth also suggests that Homer's rule that he will never perform abortions is not absolute. Candy's philosophy of how the truth about Angel's parentage should be handled is to "wait and see" (356). This perspective aggravates Homer, who sarcastically repeats the phrase "wait and see" whenever a solution to any problem is called for. The philosophical stance of "waiting and seeing" can be seen in sharp contrast to Doctor Larch's conviction that he must intervene in the

⁸The powerlessness symbolized by Wally's infertility is manifested in his inability to give Candy what Homer has given her: a child.

natural processes of life by performing abortions. "Waiting and seeing" is leaving everything to chance, and denies that human intervention can lead to a better outcome.

The classification of human behaviour into rules can also be seen in the rules of migrant workers at Ocean View. Mr. Rose, the foreman of the migrant workers, is supposed to be in the apple business, but everyone around him agrees that he is really in "the knife business" (323). Every year at harvest time at Ocean View, the migrant workers come to work and are accommodated at the cider house, an institutional-like building with rows of beds that reminds Homer of St. Cloud's. In the cider house, Olive Worthington, and later Homer, post a list of rules designed to protect the workers' safety on the wall of the cider house. These rules are ignored by the workers, who are illiterate and cannot read them. They have their own set of rules to govern their behaviour, however, and these rules are understood and observed by all the workers. "The real cider house rules [are] Mr. Rose's" (379) and they involve acceptable ways in which the men are permitted to cut each other with their knives as punishment for various offenses. Mr. Rose is an expert with a knife, like a surgeon, and the other workers are afraid of his power. The contrast between the rules posted in the cider house and the real rules the workers follow is an example of the contrast Irving makes throughout the novel between the rules society imposes on its members and the real rules they live by. As Homer thinks about the cider house rules, he also asks himself "what were

the rules at St. Cloud's?" and "Which rules did Mr. Larch observe?" (379). Doctor Larch, like Mr. Rose, observes his own rules, and not apparent rules of society. He imposes them on the small world over which he has control at St. Cloud's, just as Mr. Rose imposes his on the cider house.

Because the other workers are afraid of Mr. Rose, they do nothing when he beats his daughter or when he banishes them from the cider house so that he can engage in sexual relations with her. When Homer confronts Mr. Rose about his behaviour toward his daughter by stating that he previously thought that Mr. Rose's rules were about "not hurting each other" (550) Mr. Rose's response is to show Homer a burned-out candle nub which he and Candy have accidentally left in the cider house and ask, "That 'gainst rules, ain't it?" (551). Homer realizes the extent to which he breaks rules - both his own and society's - by sleeping with Candy and he knows that Mr. Rose has the power to reveal Homer and Candy's lie. Mr. Rose, unlike Homer, does not appear to understand rules other than his own, and does not appear to perceive that he has broken any moral rule by having sex with his daughter. She punishes him for his cruelty, however, by stabbing him to death.

Although Homer realizes he is living a lie by continuing his relationship with Candy and by not telling Angel who his natural parents are, he does not resolve to tell no more lies after Angel is told the truth. Instead, he assumes the identity of Fuzzy Stone and so creates a new lie and breaks other rules by performing abortions. Irving does not appear

to disapprove of these "necessary" lies, but he does not support the lie which Homer and Candy tell Angel. The moment of truth for Homer, when he realizes that he must tell Angel that Candy is his mother and that he is his natural father, comes when his old friend Melony visits him at Ocean View. Melony immediately recognizes Angel as Homer and Candy's son. She says to Homer: "I somehow thought you'd end up doin' better than ballin' a poor cripple's wife and pretendin' your own child ain't your own" (497). She then adds, "You of all people - you, an orphan" (497). Immediately following this encounter, Homer tells Candy that "It's time to tell" (500). As an orphan, Homer knows the pain of wondering who his natural parents are and having no family history. Even though Angel is loved by three "adoptive" parents - Homer, Wally and Candy - Homer knows he must relieve his son of any pain he may feel because he doesn't know his biological origins.

In The Cider House Rules Irving again emphasizes the high value he places on having a loving family. The orphans at St. Cloud's long to be adopted and to know their family origins. The orphans seek to define themselves by finding families. At St. Cloud's, the only definitions of themselves they have are the names Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna give them. At St. Cloud's as a child, Homer was exposed to "the damaged women who sought the services of St. Cloud's - those departing mothers in whose characters and histories the boy must be seeking some definition of his own mother" (3). Homer often wonders whether Larch, Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna remember

his mother, but they tell him that they do not. Melony asks Homer to go into Doctor Larch's records to see if there is any account of who her parents might have been. Larch's only written records are of who the adoptive parents of orphans are and the fictional history he writes. Larch thinks about the present and the future, not the past. When the orphans think about the present they feel unwanted, imagine having families, and imagine "that their parents want them back" (2). Like the Berry children in The Hotel New Hampshire, the orphans turn to parent substitutes in Nurse Angela and Nurse Edna, and Doctor Larch. Doctor Larch shows his affection for the boys by calling them "Princes of Maine" and "Kings of New England" because he writes that at St. Cloud's they "treat orphans as if they came from royal families" (71). Every time an orphan is adopted Larch says "Let us be happy for _____. He has found a family". Finding a family is every orphan's wish, but some never find one. Fuzzy Stone, for example, "finds a family" only when he dies. Homer and Melony, the oldest children in the orphanage, are also never permanently adopted.

Homer and Melony seek comfort and self-definition in their sexual relationship with each other and in the literature of Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. Melony reads Jane Eyre, which "helps define the nature of spiritual independence and a stoic response to pain" (Harter and Thompson 131). Homer reads Great Expectations and David Copperfield, works which "wonderfully evoke and explore the orphan's situation and sensibility - hence his own condition"

(Harter and Thompson 131). Homer is fascinated by the opening line of David Copperfield: "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 will show" (Dickens, 49). He wonders what it takes to be a hero and whether he can be one, and we understand that through the course of Irving's novel, we will see whether Homer can live up to Copperfield's hopes. Melony tells him in a note she sends to him after seeing him with Angel that he does not: "I thought you was going to be a hero. My mistake, Sorry for hard time" (545). To become a hero, Homer must tell Angel the truth.

There are so many negative images of the destructive aspects of human sexual behaviour in this novel that the birth of Angel Wells is a positive, welcome change. After being exposed to prostitutes, sexually transmitted diseases, botched abortions, sad orphans, incest, pornographic photographs and a vindictive character, Herb Fowler, who pricks holes in the condoms he hands out to his co-workers,⁹ the birth of a wanted child to parents who intend to keep him is a happy event indeed. Homer has no doubts about whether he wants this baby. Nurse Angela is thrilled when Homer and Candy come to St. Cloud's and cries, "We're going to have a wanted baby" (411) because this is the first time that any one has come to St. Cloud's to have a child they will keep. Candy is "the first

⁹Fowler's actions are completely antagonistic to Larch's efforts and he can be seen as a destructive agent of chaos in direct opposition to Larch's attempts to counteract random chance.

happily pregnant woman in any of their memories" (421) and an example of how pregnancy should ideally be. During their stay at St. Cloud's, Homer and Candy live happily as if they were a married couple. This is the only time in Homer's life when he experiences "anything of what sex ideally is" (47). After this time he and Candy simply steal moments together when they can. The ideal situation which Irving presents of two people who love each other awaiting the birth of their wanted child is symbolized by images of fertility which he does not usually use to describe St. Cloud's. St. Cloud's is normally a place where "growth was unwanted even when it was delivered - and the process of birth was often interrupted" (243). Ocean View, in contrast, is a place where the characters engage "in the business of growing things" (243). As Candy is in her final stages of pregnancy, Homer plants apple trees at St. Cloud's, thus making it a place where things can be grown. Having a child gives Homer's life meaning because he is finally able to create the family he has never had. Despite all the negative images of sex in this novel, the creative act of reproduction remains, for Irving, the most powerful means of finding meaning in life and bringing happiness to it to counteract gloom and tragedy.

At the conclusion of The Cider House Rules, we are left with the feeling that Irving's vision of how the world works has perhaps changed. Violence and tragedy are still everywhere, but people are able to establish rules which help them define their lives, and rules for when the rules can be

broken. The life-affirming power of bringing children into a loving family is restated, despite all the novel's negative images of the results of reproduction. Most significantly, if it is possible for human characters such as Doctor Larch to have some control over destiny and to counteract chaos, then the Under Toad seems slightly less threatening.

V

A Prayer for Owen Meany:
God's Instrument?

The question of whether a human character can cheat or control fate is a central issue in Irving's most recent novel, A Prayer for Owen Meany. The title character believes that he is God's instrument and therefore an agent of divinely-orchestrated fate. His participation in the events of the novel appears to change their outcome. He appears at times to be the cause of tragic occurrences and thus resembles the Under Toad. In other circumstances, his role in events has a positive impact, in that his actions appear to prevent tragedy from occurring. In these situations he is portrayed as a Christ-like messiah figure who believes that his life follows the course of a predetermined divine plan. Owen does not believe in choice or chance. His best friend, the narrator John Wheelwright, believes in free will and attempts to convince Owen that the consequences of his actions are the result of his own choices or of mere coincidence. This difference of opinion between the characters leads to a debate between them on the issue of free will versus predetermination. The characters give meaning to their lives by interpreting the events of the novel according to their respective philosophies. In this novel Irving again suggests that having a loving family is a source of happiness that counteracts life's tragedies. Here, as in The Cider House

Rules he focuses on the pain felt by characters who do not have happy family lives. Owen Meany's parents are even more distant and emotionally crippled than Win Berry in The Hotel New Hampshire. John Wheelwright's mother, a single parent, dies when he is only ten, never telling him who his father is. John's quest to discover his father's identity is a central concern in this novel. Although John has an apparently happy home life with his grandmother and his stepfather Dan, he moves away from them to Canada, rather than seeking comfort from them after Owen dies a violent and untimely death. Instead, he turns to religion and writes a "prayer" for his dead friend in the form of a novel. Thus, he attempts to use his personal religious philosophy and his art to impose meaning on his world. This does not completely work for him because he continues to be haunted by his experiences with Owen and by his angry opinions about politics in the United States. John leads a lonely, unsatisfying life, which is portrayed in sharp contrast to that of his friend, the Reverend Katherine Keeling, who has a happy family life with a husband and an ever-increasing number of children.

Irving's seventh novel is a departure from his earlier works because this is the first novel Irving has written which is explicitly religious. The interplay of faith and doubt is a central focus of this novel. Irving acknowledges that it is his job as a writer to try to suspend the disbelief of those who doubt the truth of Owen's story. He has stated that A Prayer for Owen Meany is about

this little guy - both a hero and a victim - who believes he's been appointed by God, that he's been specially chosen; and that the rather terrible fate he encounters is all part of his divine assignment. And it's the writer's job, isn't it, to make the readers wonder if maybe this isn't entirely true? Even the doubters, I have to convince them of little Owen's special appointment in the universe too. In that sense, maybe, writing a novel is always a religious act, in that we have to believe that our characters are appointed - even if only by us - and that their acts are not accidents, their responses not random. I don't believe in accidents. (quoted in Hansen 436)

Irving's statement that he does not believe in accidents might be an indication that he, like Owen Meany, believes in predetermination, although Irving portrays Owen's character and his philosophy ambiguously. Owen's actions appear, at times, to be manipulated not by God but, rather, by Irving.

Writing a novel in which his characters react to the events surrounding the Vietnam War marks the first time Irving has written at length about any events in American history. He has stated that he was never really "involved in the issue that obsessed most American people my age - namely, the draft and the war in Vietnam" (McCaffery 5), because he spent some of those years in Vienna and some in university in the United States, where he focused on writing and wrestling. His concern with this issue in A Prayer for Owen Meany cannot therefore be seen as a reflection of his own personal experience of this war.

The novel begins with Owen and John growing up in the small town of Gravesend, New Hampshire in the 1950's, where John is from an established rich family and Owen's parents

operate a quarry and granite shop. John's family is unconventional, in that he lives with his single mother and his grandmother, but it is loving and supportive. Owen, in contrast, lives with both his mother and his father, who are emotionally distant and unable to give Owen the support a child needs. The plot follows the early adulthood of John and Owen through the turbulent 1960's, when Owen Meany is killed in a violent incident which he has foreseen in a dream. The story is told in flashback from 1987, when the narrator is living in Toronto, teaching English. John Wheelwright is an angry, lonely man who becomes enraged at the politics and violence of a country he left twenty years prior to his writing his prayer for Owen and which he still blames for Owen's death. He angrily maintains that: "Every American should be forced to live outside the United States for a year or two. Americans should be forced to see how ridiculous they appear to the rest of the world!" (223). The violence and tragedy in this novel are associated almost exclusively with the United States. Canada, by contrast, is presented as pacifist and calm. Although John likes to associate himself with these positive elements he sees in Canadian society, an acquaintance in Toronto tells him: "It's very American - to have opinions as ... strong as your opinions" (224), and "You talk about America more than any American I know" (224). John's only apparent peace comes from the religious faith he acquires as a result of witnessing Owen Meany's life, which he

believes is a miracle.¹⁰ He goes to church because "rituals combat loneliness"(280).

John Wheelwright is typical of Irving's narrators in that he does not keep the ultimate outcome of his story a surprise. Most of the main events of the novel are described or hinted at in the first chapter. Many are summarized in the novel's first sentence:

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice - not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. (1)

Owen Meany grows to be only five feet in height, according to his own assertion, and his voice does not change when he reaches puberty. John hints that Owen's voice and his size are significant: "We thought it was a miracle; how little he weighed" (2). Owen's voice used to prevent John "from imagining that I could ever write about Owen, because - on the page - the sound of his voice would be impossible to convey."

¹⁰As a man attempting to come to terms with the death of his best friend, John wants to believe that Owen really was an instrument of God because this affirms to him that God exists and that Owen's life and death had some meaning.

We should have some suspicions about believing John's story completely because his view of Owen is not always shared by other characters. When John wonders how Owen can possibly like Liberace, John's stepfather, Dan, a stable and sensible character, points out to John that Owen is "smarter than even he knows. But he is not worldly" (263). Dan also attributes Owen's belief that he has precognitive powers to "his family - what terrible superstitions he's grown up with" (263). Owen shows how impressionable he is when he watches Bette Davis in Dark Victory on the Wheelwright's television and becomes convinced that he has a brain tumour. Dan has to convince him that he does not. (273)

(17). He attempts to convey it by putting everything Owen says or writes into upper-case letters.

What the reader wants to find out upon reading the initial sentence of the book is how Owen Meany is involved in the death of John's mother. We discover this by the end of the first chapter. When Owen and John are ten years old, Owen hits a foul ball during a little league baseball game which hits Tabitha Wheelwright on the head and kills her. The incident combines the elements of lunacy and sorrow of which Irving is so fond. The actual accident would be slapstick comedy were it not for the fact that it kills Tabitha. Tabitha Wheelwright, like Jenny Fields in Garp, is unmarried and has been raising her son alone. She refers to John as her "little fling" (15) and dies without revealing to him the identity of his father. Throughout the novel Owen refers to the incident of hitting the ball as "FATED" and perceives what happens to John's mother as evidence that he is "GOD'S INSTRUMENT" (87). Owen feels terrible for what he has done, but John considers it an accident and the result of chance circumstance. He never consciously blames Owen for it. When a psychiatrist asks him if he at times hates Owen for the "murder" (305) of his mother, John replies, "I love Owen - it was an accident" (305).¹¹

¹¹Interestingly, John cannot forgive Harry Hoyt, the boy playing in the baseball game, who got "the base on balls that led to Buzzy Thurston's easy grounder ... that led to Owen Meany coming to the plate. If Harry had only struck out or hit the ball, everything would have turned out differently." (461)

Like Irving's other narrators, John reminds the reader that he has all the information but will reveal it at his will. John has access to Owen's diary, which reminds us that he has inside knowledge that he is not yet sharing with us. Having the diary allows John to reinterpret the events he remembers not only with the benefit of hindsight, but also with the insight of Owen's perspective. John reveals at the beginning of the first chapter that Owen Meany will die in the course of the narrative. He states, "As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was" (6) and wonders "[h]ow [he could] have known that Owen was a hero" (6). These statements confirm John's view of Owen as a Christ-like figure.

Because we know that Owen, like Garp, will die, our interest in the story again lies, not in knowing what will happen, but rather in discovering how the end will come about. We are also curious to know how John came to be in Canada, and knowing that he is the right age to have been drafted in the Vietnam War, we may suspect that he is a draft dodger. He reveals that it "was Owen Meany who kept [him] out of Vietnam - a trick that only Owen could have managed" (92). He waits to reveal what this trick is until the penultimate chapter. We are also lured into the story by a desire to discover the identity of John's father. Again, John reminds us of John and Owen's ongoing search for his identity, by describing Owen and John scanning crowds to see if they recognize John's father, and their investigating John's mother's secret life as a

nightclub singer in Boston, and by recalling Owen's telling John that "God would identify" (10) his father to him.

The self-consciousness of John's withholding and gradual revealing of information is reflected in his repeated use of the phrase "as you shall see." He uses this phrase, for example, when he states that his family's change from the Congregational to Episcopalian church did not suit him (21), and that, in response to his stepfather Dan's view that Owen was brilliant and preposterous, he believes Owen was "maybe not so preposterous" (106). We later discover that Tabitha changed churches because John's father was the Reverend Lewis Merrill of the Congregational Church. Owen was perhaps "not so preposterous" because his predictions for the future come true.

John, like Irving's other narrators, jumps out of the chronology of the narrative to describe the ultimate fates of other characters, to remind us of his distance in time from the events he describes. The deaths of Harry Hoyt and Buzzy Thurston, the two boys at bat immediately before Owen hits the ball that kills Tabitha, are described in this manner. Many years after Tabitha's death, Harry is killed by a poisonous snake in Vietnam and Buzzy dies in a car accident induced by bourbon, marijuana, peyote and LSD, after being found psychologically unfit to serve in Vietnam. The death of Sagamore, the dog of John's neighbour Mr. Fish, is also described in this way: "The canine Sagamore was killed by a diaper truck" (7). When the incident actually occurs later in

the narrative, its significance becomes clear. Sagamore dies chasing a football which Owen Meany has kicked, and Owen is thus the instrument of Sagamore's death as well as John's mother's.

John points out that in "New England, the Indian chiefs and higher-ups were called sagamores" (7). The local sagamore in the area where John and Owen grow up was called Watahantowet; his totem was an armless man. This armless figure is a recurring symbol in the novel. John speculates on the possible meanings of the armlessness of Watahantowet:

Some said it was how it made the Sagamore feel to give up all [his] land - to have his arms cut off - and others pointed out that earlier "marks" made by Watahantowet revealed that the figure, although armless, held a feather in his mouth; this was said to indicate the Sagamore's frustration at being unable to write. But in several other versions of the totem ascribed to Watahantowet, the figure has a tomahawk in its mouth and looks completely crazy - or else, he is making a gesture toward peace: no arms, tomahawk in mouth; together, perhaps, they are meant to signify that Watahantowet does not fight. (8)

Watahantowet's frustration at being unable to write reflects John's inability to write about Owen's life until twenty years after Owen's death and the difficulty he has conveying the true nature of Owen's voice in writing. Watahantowet's gesture toward peace reflects John's pacifist sympathies and his response to the Vietnam War.

As in The World According to Garp and The Cider House Rules, the loss of body parts in A Prayer for Owen Meany symbolizes powerlessness. One critic has pointed out that although the totem makes "the point that the world is besotted

with weapons" - this "seems to be an argument not for peace but for impotence" (Kazin 30). In John's case this may be true, because he repeatedly states that he is unable to have any sexual relationship in his life. However, Watahantowet is also associated with Owen Meany, who is not voiceless or impotent. For Owen, the armlessness of this totem reflects the submission of his free will to God's design. He tells John: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT," (87). Owen attributes the influence he has on events, not to his own actions, but, rather, to God's will. Unlike Doctor Larch, who believes that a human can influence the outcome of events, Owen believes that humans simply succumb to the greater will of God. Free will does not exist for Owen Meany. From this perspective Watahantowet does symbolize impotence, but this powerlessness is the inability of man to resist the will of God.

The symbol of armlessness is used to reflect apparently fated outcomes of events throughout the novel. After the accident which kills John's mother, Owen amputates the claws of John's toy armadillo "to resemble Watahantowet's totem" (86) and to reflect his belief that God has taken his hands. After Tabitha's death Owen keeps her dressmaker's dummy, "a headless woman with a shining figure, but with no arms" (142), whose body looks exactly like Tabitha's, in his room. He cuts the head and arms off a statue of Mary Magdalene which stands outside the Catholic school in Gravesend. He places

the amputated statue in the auditorium of the Gravesend Academy, an exclusive private boys' school from which he has been expelled. His action reflects his belief that he could do nothing to avoid his expulsion. Owen himself is armless when he plays the baby Jesus wrapped in "swaddling clothes" (169) in the Episcopalian Church's Christmas pageant. When he dies his own arms are blown off by a grenade.

Owen believes that he has been chosen by God for some divine purpose and that the events of his life are orchestrated by God. This purpose is foreshadowed throughout the novel by Owen's gradual revealing to John what this divinely-assigned role is. John as a young man believes in chance or coincidence and human choice, and has no religious faith, although he attends church and Sunday school. Owen appears to have a great deal of religious faith even as a child. This is reflected in his telling John that God will tell him who his father is. Although Owen was born a Catholic, and Owen and John attend the Protestant Episcopal Church, Owen's insistence that everything is fated is reminiscent of rigid Calvinist thinking.¹²

The philosophical debate between the characters on the issue of free will versus predetermination is reflected in their respective reactions when they happen to be directly

¹²The Protestant Episcopal Church is the American equivalent of the Church of England (Smart 504). As an adult, John acquires religious faith and becomes involved with the Anglican Church of Canada, the Canadian equivalent of the Church of England.

under a trestle bridge when an express train "The Flying Yankee" passes over it. John exclaims: "What a coincidence!" (186), but Owen looks at him with a combination of "mild pity and mild contempt" (186). John tells us that

Owen Meany believed that 'coincidence' was a stupid, shallow refuge sought by stupid, shallow people who were unable to accept the fact that their lives were shaped by terrifying and awesome design - more powerful and unstoppable than 'The Flying Yankee'. (186)

Owen first reveals his belief that events are predetermined by God when he stays overnight at the Wheelwright home, shortly before Tabitha's death, and believes he sees an angel in her room. He is convinced that he has "INTERRUPTED AN ANGEL ... [and] UPSET THE SCHEME OF THINGS." (102). John later reveals that Owen believed he interrupted an angel of death in Tabitha's room, and that the angel "reassigned the task - she gave it to [Owen]" (103). Later the same night John's grandmother comes into Tabitha's room, finds Owen sleeping there and, in Owen's words, starts "WAILING LIKE A BANSHEE" (105). Years later John's stepfather, Dan, looks up the word 'banshee' in the dictionary and discovers that "a banshee, in Irish folklore, is a female spirit whose wailing is a sign that a loved one will soon die" (106). These first associations of Owen with fate reveals his ability to predict the future. If Owen's life has a divine purpose, however, we must question the benevolence of a God who would assign him the task of being the instrument of a relatively innocent character's death. Does this God intend

to punish Tabitha for the love affair which led to John's conception? This seems cruel and it makes Owen's "divine" purpose ambiguous. Owen's belief in cosmic design might also result from an attempt to extricate himself from guilt over Tabitha's death, rather than from a deep-felt philosophical conviction.

The ambiguity of Owen's role as God's instrument is reflected in his portrayal of two important parts in two Christmas plays in 1953, shortly after Tabitha's death. These roles enhance John's view of Owen as someone not-quite human. Owen is the little Lord Jesus in the Episcopal Church's Christmas pageant. He assigns himself this role because he is small enough to "FIT IN THE CRIB" and "OLD ENOUGH NOT TO CRY" (164), and then proceeds to take over the direction of the play. As the baby Jesus, Owen is swaddled in a scarf so that he appears armless, and is unable to lift his hands up like the Christ child usually does in nativity scenes. Owen assigns John the role of "Joseph - that hapless follower, that stand-in, that guy along for the ride" (160). John is fated to play this role all his life, because his own inability to have any sexual relationship reflects Joseph's lack of involvement in the conception of the son that Mary bears. Owen's playing the role of Jesus reflects John's belief that he is some kind of martyr to a divine purpose. This role also reveals Owen's capacity for anger and cruelty, however, not only in his assignment of the role of Joseph to John, but also in his treatment of his own parents.

When Owen's parents come to see him in this pageant, he tells them: "IT IS A SACRILEGE FOR YOU TO BE HERE!" (220). Mr. and Mrs. Meany follow his order to leave, thus showing the entire community who is really the head of their household. Owen often speaks of an "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE that the Catholics had perpetrated" (235) on his family. Owen's rage at the Christmas pageant and his control over his parents are later explained after Owen's death, when John discovers from Mr. Meany why Owen felt that the Catholic Church had committed an "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE." Mr. Meany reveals that Owen "was born unnaturally ... Like the Christ Child - that's what I mean ... Me and his mother, we didn't ever do it ..." (536) Mr. Meany is also "just a Joseph" (204) who had no part in the creation of this child. The UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE of the Catholic Church is that they "believe *that* story, but they wouldn't listen to *this* one! They even teach that other story, but they tell us our story is worse than some kinda sin! Owen was no sin" (536). Mr. Meany reveals that he told Owen this story when "he was ten or eleven - it was about the time he hit that ball" (537), which is the time from which John notices that "Mr. Meany wouldn't interfere with *anything* Owen wanted" (138). Owen's parents' revelation to him that his was a virgin birth probably marks the beginning of Owen's belief that he is God's instrument, and hitting the baseball that killed Tabitha probably affirmed his belief in his own divine purpose. Owen's response to this story appears to be the almost self-righteous assertion that he should play the

role of Christ. His portrayal shows little Christian mercy and a fair amount of wrath at his parents, however. Although John appears to believe that Owen is a Christ figure, ironically, he refuses to believe Mr. Meany's story and calls the Meanys "monsters of superstition" (537). If one does not accept Owen's philosophy of predetermination, then perhaps he too can be seen as a monster of superstition.

Owen also plays the part of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the Gravesend Players' production of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. He is "a huge presence on stage" (202) who does not look "human" (203) and frightens audiences. His portrayal of this part reinforces the notion that Owen can foresee the future. As the Ghost of the Future, Owen must show Scrooge, played by Mr. Fish, his own grave, as Scrooge asks him: "Are these the shadows of the things that *will* be or are they the shadows of the things that *may* be, only?" (197). The question reflects the central concern of the novel with the issue of free will versus predetermination.

When Owen looks at the grave he sees his own name on the stone, rather than Scrooge's. People attempt to reassure him: "Your own name on your own grave - it's a vision we all have. It's just a bad dream, Owen" (245). These words echo Garp's reassurances to Walt. Owen remains convinced, however, that he has had a vision of his own death, and tells John this is because "IT WAS MY REAL NAME. IT SAID THE WHOLE THING" (254). We later discover that this means "1 LT PAUL O. MEANY, JR." (539), when Owen carves this name, together with the date he

sees on Scrooge's grave, on a tombstone he makes for himself. Paul is Owen's real name and he is in the army at the time of his death. The fact that there is a date on the gravestone suggests that Owen's vision is a shadow of things that *will* be, a future which is predetermined, rather than of those things that *may* be or a set of possibilities. John, who doesn't believe "a single thing about [Owen's] stupid vision" (255), believes that the gravestone is a shadow of things that may be, only. The date Owen carves turns out to be correct, however, which might indicate that Irving is on Owen's side of this debate.

As the two boys grow older and go to high school at the prestigious Gravesend Academy, the strength of Owen's vision becomes increasingly clear. This is reflected in the entries of a diary which John's grandmother gives to Owen for Christmas in 1960, in his senior year at the Gravesend Academy. His entry for January 1, 1961 reads:

I KNOW THREE THINGS. I KNOW THAT MY VOICE DOESN'T CHANGE, AND I KNOW WHEN I'M GOING TO DIE. I WISH I KNEW WHY MY VOICE NEVER CHANGES, I WISH I KNEW HOW I WAS GOING TO DIE; BUT GOD HAS ALLOWED ME TO KNOW MORE THAN MOST PEOPLE KNOW - SO I'M NOT COMPLAINING. THE THIRD THING I KNOW IS THAT I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT; I HAVE FAITH THAT GOD WILL LET ME KNOW WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO DO, AND WHEN I'M SUPPOSED TO DO IT. (366)

John comments:

If I had understood then that this was a fatalistic acceptance of what he "knew", I could have better understood why he behaved as he did - when the world appeared to turn against him, and he hardly raised a hand in his own defense. (366)

At the Gravesend Academy, Owen is the top student of his class and writes an influential column called "The Voice" in the school paper. The world turns against Owen when he makes an enemy of his headmaster, gets thrown out of Gravesend Academy and loses his chance for good scholarships to the best universities. Owen accepts all of this with a resignation that reflects his belief that these events are simply ways of getting to the predetermined fate God has assigned him. Owen goes to the state university with John, finances his education by joining the Reserve Officers Training Corps, and is content to get by with average grades, except in Military Science courses, in which he excels. We later learn that his concentration on his military courses stems from his belief that he is fated to be in the army.

Owen's power to predict the future is most evident in a recurring dream he has. This dream not only foreshadows his death, but also contains details of how it will occur. It is Irving's most elaborate dream of death. Owen reads John an "edited version" (473) of his dream, which is written in his diary. The dream involves an explosion, a group of Vietnamese children, some nuns, and Owen dying and moving away from these people above some palm trees. He repeats what Reverend Merrill has told him: "It's just a dream, Owen" (475), and tells him "you can't have a dream and believe that you 'know' what you're supposed to do!" (472). As Owen begins to take action which he believes will lead him to the destiny that God has chosen for him, his friends attempt to convince him that

he can control his own fate. John and his cousin, Hester, who is in love with Owen, question Owen's insistence on joining the ROTC and committing himself to several years of military service at a time when the United States' involvement in Vietnam is escalating. Owen explains to John that he knows God wants him to go to Vietnam because the dream has told him this. He insists that he is *supposed to go to Vietnam* and that he knows this "THE WAY YOU KNOW SOME THINGS - YOUR OBLIGATIONS, YOUR DESTINY OR YOUR FATE ... THE WAY YOU KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO" (471). John thinks that Owen's dream is ludicrous. He tells him "you can't have a dream and believe that you 'know' what you're supposed to do!" (472). Hester agrees and tells Owen:

You're very original, but the dream is a stereotype - the dream is stupid. You're in the Army, there's a war in Vietnam - do you think you'd have a dream about saving American children? And, naturally, there would be palm trees - what would you expect? Igloos? (475)

On one occasion, John attempts to change the fate Owen appears to have chosen for himself, thus revealing his belief in the power of human action to influence destiny. Owen wants to be assigned to a combat branch and John tries to keep him out of this type of service by telling Owen's commanding officer that he doesn't believe Owen is "suitable for combat" (462) because he questions "his emotional stability" (417). When Owen is not assigned to combat duty, it is because he fails the obstacle course in training and not because of John's actions, however. Unable to get into combat duty, he

becomes a "casualty assistance officer" (496), who accompanies the bodies of dead soldiers on their journeys home to their families. Because of his years of experience helping bereaved families select monuments for their deceased loved ones at his family's granite shop, he is, as Hester observes, "familiar with the territory" (497). He thus appears to be fated to play this role.

Although Owen appears to be stubborn in his insistence that the dream is a divine revelation of a predetermined future, he, like John, tries to intervene and change the future he sees in his dream. The part of the dream that Owen does not at first share with John is that John is in the dream "EVERY TIME" (508). Owen tells John: "IF YOU DON'T GO TO VIETNAM, YOU CAN'T BE IN THAT DREAM" (508), and cuts off the first two joints of John's right index finger with the diamond wheel in his father's granite shop so that John will be ineligible for military service. Owen thus becomes the instrument of John's fate by keeping him out of the war. The loss of John's finger reflects Watahantowet's symbolic meaning of unwillingness to fight, and is another example of Irving's use of images of severed body parts to suggest powerlessness. Owen's action is strange because if he believes everything in the dream is divinely predetermined, he must know that he cannot change the future through his own actions because God controls it. He can keep John out of Vietnam, but if his dream foretells a predetermined future, he cannot remove John from his death scene. Owen's action here suggests that his

faith in his philosophy of predetermination is not as strong as he would have his friends believe.

His faith also appears to be shaken on Monday, July 8, 1968, the date he sees on Scrooge's gravestone. He thinks perhaps the dream is simply a dream rather than a divine revelation. He is in Phoenix, Arizona with John, and not in Vietnam. He wonders whether the premonition in his dream will be realized. He says, "THIS MAY BE THE HAPPIEST DAY OF MY LIFE! ... MAYBE NOTHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN!" (609). Something does happen, however, and Owen's dream does become reality, and the divine purpose which he believes in appears to be the truth. Like the accident scene in The World According to Garp, a series of apparently unrelated elements and incidents come together to make this outcome possible and in hindsight make it appear fated. It appears that Owen's size, his voice, his service in the army and his friendship with John have in fact all been part of the divine plan which he has had faith in. The fact that the plan is not carried out in Vietnam creates "An Appointment in Samarra" type of ending to the novel whereby Owen and John cannot escape their appointment with destiny.

While Owen and John are in the airport in Phoenix, they see some nuns get off a plane with a group of Vietnamese orphans. The nuns, seeing Owen in uniform, ask him to take the boys to the washroom, a high-ceilinged, makeshift men's room with a tiny window with a ledge at least ten feet from the ground. While they are inside, the lunatic brother of a

dead warrant officer, whose body Owen has accompanied to Phoenix, arrives at the door holding a grenade. The children are afraid but Owen's voice, which "was a voice like their voices" (612), calms them and they lie on the floor. As the madman rips the fuse cord and throws the grenade at them, Owen says to John, "WE'LL HAVE JUST FOUR SECONDS" (612); John knows they must complete "the shot". The shot is a basketball manoeuvre that they have been practising for years. The move involves Owen jumping into John's arms (because he is too small to jump up and reach the basket himself) and John boosting him up above the rim of the basket so that he can score. John catches the grenade and throws it to Owen, who jumps into his arms and John lifts him up "as easily as I had always lifted him" (612). The grenade detonates after Owen reaches the window ledge and pins it down. The explosion severs Owen's arms just below his elbows. When Owen sees this as he is dying he says: "REMEMBER WATAHANTOWET?" (615). He comments, "NOW I UNDERSTAND WHY YOU HAD TO BE HERE" (615), knowing that his attempt to keep John out of his dream has failed. Some lunacy is injected into this scene of sorrow when Owen says to his Superior Officer, "PLEASE SEE TO IT THAT I GET SOME KIND OF MEDAL FOR THIS" (615).

That Irving wants us to see Owen as an agent of fate is clear. Whether he also wants us to accept Owen's philosophy that everything is predetermined is not as apparent. If there is a God in full control of all events that occur in Owen Meany's world, He must be seen as a force of both good and

evil because He orchestrates constructive and destructive events. Owen may be an agent of this God that counteracts the forces of chaos while at the same time becoming their victim. Perhaps Owen's death is a sacrifice that an all-powerful God deems to be necessary in order to save these children. Some of Owen's other actions, such as his causing the deaths of Tabitha and Sagamore, can be seen as destructive because their results are tragic, but saving these children (and keeping John out of the war, perhaps) is a constructive action, in which Owen's participation leads to a positive outcome. These events could also be caused by the same random violence and chaos which characterizes Irving's earlier novels, however. The events are carefully orchestrated by Irving for the purpose of telling a good story, but it is not entirely certain that we can assume he believes that God is controlling them. If God does not control them, then Owen's life is not divinely predetermined. Instead, Owen can be seen as a creator and controller of the fates of himself and others because of the extent to which his participation in events changes their outcome. From this perspective, his role is similar to that of Doctor Larch in The Cider House Rules.

The ambiguity of Owen's role in the novel, and the uncertainty of Irving's own position in the debate of free will versus predestination are reflected in John's reaction to Owen's death. John claims he is persuaded by Owen's belief in fate and finds his own faith when he witnesses Owen's death. John is convinced by Owen's correct predictions of the future

that Owen is "a miracle" (524). He says he believes in "forces beyond our play" (617) which control destiny. He continues to be angry at political events in the United States, however. If he really believed that everything were controlled by forces beyond human control it would be pointless to be angry at American politicians because their actions would not be the result of their own choices.

John uses his religious faith to seek comfort from the sorrow that results from the loss of his friend, because his faith allows him to believe in an after-life. Christianity thus provides a structure for him through which he can interpret the way the world works, just as Owen Meany uses it to accept what he sees as his predetermined fate. This is revealed in John's interest in the notion of resurrection in Christianity. He says that "Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer" (278). John feels Owen's continued presence in his life, on two occasions after Owen is dead and John hears Owen's distinctive voice; on one occasion, when he is in Pastor Merrill's office shortly after Owen's death and on another, many years later, when he hears Owen speak to him in the secret passageway of his grandmother's home. As "a small, strong hand, or something like it" (517) touches him, John hears Owen's voice saying to him, "DON'T BE AFRAID. NOTHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU" (517), echoing the words that Owen spoke to John before he cut John's finger off. These

events convince John that his friend is "resurrected", and reinforce John's association of Owen with Christ.

Aside from the reassurance John feels that life after death exists, his religious faith does nothing to make his life more complete. He remains lonely and angry, and practices the rituals of his faith because he has little else to do with his time. His approach to his faith is contrasted to that of the Reverend Katherine Keeling, "a jubilant soul" (280), who "does not bullshit herself about what Easter means" (281) and manages to fit in her church attendances between the feedings of her babies.

John also attempts to "resurrect" Owen through the story he tells about him. Writing a "prayer" for Owen is another way that John can cope with his anger and grief because his writing allows him to reflect upon and reinterpret the events many years later. He also attempts to keep Owen alive forever by immortalizing him in his story, just as Garp attempts to keep the dead alive in his fiction. He thus uses art to help structure his thoughts about the meaning of Owen's life and death, and to bring his friend back to life in his story.

John's cousin Hester, who becomes a popular rock performer, also uses art to cope with the loss of Owen, by channelling her grief and anger about Owen's death into her songs. The titles of the songs she writes include "Drivin' with No Hands", "Gone to Arizona", "Just Another Dead Hero" and "You Won't See Me at His Funeral" (513). Hester believes that Owen chooses to die by joining the army, and tells him,

"I'll marry you, I'll move to Arizona - I'll go anywhere with you ... I'll even get pregnant - if you'd like that Owen. Do you want babies ? I'll give you babies! ... I'll do anything for you - you know that. But I won't go to your fucking funeral." (531) When Owen dies, Hester does not attend his funeral, but her song titles reflect her inability to forget him.

Although Hester tells Owen she will have his children, neither she, nor Owen, nor John has children. Creating a family is not a means used to affirm the meaning of life for these characters. This is another departure for Irving because all the other younger generation characters in every other Irving novel, except Setting Free The Bears, have children. Hester becomes involved in her career, Owen dies too young and John remains a virgin into his forties. The affirmation at the end of the novel that life continues comes, to large extent, from the notions of resurrection and after-life, rather than from a new generation being born to replace the old. The continuation of life is reflected, not only in Owen's "resurrection" in a Christian sense, but also in his association with the phoenix. Owen writes in his diary that this mythical bird, which is reborn from its own ashes, is: "OFTEN A SYMBOL OF REBORN IDEALISM OR HOPE - OR AN EMBLEM OF IMMORTALITY" (557). Owen dies in Phoenix, Arizona and in his dream he always sees himself rising above the children, the nuns and John until he is far away above them.

Katherine Keeling is the only character in this novel who has children and thus uses the creation of family as a means of affirming the value of life. John notes that she "has a large family - she's had so many children, I've lost count" (279). The fullness and joy of Katherine's life are contrasted to John's sad, lonely existence when John goes to visit her family at their cottage in Georgian Bay, Ontario. Before the visit, he spends much of his summer waiting for Katherine's invitation, hoping that spending time with her family will take him away from his loneliness and from American newspapers. During his visit, he overhears Katherine's husband labelling him a "non-practising homosexual" (423), in a comment on his curious life-style.

The part Owen assigns to John as "just a Joseph" (204) with "nothing to do, nothing to say, nothing to learn" (167) becomes "the only part [he] could play" (207). John feels humiliated at being a Joseph and reacts to his feelings by saying that "if someone were to put my doink under the [diamond] wheel, I considered that it would be no great loss." (439). Like Dr. Larch, his hands are more use to him than his penis. The removal of this body part would make him only slightly more impotent than he already appears. Again, the loss of body parts symbolizes powerlessness. One reason that John remains a virgin is that he associates whatever sexual feelings he has with his father. He thinks that his lust is his "father asserting himself in me" (252) and he begins to think that his "father might be evil, or that what of himself

he had given to me was what was evil in me" (252). Believing his lust is evil, he attempts to suppress it. Owen tries to use this "LUST CONNECTION" (275) in the search he actively pursues for John's father. He tells John: "EVERY TIME YOU GET A BONER, TRY TO THINK IF YOU REMIND YOURSELF OF ANYONE YOU KNOW" (275). Owen thus contributes to John's suppression of his sexual feelings. In his early adulthood, John's asexual status is also attributed to his feelings for Hester and Owen. Hester tells him: "Between how much you love him and whatever it is that you think of me, I sometimes wonder if you'll ever get laid" (503).

John wants to know who his father is, but he is also scared to find out because as Owen points out to him: "[YOUR MOTHER] WAS A GOOD MOTHER. IF SHE THOUGHT THE GUY COULD BE A GOOD FATHER TO YOU, YOU'D ALREADY KNOW HIM" (275). John has other loving family members - his grandmother and his stepfather, Dan - who raise him, but he is nonetheless curious about the identity of his father. John and Owen's search for John's father does indeed lead to much disillusionment. Their search leads them to Boston, where John's mother went for "singing lessons" each week, and, it is assumed by John's grandmother and his Aunt Martha, where Tabitha met John's father. In Boston, Owen and John discover that Tabitha led a secret life as a nightclub singer known as "The Lady in Red", wearing a red dress that now clothes her dressmaker's dummy. Tabitha always claims to hate this dress, but says she is unable to return it because the store where she bought it

burned down. John and Owen discover the story of "The Lady in Red" by going to this store, which in fact never burned down. John is shocked by his discovery that his mother lied to her family and is even more confused about his identity. Following their investigation in Boston, which reveals nothing about the identity of John's father, Owen remarks: "NOW YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOUR MOTHER IS EITHER" (351).

Owen's prediction that God will reveal to John who his father is comes true when John visits Lewis Merrill after Owen's death. Merrill reveals to John, during Owen's first after-death appearance in John's life, that he is John's father. Merrill, with his voice sounding unmistakably like Owen's, says: "LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT - HAND SIDE" (542) of his desk, which contains the fated baseball that hit Tabitha. Owen has scribbled this same remark in his diary, having discovered the ball one day as he was sitting at Merrill's desk on one of his many visits to Merrill's office. John remembers seeing Owen opening and closing the drawers when Merrill was not in the office and he realizes that Owen learned then who his father was and didn't tell him. Although Owen clearly could have revealed the truth to John, John is, curiously, not angry at Owen for not doing so. He apparently believes Owen was merely protecting him from the truth.

Owen is correct in his assumption that John will be disappointed when he learns his father's identity. John is already upset at Merrill's reluctance to accept John's belief that Owen's life was a miracle. Merrill's approach to

religion has always been that "doubt [is] the essence and not the opposite of faith" (541), but John tells him, "it seems to me that your doubt has taken control of you" (541). After John discovers that Merrill is his father, Merrill admits to him that he lost his faith the day Tabitha died. At the moment she turned and waved to him at the baseball game he "prayed to God that [she] would drop dead" (544). This is quite odd because it is an experience which might lead many people to conclude that God *does* exist. Merrill at the time was consumed by guilt at their affair, and resentful that Tabitha was not. John believes that when Merrill "said he wouldn't leave his family for her, she simply put him out of her mind and went on singing" (546). Tabitha, like Jenny Fields, simply gets on with her life as a single mother, oblivious to the judgment of others. Merrill reveals to him he promised Tabitha that he would never tell John his identity. Dan later confirms that Tabitha never intended to tell him, thus destroying John's long-held assumption that his mother planned to tell him the truth but died before she had the chance.

John is angry at his discovery of his father's identity, and upset that Merrill, who has been "privileged to witness the miracle of Owen Meany" (546), can only "whine about his lost faith" (546). He feels "moved to do evil" (547) and decides to play a prank on Merrill to scare him. He sets up his mother's dressmaker's dummy, wearing the red dress, and throws the "FATED" baseball through the window of the church

where Merrill is working that night. Believing that he sees Tabitha's ghost when he sees the dummy, Merrill is frightened back into believing in God. John remains angry that this man who resists believing that Owen is a "real miracle" (568) has his faith restored "by an encounter with a dummy" (568). He states that it "disappointed me ... to discover that my father was just another Joseph" (571). Merrill is just another of the weak, powerless male characters in this novel.

After frightening Merrill, John throws the dressmaker's dummy and the baseball into the ocean, in a symbolic gesture suggesting that now that his search for his parents' identities is complete, he may be able to let go of his past. Before discarding the last physical reminder of his mother, he hugs "the body of the dummy to my face, but whatever scent had once clung to the red dress had long ago departed" (556). He later tells Dan: "You're the best father a boy ever had - and the only father I ever needed" (558), knowing that he has always had a better father than the one his search reveals.

After Owen Meany's funeral, John attempts to leave his past behind by moving away from his family to Canada, where he lives his lonely life. At the end of the novel, the grandmother who raised him is also dead and he asks himself: "Whom do I know who's alive whom I love?" (571). He decides the answer is Dan and the Reverend Katherine Keeling. Because he has no wife or children, John's family contact is now limited to annual August visits with Dan. He never manages to gain control of his anger at the United States, or build a

family of his own. Dan tells him: "He's been dead for twenty years. Forgive it. Forgive and forget - and come home" (522). John cannot forgive and forget and therefore cannot put his past behind him.

Like John, Owen Meany and Hester also suffer because of their absent parents. Hester is the youngest child of John's Aunt Martha and Uncle Alfred. Martha and Alfred appear to devote most of their attention to the upbringing and education of their sons, Simon and Noah. The boys attend the best Ivy League schools while Hester goes to the State University. Hester repeatedly tries to get her parents' attention through rebellious, self-destructive acts, such as becoming sexually involved with an older black man she meets on vacation in the Caribbean. Although Owen lives with his mother and father, he is closer to John's mother, grandmother and stepfather. He keeps Tabitha's dressmaker's dummy in his room after she dies. Tabitha is a mother substitute to Owen when she is alive, and her dummy serves the same purpose to him after her death, just as Frank Berry's dummy does in The Hotel New Hampshire.

Owen's own mother is an apparently insane woman who constantly stares out of the windows of her home and never speaks or turns to face anyone. She looks at and speaks to John only once; when she tells him she is sorry that his mother has died. The only occasions on which we see her leave the Meany house are to attend the Christmas pageant and Owen's funeral. Mr. Meany is a Joseph: an impotent bystander who witnesses events but is powerless to assert himself over

Owen's controlling personality. The Meany family relationships are symbolized in the decrepit nativity scene they have in their house at Christmas time. Joseph has "lost a hand - perhaps he hacked it off himself, in a jealous rage." (182) and "[a] gouge through the flesh-toned paint of the Holy Mother's face had rendered her obviously blind and so ghastly to behold that someone in the Meany family had thoughtfully turned her face away from the crib" (182). The Little Lord Jesus is missing from the crib, as Owen has apparently taken Him and hidden Him in his room.

At the conclusion of A Prayer for Owen Meany, one is struck by the sadness of John Wheelwright's life. Although John manages to structure his memories of Owen into an artistic "prayer", Irving fails to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the title character by asserting his own position in the free will versus predetermination debate. Irving's narrator asserts that he now shares Owen's view, but this does not make his life any happier, and his attitudes suggest that he does not in fact believe that everything is predetermined. John is unsuccessful at affirming the value of life through religion or family, although Irving clearly shows, in the character of Katherine Keeling, that he believes such affirmation is still possible, even if the universe may be governed by an all-powerful, controlling God. It may, in some respects, be comforting to believe that we are subject to such strong spiritual forces, because believing that such forces exist may help us accept some of the tragedies we experience

in this world. It may also be disturbing, however, that tragedy may be the result of the will of God and not a consequence of chance or random chaos. It is also unfortunate that the characters here wait for an after-life to affirm the meaning of their existence, rather than finding happiness in this world by creating families.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the development of John Irving's treatment of the theme of affirmation reveals that the world according to Irving has changed considerably between the writing of The World According to Garp and A Prayer for Owen Meany. In The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire violence and tragedy appear to be subject to the random forces of chaos represented by the Under Toad and Sorrow the dog. In these two novels, humans appear to be fated to endure the tragedies they experience at the hands of these forces, but should react defiantly to their awareness of danger and tragedy in the world. The personal philosophies of the main characters of these two novels maintain that they should bring energy and enthusiasm to everything they do, even though they recognize that life will inevitably bring them much sorrow. In The Cider House Rules, these chaotic forces are also present to cause tragedy, but a human character, Dr. Larch, acts as an intervenor in the fates which await characters who leave everything to chance. Larch changes the outcome of events and therefore becomes an agent of fate himself. This defiance in the face of tragedy involves, not only having an attitude which affirms the value of life despite his recognition of sorrow in the world, but, also, acting in a manner specifically designed to counteract this sadness. Larch and the other characters in this novel develop their own rules to live by when the rules imposed on them by society fail to help

them avoid sorrow. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, the title character is an agent of fate, whose influence on events is attributed, not to his own powers, but, rather, to the will of a God who seems to cause both happy events and sorrowful ones. The power of this God is a force beyond the control of humans, just as those represented by the Under Toad or Sorrow the dog are. Any suggestion that Irving may have made in The Cider House Rules that humans can "cheat fate" is contradicted if one accepts Owen's philosophy of divine predetermination. If God is a force of tragedy and destruction, then the universe perhaps appears more evil than it does if it is merely subject to random chaos.

In A Prayer for Owen Meany, Irving to some extent appears to have abandoned his former emphasis on finding a way to live happily despite recognizing tragedy in life. The main characters do not react defiantly to their awareness of fate. Perhaps this is because their belief that everything is predetermined by God leads them to conclude that there is no purpose in reacting defiantly where the outcome of all the events has been decided before the events occur. Rather than find ways to live happily in this world, the narrator of Owen's story focuses his attention on writing his prayer for Owen and on life in the next world instead.

Art affirms the meaning of life for Irving's characters, but they must use it properly in order for this to be successful. Garp's writing can bring meaning to his life when he uses it to recreate characters so vividly that he appears

to inject life into them. In this sense, his art creates the illusion of defying death. When he writes without this vividness, or solely from his personal experience, or as an outlet for his anger and violent imagination, his work becomes uninteresting and self-destructive. Lilly Berry, in The Hotel New Hampshire, is a writer who never manages to inject the vividness of life into her work because she is unable to face her experience of the deaths of the loved ones. Garp only learns to use art constructively after he experiences the death of someone close to him, because this is what makes him realize that it is a writer's job to try to keep "everyone alive forever". Because she refuses to face death, Lilly does not understand that she must try to make characters in her fiction seem alive. Her characters and stories are, consequently, dull and abstract. In The Cider House Rules, Doctor Larch's fictional written history of St. Cloud's is so vivid that the role of its main character, Fuzzy Stone, is actually taken in real life by Homer Wells. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, John Wheelwright attempts to recreate Owen's character and life vividly, in order to try to make his friend seem still alive. He also uses his prayer for Owen to reconsider and reinterpret the experiences he had with Owen, now that he claims to believe Owen's philosophy of predetermination and has found his own Christian faith.

The element of creating a loving family to counteract tragedy exists in each of Irving's novels, although his focus is perhaps changing as he concentrates on the metaphysical

concerns of religion in A Prayer for Owen Meany. In The World According to Garp, Garp finds his greatest joy in the time he spends with his family members. The birth of a new generation of children at the end of this novel symbolizes the hope that life continues on after the Garp family experiences the tragic losses of Walt, Jenny and, finally, Garp himself. Similarly, The Hotel New Hampshire ends with the anticipated birth of Franny and Junior's baby: an assurance that life continues, even though Mary and Egg have died in the plane crash, Lilly has committed suicide, and Win has been blinded. Through each of these tragic events, the surviving members of the Berry family find comfort from their sorrow in the love and support they provide for each other. The Cider House Rules contains many negative images of sexual behaviour and reproduction, but the value of a loving family is nonetheless affirmed. Having a family is the wish of every orphan at St. Cloud's and the hope of Homer Wells when he decides to raise his own son. In A Prayer for Owen Meany, the hope and power of a happy family are reflected in the portrayal of the family of Katherine Keeling, the only character of Irving's latest novel who affirms the meaning of life by creating a family.

When reading A Prayer for Owen Meany one is struck by the sadness of the lives of those characters who do not have children and create loving families who will bring meaning to their lives: John, Hester and Dan Needham. One feels that if only these characters could find happy family lives, they would be able to stop living in the past. It remains to be

seen whether Irving's shift in emphasis away from creating a family and toward a focus on the other-worldly considerations of Christianity will continue in later works. One hopes that, even if Irving has found new meaning in life through religion, he will also continue to affirm the value of other aspects of life in his fiction. In a world filled with fiction that bemoans the tragedy and violence of our world and concludes that the human condition is hopeless, it is refreshing to read the works of an author who clearly believes that the experience of living is worthwhile, even if we must inevitably experience such tragedy and violence. One can only hope that the sorrow and bitterness of Irving's most recent narrator, John Wheelwright, are not shared by the author, and that Irving will continue to write life-affirming fiction.

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