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# John Irving, Female Sexuality, and the Victorian Feminine Ideal

Tara Coburn

*Eastern Illinois University*

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**JOHN IRVING, FEMALE SEXUALITY, AND THE VICTORIAN  
FEMININE IDEAL**

BY

TARA COBURN

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF

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## ABSTRACT

In an interview about *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving states, “It is never the social or political message that interests me in a novel” (qtd. in Herel, para. 18). However, in book reviews, jacket blurbs, literary criticism, and Irving’s own writing, readers and critics and Irving often assert that he is a neo-Victorian novelist, and the Victorians were a notoriously political bunch. Though Irving does not admit to the political nature of his writing, the way he treats feminist politics in his fiction has drawn particular notice by the media, who often label him as a feminist writer.

Deeper investigation into the female characters in three of his novels—*The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *The Cider House Rules*—illuminates Irving’s literary juxtaposition between traditional Victorianist and modern feminist. Like the archetypal Victorian fallen women, Ellen James, Franny Berry, Melony, and Rose Rose, are sexually and physically abused by men. However, where the Victorian fallen woman would face societal excommunication, these characters exact revenge on their attackers, eventually reclaiming their sexuality and control over their own lives.

Investigating the various conformities and incongruities between Irving’s versions of liberal feminism, and radical feminism suggests that though Irving modernizes the Victorian woman for his updated 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives, he is less successful as a male author portraying feminism. He favors a liberal brand of feminism he views as intellectual but non-threatening over radical feminism that he sees as seeking political gain, paralleling his anxieties about political writing. If Irving wants to write about feminism well, he must acknowledge that he is contributing to a political conversation and take responsibility for the political baggage that comes with the territory.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In an interview about his most controversial novel, *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving states, “It is never the social or political message that interests me in a novel” (qtd. in Herel, para. 18). Considering the body of criticism and reviews about his work, one must ask, “Why is it, then, that readers of Irving are so interested in his politics?” Irving is not just a novelist, but also a literary celebrity who has been called upon to espouse his political views on TV’s *Politically Incorrect* and in the political magazine *George*. Most often, these public political discussions center on his literary portrayals of women. In fact, he was awarded a “Good Guy” award by the National Women’s Political Caucus for the abortion issues raised in *The Cider House Rules*. As a modern male author who writes obsessively about rape, abortion, incest, and other women’s issues, he is a favorite with interviewers who want to know what a “feminist author”— especially a male feminist author— thinks.

Irving, however, would rather talk about how he writes. A self-proclaimed 19<sup>th</sup> century writer, dedicated to the Victorian tradition of Dickens, Hardy, the Brontës, and George Eliot, Irving prides himself in interviews and print on being a traditional author with no use for modernism, post-modernism, or experimental techniques. Most critics share this view of his style; rarely does one of his book jackets appear without a reference to Irving as a “new Victorian.” Irving would rather discuss his Victorian influences than his politics, but the Victorians were a notoriously political bunch. Victorian authors wrote moral lessons into their stories, hoping that their tales would be either cautionary, warning readers to adhere to rules of morality, or revolutionary, exposing society for its

wrongs. Considering that the Victorian period was the age of the didactic novel, the novel with both a story and a message, Irving's desire to shy away from political associations in discussions of his own work seems disingenuous.

Being portrayed as both a contemporary progressive feminist writer and a traditional Victorian writer places Irving as an author at a unique crux of literary styles and philosophies, one that demands closer inspection. Deeper investigation into the female characters in three of his novels in which feminist issues play significant roles—*The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *The Cider House Rules*—reveals this literary juxtaposition at its most forceful and profound. Like the archetypal Victorian fallen woman, characters in these novels, such as Ellen James, Franny Berry, Melony, and Rose Rose, are sexually and physically abused by men and must learn to live with the emotional and social consequences. However, where the Victorian fallen woman would face societal excommunication, these characters exact revenge on their attackers, eventually reclaiming their sexuality and control over their own lives.

Irving's pattern of writing his female characters into "fallen" situations, and then writing them out by endowing them with strength and power hints that he is revising the fate of the Victorian fallen woman. His female characters demonstrate the constraints contemporary American society places on women, but in their physical and emotional survival, they subvert the fate of the Victorian woman. As a "19<sup>th</sup> century writer for our times" (Bernstein C13), Irving has rewritten Victorian women for our times, producing female characters who are some of the most memorable in his body of work. By striving to adhere to the Victorian themes while revising its portrayal of women, Irving undercuts the status of the new American Victorian so often attributed to him. However, revising

the characterizations within novels with traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns allows Irving to comment on Victorian mores while remaining an updated Victorian storyteller.

Analyzing Irving's Victorian patterning allows a closer, more particular examination of his task as a "new Victorian," a title mentioned frequently by critics and reviewers but obviously not applicable to his contemporary treatment of female characters.

However, though his characterizations put a modern twist on an outdated archetype, not all of the beliefs espoused in Irving's fiction are positive towards feminism as a whole. Closer inspection of Irving's ideas on feminism reveals that though his individual female characters are strong and compelling, they are undercut by the overall impact of Irving's novels, which favors a type of individual feminist while questioning feminism as a political endeavor. Irving writes female characters who are meticulously drawn and developed— far from the Victorian archetypes— and aligned with liberal notions of feminism.

Examining the differences between radical feminism and liberal feminism can help explain Irving's approval of feminism as a personal belief coupled with his uneasiness with feminism as a political movement. Irving's favored type of feminism is more closely related to what is termed "liberal" feminism. Liberal feminism is "directed toward criticizing the injustice of [gendered] norms and working toward changing them" and desires "gender equality in the sense of equal opportunities for men and women" (Jaggar and Rothenberg 117). Liberal feminism operates under a distinction between the personal and the political, arguing that decisions about private issues should be left to individuals (Jaggar and Rothenberg 118). A liberal feminist writer would challenge gender expectations, but not call for widespread changes in the ways people operate in

their personal lives. Irving's brand of preferred feminism in his writing is closely aligned to liberal feminism. Jenny Fields, his premier feminist character, for example, is dedicated to equality, and much of Dr. Larch's argument in *The Cider House Rules* is based on the value of choice. Irving uses his novel to set up worlds in which his characters struggle against inequality and work to even the field between the genders.

Radical feminism, on the other hand, is often referenced by the slogan "The personal is political." According to Jaggar and Rothenberg, radical feminists believe that "women's subordination was more widespread than other forms of domination, existing in virtually every known society, that it caused more suffering and damage than other systems of domination, and that it was more recalcitrant to change because it was more deeply established in individual psyches and social practices" (120). Instead of seeing sexual and reproductive issues as matters of personal choice, as liberals do, radicals see them as "deeply political" because they are systematically controlled by organized patriarchal power (Jaggar and Rothenberg 121). The feminist beliefs espoused in Irving's fiction often run counter to many of these radical feminist beliefs. Irving does not often place emphasis on the sociopolitical causes and consequences of gender issues as a radical feminist writer would; rather, he prefers to isolate those issues to the experiences of individuals who each has the power to choose the way he or she will deal with sexual issues. The radical feminists in his novels, such as the Ellen Jamesians, are often the targets of Irving's criticism.

Investigating the various conformities and incongruities between Irving's version of feminism, liberal feminism, and radical feminism suggests that he favors a liberal brand of feminism he views as intellectual but non-threatening over a radical feminist

activism that he sees as proactively seeking political gain. As his version of politics attracts a reading public that buys and read millions of his novels, Irving's views on feminism are worth a closer look.

### **Irving's History: Personal, Literary, Critical**

John Irving was born in 1942 in Exeter, New Hampshire, a town very similar to Steering, Dairy, and Heart's Rock, the small New England towns in *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *The Cider House Rules*. After graduating from high school in 1961, he briefly attended the University of Pittsburgh and Harvard. Beginning in 1963, he moved to study in Vienna, another setting that appears in *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*. After moving back to the United States, Irving graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1964.

As his Masters thesis at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, Irving wrote *Setting Free the Bears*, the tale of two friends who set off on a road trip in Vienna to trace and replicate the history of the incidents that took place at the Vienna Zoo during World War II. The novel was published in 1968 to good reviews but not many sales. Irving's second novel was *The Water Method Man*, the story of Bogus Trumper, an erstwhile literature student with a constantly infected urinary tract and complicated personal relationships. The novel was published in 1972. Like *Setting Free the Bears*, it was a critical success but not a commercial blockbuster. During the next three years, he wrote his third novel, the story of two couples caught in the tangles of a wife-swapping arrangement. *The 158-Pound Marriage*, published in 1973, exceeded his previous two novels in critical response but sold fewer copies than *Setting Free the Bears* and *The Water Method Man*.

Critical achievement, commercial success, and financial stability would all find Irving after the 1976 publication of *The World According to Garp*, which told the story of the life of T.S. Garp, a novelist. It sold millions of copies, many more than his previous novels combined, launching him to literary stardom. *Garp* was a bestseller and chosen as the American Book Association's paperback of the year. He followed up this success in 1981 with another popular novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which followed the Berry family's search to fulfill their father's dream of owning a hotel.

In the year following the publication of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving began to write his sixth novel. *The Cider House Rules* is the story of Homer Wells, an unadoptable orphan raised in an orphanage that also functions as a secret abortion clinic. This novel sold well and was received well by critics. In 1999, *The Cider House Rules* was made into a movie, a project that Irving had been working on for thirteen years. Irving wrote the screenplay for the movie, for which he won an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay<sup>1</sup>.

In 1989, Irving's sixth novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, was published. The story of the friendship between two boys, one a tiny, underdeveloped self-professed "instrument of God," was also well received by both the critics and the public. Since then, Irving has published three other novels. *A Son of the Circus* (1994) is Irving's longest novel, a complex entangling of plots centered on an Indian circus, the Bollywood movie industry, and a detective story line. *A Widow for One Year* (1998) is the story of a woman and her search for and resistance to the bonds of marriage and motherhood. Irving's latest novel is *The Fourth Hand*. Published in 2001, his latest fictional work is

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<sup>1</sup> The movie was also nominated for best art direction, best director, best editing, best original score, and best picture, and Michael Caine received the award for Best Supporting Actor.

the story of Patrick Wallingford, a newsman who loses his hand to a lion and falls in love with the wife of his hand transplant donor.

In addition to his nine novels and numerous short stories, Irving has written many non-fiction works. He has written introductions to Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*, critical work on his mentor Kurt Vonnegut, and many reviews of other novels. He has also published a collection of non-fiction works, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed* (1993), included in which is his short memoir, "The Imaginary Girlfriend." Irving's most recent nonfiction book is *My Movie Business*. Published in 1999, this memoir relates the thirteen-year-long odyssey Irving embarked upon to have *The Cider House Rules* made into a movie.

#### **Irving's Style: Victorianism in the New Millenium?**

In book reviews, jacket blurbs, and literary criticism, readers and critics often assert that John Irving is a neo-Victorian novelist. He is noted for the Victorian style of his widely scoped plots that follow character from birth to death, his comedy of situation, and his finely crafted minor characters. The *Boston Sunday Globe* writes that *The Cider House Rules* is an "old fashioned, big-hearted novel... with its epic yearning caught in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, somewhere between Trollope and Twain." More specifically, critics often associate Irving with Charles Dickens, one of his idols. About *Son of the Circus*, for example, Boyd Tonkin writes, "Irving can blend comedy and compassion with Dickensian brio." The *Orlando Sentinel* makes a similar assertion about *A Widow for One Year*, writing, "Irving's best books are Dickensian in their rich characters, plotting and language, and of course, in moving the reader" ("Paper Chase" F10) Entire articles have

been written analyzing the relationships between Irving's and Dickens' styles.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, *MacLean's* writes that Irving is "fighting for the title of America's modern-day Dickens" (Johnson 40). The terms "Dickensian" and "19<sup>th</sup> century" abound in critical writing about Irving.

More than any critic, Irving loves to compare himself to Dickens. A significant amount of his critical work has been on the Victorian master.<sup>3</sup> In Irving's writing about his style and influences, he always cites Dickens as his foremost model and favorite author. For example, while describing his grandfather's influence on *The Cider House Rules*, he writes that the medical texts his grandfather wrote were "more eye-opening than anything in Charles Dickens, although Dickens would ultimately prove to be a greater influence on my writing than Dr. Irving. Thank goodness" (*My Movie Business* 4). He alludes to Dickens' novels in many of his novels, with *David Copperfield* being read nightly in *The Cider House Rules*. However, Irving's 19<sup>th</sup> century-style novels often comment on 20<sup>th</sup> century controversies, such as the Vietnam War in *Owen Meany* and John F. Kennedy Jr.'s death in *The Fourth Hand*. While idolizing the Victorians for their skill with narrative, Irving infuses his works with references to events of more recent memory

Nowhere do Irving's anachronistic style and contemporary content collide more forcefully than in his portrayal of women. In her book on Victorian culture, Helena Mitchie blames all of Victorian culture for the stunted portrayal of women. She writes, "Victorianism remains the main enemy, the female body as it is represented in Victorian texts a straw woman, a wispy, insubstantial outline that it is the task of feminism to flesh

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<sup>2</sup> See Booth, Davis and Womack, and Shostack.

out” (127). However, Irving seems to have figured out a way to salvage the Victorian obsession with fallen women while reexamining the literary fates of those characters. To fully understand Irving’s rejection of this part of the Victorian tradition, we must first survey the Victorian attitude towards women and the archetypes of female representation in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature.

Critics have obsessively examined the Victorian woman, central to so many novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but stunted in her portrayal. The story of the Victorian fallen woman begins with the story of the societal mores that set women up in a position to fall. Women were seen as the keepers of the house, raising moral children and creating a sanctuary for their husbands, but never expressing feelings of sexuality. In his book *Sexual Repression and Victorian Literature*, Russell Goldfarb writes, “The Victorians wanted desperately to believe that their wives and mothers were sexually pure and so they place women on a towering pedestal the better to idolize them...” (41). This ideal was completely unachievable—to be an asexual mother is an unreachable standard—thus women in this culture were forced into violating this imagined ideal.

The venerated women of Victorian life and literature, however, did embody the incompatible titles of virgin and mother. Nina Auerbach writes that the Victorian “imaginative scheme does not believe in a human woman,” but only a heavenly creature with no human needs, only “suprahuman powers” (64). Women were believed to have no sexual feelings, and their interactions with men were strictly limited so as not to infringe upon their natural purity. Upper class women even bathed and delivered babies under mounds of chaste clothing. “Thus,” Goldfarb continues, “the Victorian woman became a

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<sup>3</sup> See “The King of the Novel: An Introduction to *Great Expectations*” and “An Introduction to *A Christmas Carol*.”

living embodiment of sexual sanctions” (41). These ideals strictly limited the characterizations of positive female characters in Victorian characters, as women who fit the standard would be prevented from doing anything worthy of a plot.

Women who were not simply angels of the home, and, whether by choice or by force, acted outside the expectations for Victorian women, were seen as “fallen,” almost always irretrievably. However, because these women could function outside the limits of the angelic ideal, they were prevalent as literary characters. One of the most prevalent portrayals of women in the later Victorian period was that of the victim, a woman transformed from pure to perverted, whether by voluntary extramarital love, coerced seduction, or rape. Auerbach writes that though most women in novels were transformed in some way, “Generally the fallen woman must die at the end of her story, perhaps because death rather than marriage is the one implacable human change, the only honorable symbol of her fall’s transforming power” (161). She writes that this ending is further indicative of the Victorian culture’s denial of female sexuality and fear of female power, the same factors that prompted the society to place women in social confinement (157). To allow women to transform from angelic to sexually empowered would admit that women had power, and that admission would have destroyed the basic fundamentals of Victorian gender ideals.

Because those Victorian gender ideals concentrate so heavily on the woman’s control and suppression of her body, it is not surprising that characterizations of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature concentrate on the body. The fallen woman falls because of her bodily trespasses against the moral codes, and physical trespasses were directly tied to moral trespasses. Any woman who put her body into public use or display was surely

corrupt. Though the body was in the forefront of these assumptions, Mitchie notes that discussion of the body itself was rare. She writes, "Although many, even most, Victorian novels center on a physically beautiful heroine and trace the disposition of her body in either marriage or death, the body itself appears only as a series of tropes or rhetorical codes that distance it from the reader in the very act of its depiction (5). The body was shrouded in either ignorance or imagined ideals, not in detailed description.

Though the Victorian period is typically characterized as sexually repressive, especially of women, the fact remains that people did have sex, including women, and some probably enjoyed it. The Victorian standard applied directly to upper-class women; a vast majority of women in Victorian England, the working class, could never have aspired to the ideal of womanhood. Outward denial of sexuality then, must have been necessary to hide ordinary people's everyday sex lives. As Goldfarb argues, "The truth is, of course, the Victorian age was obsessed with hiding sex, and this obsession accounts for the extraordinary pressures the age brought upon society to satisfy its compulsion" (21). Thus, there was a tension between real-life sexuality and sexuality in the Victorian social and literary imagination.

Though Irving admires the literary style of this period, his body of work shows that he will not emulate the Victorian's disguised sexuality in his writing. His novels often celebrate sexuality and sexual empowerment for women, ideas that would never have been tolerated in a popular writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through his pointed and prominent use of sexuality and sexual violence, Irving refuses to replicate the gap Victorian culture entertained between real life and literature. He uses literature to comment on the sexual issues of our time, not to hide them.

Nina Auerbach and Judith Fryer, among other contemporary critics, have noted that even within the stereotypical portrayals of women during the American and Victorian period, writers often left room for the possibility of the women characters to subvert those stereotypes. Writers could write women with compelling strength and emotional appeal even within the archetypes; as Auerbach writes, all of the female character patterns entail an “otherworldly power (4). Irving takes the feminist possibilities of the Victorian fallen woman and brings that power to the forefront through his creation of women who fight their way out of fallenness.

#### **Irving’s Politics: Feminism, Male Authors, and Literary Theory**

While he attempts to write in the classic tradition of Dickens and his 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries, Irving’s portrayal of women is more heavily informed by liberal and radical feminist ideas of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century than it is by the “fallen woman” archetype of the Victorians. One general theme in critical writing about Irving is the vague assertion that “feminists like his books.” However, a person cannot simply be termed a “feminist;” it is an overly broad term that ignores the various specific interests that various groups of feminists have (Gubar 8). Therefore, it is important to examine both Irving’s writing and the public responses to his form of feminism to determine what specific aspects of feminist beliefs Irving subscribes to and which he dismisses.

Not long after *Garp*’s publication, *Ms.* magazine cited him as one of their “heroes” for “integrating feminism as a major philosophical theme” (qtd. in Harter and Thompson 2). Other critics and popular publications write in passing that Irving is a feminist writer. Debra Shostak, for example, notes that Irving’s work has a “sensitivity to female experience.” In an article titled, “Iron John: Stepping into the Lion’s Den with

John Irving— Our Almost-Canadian Writer, Wrestler and Macho-Feminist Guy,” Brian Johnson calls him “ a kind of macho feminist, a vocal champion of free choice who makes heroines of obdurate women.”

Because of Irving’s unapologetic support of pro-choice concerns in his writing, movies, and his controversial Oscar acceptance speech supporting free choice for women, his liberal views on abortion have also taken prominence in popular media portrayal of the novelist. Not surprisingly, Irving’s pro-choice statements have drawn significant disapproval from right-wing religious writers. For example, in *America*, Paul McNellis writes that Irving sees “abortion as a sacramental rite of passage, akin to confirmation or bar mitzvah” and also that “[Irving] doesn't necessarily regard incest as a problem” (16). In *The Human Life Review*, Chris Weinkopf calls the movie version of *The Cider House Rules* a “feel-good abortion flick” that “promotes the culture of death” (125). Though being a proud enemy of pro-life publications is not an automatic feminist qualification, it does show that Irving’s political messages are discussed seriously by people at both ends of the political spectrum.

However, Irving has also taken fire from feminists on the left. Not long after *Garp* was published, novelist Marilyn French published an article titled, “The Garp Phenomenon,” a skeptical look at Irving’s purportedly feminist fiction. She praises Irving for creating a world with androgyny and equality between individuals—a personal vision where the women are independent, interesting, and admirable. But, this personal world contradicts real world violence towards women, and because that violence does not affect Garp’s personal life, French argues that Irving sees feminism as unnecessary. She argues that Irving makes the Ellen Jamesians “the villains of his book,” writing feminism as “an

aberration, the insane revenge of unsexual people against sexual ones, a self-destructive cult of hatred against well-intentioned kindly men simply because they are men” (15). She concludes this discussion saying that if the world really were androgynous and equal, we would not need feminism, but because it is not, Irving’s criticisms against feminism are unfounded.

Irving received even fiercer opposition after he published an opinion piece in *The New York Times Book Review* titled, “Pornography and the New Puritans.” Written in response to the proposed pornography victim’s compensation bill presented to Congress by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Irving states, “These are censorial times,” lambasting the bill for supporting the connections between sexually explicit publications and sexual crimes (1). Irving concludes, “We have many new Puritans in our country today; they are as dangerous to freedom of expression as the old Puritans ever were. An especially sad thing is, a few of those new Puritans are formerly liberal thinking feminists” (24). Irving’s article garnered responses both in support and dissent. Some readers called his article “a brilliant effort” and “essential reading” (Mitford 15; Caine 16). Others, however, said that Irving is “falling into a new age of feminist bashing” and that his essay is “an attack on a feminist he constructs” (DeCrow 16; Rutledge 16). A few weeks later, the same publication published a number of responses, featuring a letter from anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin, a founder of the anti-pornography bill Irving had criticized. Dworkin concludes, “In defending pornography as if it were speech, liberals defend the new slavers” (15). This extensive debate shows that Irving’s political views on feminism have reached a great audience, but occasionally his beliefs raise the ire of certain feminists.

Despite Irving's high-profile involvement in feminist debate, and despite the fact that his fiction often engages feminist controversy and politics, an analysis of the feminist bases of Irving's work has yet to be undertaken. French's article addressed Irving from a feminist point-of-view, but now twenty years and many novels later, an updated examination would provide a more in-depth look at Irving's body of work from a feminist perspective.

Because feminist criticism as a whole has long privileged the female text and sometimes ignored or reviled male authors of the past, using its theories to examine Irving's work is a challenge. However, using feminist criticism to examine popular male works of today is one of the few ways to gauge what progress feminist theory has made to influence contemporary male writers. Feminist criticism at the time of Irving's first publication was dominated by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), which "made a frontal attack on the overt misogyny of much privileged literature," literature that she saw as both ignoring women, capitalizing on their oppression, and thus contributing to sexism (Todd 21). During this time, male texts were ignored as a possible source of feminism, and in fact reviled as the source of sexism. Mary Eagleton writes that in some feminist theory, "any pleasure the woman gained from the male text was ascribed to false consciousness, masochism, or the infantile desire to continue pleasing daddy" (18). As seen in the media, however, some feminists do enjoy Irving's novels, and examining his portrayal of women might reveal if his work is enjoyed because it is genuinely feminist or if behind the media's attachment of that label lurk more conservative leanings.

Throughout the 1970s feminist literary scholarship concentrated on revisionist reading, exposing male texts of the past for their sexist portrayals and resurrecting female

texts from previously negative criticism (Todd 24). During this time, many of the works that Irving enjoys, Victorian novels by men, were being criticized and many new female novelists of the period were being re-discovered and resurrected from the criticism of their time period. Because Irving's texts can be seen as revisionist readings and writings of the Victorian period, and because his portrayals of women are often counter to the feminine domestic ideal, recent feminist theory is an appropriate starting place for an examination of his work.

Maria Lauret writes, "Feminist fiction addresses its readership in ways which seek to challenge prevailing cultural definitions of gender..." (88). According to this concise definition, it would seem that the writers, readers, and critics of feminist fictions could be male or female. Only recently, though, has the topic of men as feminists been raised. In the beginning, modern feminism was a women-only endeavor simply because men did not often choose to participate. However, "currently feminism is experiencing a flurry of male attention" (Eagleton 17). Some feminist critics are wary of this new topic. Todd writes, "The question of men in feminism often seems to resolve itself either into an effort to make women into something else or into the issue of masculinity..." (118). Eagleton is less critical about the idea of men in feminism because according to its most central ideals, feminism will not allow men to change its goals: "Feminism is the one discourse where men cannot play the star part" (13). Though their potential role is controversial, some men are now interested in feminism. Debate on the subject is not plentiful, but it is heated because feminists cannot seem to find a place where they feel comfortable having men participate, but most are not willing to exclude men's participation, either.

For instance, in her response to Irving's anti-censorship essay, one of Andrea Dworkin's main arguments against Irving is that because he is a man, he cannot understand the position of women against pornography. This is a central point in the debate surrounding men in feminism, an argument taken up by Stephen Heath, one of the most often noted scholars of men in feminism. Addressing the problem of how men can participate in feminism in his essay "Male Feminism," his first statement is, "Men's relation to feminism is an impossible one" (193). The contradictions surrounding this issue are numerous and complicated. Heath writes that men cannot participate in feminism without the possibility of somehow, even unknowingly, exerting the power and influence that they already have, even if it is that power and influence that they seek to demean. He also questions the possible pornographic effects that might arise should men attempt to address some of feminism's sexual issues. Is there any way for men to address women and sex without any voyeuristic undertones? (197). Because Irving's novels often address women's sexuality, and this issue is one of the points that leads writers to call him a feminist, the points that Heath raises certainly questions whether Irving can be called a feminist by the academic definition of the word. Close inspection of Irving's attitudes towards feminism in his novels answers those questions, showing that Irving is only a provisional feminist eager to criticize interpretations of feminism he finds distasteful.

Heath does outline several considerations that must be examined if men are to take an active role in feminism. If men want to participate as feminists, they must be willing to question their own masculinity and their own possible complicity in women's oppression (Heath 194). He concludes that with care, there is a place in feminism for

men. He writes, "Feminism is a subject for women, who are, precisely, its subjects, the people who make it, it is their affair. Feminism is also a subject for men, what it is about obviously concerns them; they have to make it their affair, to carry it through into [their] lives" (201). Men's main role in feminism, then, is to examine their role as men. Most of the connections between Irving and feminism have been made based on his portrayal of women, but his portrayal of men also reveals that some of Irving's success as a feminist writer is centered in his portrayals of masculinity.

Obviously, something about Irving's brand of feminism appeals to the reading public. But, as Lauret notes, some novels "which have been read and praised as feminist texts, but... were strongly influenced by, and are in their functioning complicit with, the anti-feminist backlash..." (165). So, what may be popularly termed feminist fiction may not, upon closer examination, turn out to be such. While Irving's politics are not always in line with radical feminism, they are obviously appealing to trends in liberal feminism. This discrepancy raises many questions about the differences between radical and liberal feminism, and what examining Irving's body of work can tell us about feminist beliefs in the general reading public.

Eagleton notes that some people argue that "what is happening in literature parallels what is happening in other areas of society. Thus... if one finds examples of sexism in literature, then these are a good indication of a wider malaise" (17). According to this logic then, the popularity of a writer concerned with feminist issues indicates that general readers find something appealing about his treatment of those issues. Closer examination of those views, both when they coincide with radical and liberal feminism and where they depart, may reveal more about what brand of feminism the public is

interested in reading about. When they read Irving, they are reading a gentle form of feminism that examines the abstract notions of sex and gender, but only cerebrally, never suggesting that political activity is the best route for feminist action.

An examination of the feminist issues being raised in Irving's work starts with his female characters. Irving's female characters have gone through an evolution from being abstract and one-dimensional to being the main character in *A Widow for One Year*. In his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, the only female character who affects the plot is Gallen, a young, sexy girl of long amber locks but short characterization. As Josie Campbell writes, "Gallen, the third major character in *Bears*, is given short shrift indeed," though Campbell notes that Gallen is the most compassionate of all the characters (22). The two main female characters in *The Water Method Man*, Trumper's wife Biggie and his girlfriend Tulpen, are much more developed and "far more sympathetic than the men" (Campbell 43). However, they still exist mainly to react to Trumper's foolishness—they bug him about paying the power bill, fixing the broken window screens, or having a baby. But, as Harter and Thompson point out, in taking these roles of management and responsibility over the hapless Trumper, Biggie and Tulpen are really the only two adults in the novel (48). In these first two novels, the women are not portrayed negatively; they simply are not integral to the plots. They populate the background of male characters' stories, though sometimes the women are more interesting than their male counterparts.

In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, however, the women characters play vital roles. In the story of a *menage-a-quatre*, Irving develops the two wives in the spouse-swapping scheme more fully than in his previous two novels. In fact, "while Edith is perhaps not a fully realized character, she represents a new phase in Irving's development: the self-

directed, self-assured woman” (Harter and Thompson 65). Thus, in putting Utch and Edith on equal footing male characters, *The 158-Pound Marriage* is the first of Irving’s novels to create indispensable female characters who are not only important to the plot, but also meaningfully developed.

Irving’s first novel to have central female characters is *The World According to Garp*, and each novel since has included female characters who play integral roles in the plot. In the three novels that followed *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Irving’s female characters are not just realistic; they are strong, dauntless, and full of life. But in addition to the personal strength of such women, at least one character from each of the novels—(Ellen James in *Garp*, Franny Berry in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and Melony and Rose in *The Cider House Rules*)—share another similarity—each of them is raped or sexually abused in some way. At first glance, this pattern may appear to bear a resemblance to the victimized woman trend in much of Victorian literature. What distinguishes Irving’s work from the stereotypical Victorian portrayal of women, however, is that these characters not only survive their trauma, but also conquer it, often seeking revenge against their attackers. Harter and Thompson write about this motif:

Drawn to the female victim as he reminds us Thomas Hardy was to Tess, Irving admits to a kind of obsession. And while his own analogy helps explain, for example, the ubiquitous rape motifs (often graphically portrayed) in Irving’s narratives and the manipulative relationships that degrade the humanity of women characters, it does not explain what occurs to shift Irving’s focus from “woman-as-victim” to “woman-as-hero” (Harter and Thompson 13).

Irving's choice to portray women dealing with trauma aligns him with his 19<sup>th</sup> century heroes, but his decision to transform his female characters distinguishes him from his Victorian models.

Irving's reputed feminism is often attached to his novels' portrayals of rape, abortion, and violence against women, and a significant amount of recent feminist writing has concentrated on the female body. The theory behind feminism's concentration on the body may show why Irving's female characters are often confronted with conflicts surrounding their bodies. In their anthology of feminist writing, *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury write that feminist theory often focuses on the female body because "historically, women have been determined by their bodies; their individual actions and awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the body in larger social frameworks" (1). Irving's work and feminist writings share this interest in the female body and how it is influenced, constructed, and broken down by society's myths about women. Irving's work questions these forces in both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, so feminist theory might shed some light on the feminist messages of his novels.

Analyzing Ellen James, Franny Berry, Melony, and Rose Rose in the context of feminist theory helps explain the impetus behind Irving's characters' transformations. Each novel focuses on feminism in some incarnation, with some characters portraying feminism as benevolent and restorative and other characters portraying it as violent and hypocritical. These characters, in the context of their novels, hold the answers to Irving's juxtaposition of Victorian style and feminist-leaning content. Irving dramatically rewrites the Victorian fallen woman according to a version of feminism he formulates in his

novels—a feminism that questions society's notions of gender but eschews political activism in favor of individual change.

**Chapter Two**  
**Radical Politics or Personal Vision?: Jenny Fields, Ellen James, and Feminism in**  
***The World According to Garp***

As he was writing *Garp*, Irving didn't know who was going to be the main character- Jenny or Garp ("Imaginary" 118). Jenny Fields certainly could have carried the novel on her own. She is a fascinating and unique character, and her characterization combines encounters with sex and violence from the beginning of the novel, when she stabs a man in a movie theater, to the end, when she is shot and killed. On the other hand, she is maternal and caring, facing social disapproval as she mothers not only her son, but also countless abused women. Her unique views on sex, parenting, and feminism are treated with immense respect in the novel, and she becomes Irving's ideal feminist, though she is uncomfortable with the term and does not use it to describe herself. Irving portrays Jenny in such an exalted way that we can assume her views reflect the feminist message Irving intended the novel to send. By positioning Jenny as the exemplary feminist who will not identify with the movement she leads, Irving expresses sympathy with liberal feminist ideas but an anxiety with radical feminism itself, especially when it acts in an organized, public way towards a political goal.

Jenny first explains her unusual lifestyle choices, including her conception of Garp with a comatose patient, when she writes and publishes her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*. Her memoir begins with the words: "In this dirty-minded world, you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore—or fast on your way to becoming one or the other. If you don't fit either category, then everyone tries to make you think there is something wrong with you" (13). Jenny's autobiography is quoted frequently, becoming a sort of feminist textbook in the novel, elucidating Jenny's philosophies on sex and

gender. She launches a severe critique on the society that places impossible expectations on women, and if women do not live up to these expectations, their sexuality is “suspect.” They can be someone’s wife, and have no free will or potential for independence, or they can have autonomy and be automatically assumed to be a whore. Jenny’s opinions that women are saddled with unrealistic gender expectations and are expected to depend on men are aligned with many general feminist concepts, showing that Irving respects these feminist beliefs, as well.

The main arguments of Jenny’s autobiography question whether a woman’s sexual choices should determine her value. Jenny believes that every woman’s body is her own, not to be controlled by anyone. She believes that women should have access to abortions and the right to sell sex, though she doesn’t understand why they would want to. When Garp tells her that prostitution is illegal in places, Jenny responds, “Why can’t a woman use her body the way she wants to? If someone wants to pay for it, it’s just one more crummy deal” (136). Irving constructs Jenny’s views on sex to stand in direct opposition to the values that controlled Victorian views of women. Victorian standards valued women for their sexual purity or censured them for their sexual independence. Victorian fiction is full of sexual suspects punished for doing much less than what Jenny does. Though her autobiography never draws direct parallels, her description of America in the 1950s mirrors the world of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Irving writes Jenny as a voice against the values of both of those worlds, and her voice is one of the strongest in the novel.

Though *Garp’s* society interprets Jenny’s views, as expressed in her dialogue and the quoted portions of *A Sexual Suspect*, as feminist, Jenny is uneasy with that

association. In an interview about her book, Irving explains Jenny's feelings on being labeled "feminist": "Jenny Fields... felt discomfort at the word *feminism*... She said shyly that she'd only thought she made the right choice about how to live her life, and since it had not been a popular choice, she felt goaded into saying something to defend it" (185). Irving portrays Jenny as being far too independent to need to identify with a group. She does not follow what feminists say she should do; she does and believes what she wants, and Irving sets these two choices as mutually exclusive.

In the description of the same interview, Irving again emphasizes Jenny's independence as if it were counter to feminism: "As for Jenny, she felt only that women—just like men—should at least be able to make conscious decisions about the course of their lives; if that made her a feminist, she said, then she guessed she *was* one" (185-6). Jenny accepts her association with feminists only by default, thus expressing the novel's uncertainties about feminism. Jenny is revered for her independence, and her reluctance to identify with feminism stems from this independence. Irving again expresses the effect that her vehement self-sufficiency has on her views of feminism when Garp quotes her: "She said, 'I hate being called one, because it's a label I didn't choose to describe my feelings about men or the way I write'" (488). Jenny's views on feminism, taken together with Irving's obvious veneration of her, suggest that Irving considers feminism and independence as two incompatible philosophies. According to this philosophy, a feminist association would be for people without independence, people who need to follow a group. Indeed, the pitfalls of the group mentality become a theme in *Garp*, and Irving often characterizes feminism as a group mentality incompatible with individual choice.

Though she is critical of feminists as a group, Jenny herself becomes the leader of a group of women, even if only reluctantly. Her house at Dog's Head Harbor becomes a refuge for abused and unhappy women. Jenny's popularity results in numerous speaking engagements, and Irving characterizes the devoted group that travels with her in two ways. One group is made up of women who are hurt and need her help, allowing her to be a nurse forever. Jenny's other groupies "are other occasional figures who felt they were part of what would be called the women's movement; they often wanted Jenny's support or her endorsement" (188). The group that populates Dog's Head Harbors makes for a questionable population of feminists. Irving's descriptions imply that feminists come in one of two varieties. Either they need help, and Jenny can be the ideal feminist by helping them, or they are manipulative, wanting Jenny's support for only their political gain. Irving's feminists are usually needy or selfish.

By placing Jenny—a character with presence whom Irving says could have carried the novel—as a "feminist" apathetic about feminism, Irving shows that though he highlights women's issues, he is also wary of feminism. Irving obviously sides with Jenny's form of feminism. She is strong, self-reliant, and opinionated. She does exactly what she wants to do, but always has time to help someone in need. Jenny's form of personal, humanitarian feminism does not bow to a feminism Irving portrays as regimented and inflexible. Irving draws parallels between Jenny's stoic, silent persona and the Virgin Mary; Miller explains, "Jenny does, indeed manage an almost virgin birth, and Irving makes no effort to disguise the Virgin Mary parallels—both women are 'sexual suspects,' celibate, and heroically generous; both lose their sons at the age of thirty-three" (Miller 95). This parallel not only venerates Jenny, but also exposes the

society she rebels against for its hypocrisy. Her form of erstwhile feminism rejects sexual mores, exposing the speciousness of society's sexual expectations while denying affiliation with the feminist label.

ii

Another hero of *The World According to Garp* is Ellen James, who only appears in the novel during the last 100 pages, after Jenny's death has removed the novel's primary symbol of feminism. However, Irving uses Ellen and the story of her rape and mutilation to exert a constant pressure on the entire novel. In *Garp*, Irving writes Ellen and her trauma to represent the worst tragedy that could happen to a woman; not only is she brutally raped, but also her tongue is cut out, so she cannot tell her story. The readers first hear about Ellen James long before she appears as a character in the novel. Jenny describes what happened to Ellen the first time that Garp meets an Ellen Jamesian—that is, a member of the cult society of women who mutilate themselves in imitation of Ellen's ordeal. She says,

Two men raped [Ellen James] when she was eleven years old... Then they cut her off so she couldn't tell anyone who they were or what they looked like. They were so stupid that they didn't know an eleven-year-old could write. Ellen James wrote a very careful description of the men, and they were caught, and they were tried and convicted. In jail, someone murdered them (190).

Though Ellen's rapists face severe punishment for their crimes, Ellen cannot use her voice, her best weapon, to fight for herself or other women.

Ellen's experience reverberates through Garp's rescue of a ten-year-old rape victim he encounters while running in a park. As the girl can only scream and make

frantic hand gestures, not talk, Garp is at first afraid that her tongue has been cut out: “Apparently, her words were gone; or her *tongue*, Garp thought, recalling Ellen James” (199). Garp has the same thought when he comes across the little girl’s attacker, whom he calls the “Mustache Kid.” When Garp asks the girl’s rapist, “How’d you ever get free?” the kid replies, “Nobody proved nothing... That dumb girl wouldn’t even talk.’ Garp thought again of Ellen James with her tongue cut off at eleven” (207). Irving uses this scene to expand Ellen’s story in several ways. First, in just one small scene, it proves that what happened to Ellen is not an isolated case. It happened to this little girl, and as the Mustache Kid is growing another mustache, it will happen again. The story of the young girl also furthers speechlessness as a theme in *Garp*. Though this girl’s tongue is left intact, she cannot speak. In Irving’s portrayal, speechlessness is not just a physical consequence of rape, but a psychological one, as well. Rape silences women in more ways than one, as Irving seems to understand it.

Through the scene with the young rape victim in the park, Irving amplifies the mythological proportions of Ellen’s effect on Garp before Garp even meets her. Though Garp is skeptical and even dismissive of the feminists who surround his mother, he is haunted by the story of Ellen herself. He hates the Ellen Jamesians, but he is affected deeply by Ellen’s story; For both Irving and Garp, Ellen’s rape represents unequivocal proof of the horror suffered by women. Not even Garp, who is skeptical of the Ellen Jamesians, can deny that what happened to Ellen James was horrible, and that any society that could produce brutalizers who would rape an 11-year-old is flawed. Indeed, it is in light of this understanding that Garp devotes himself first to Ellen James, and then to continuing his mother’s charity work at Dog’s Head Harbor.

Though Ellen James has come to represent many things to Garp, he first meets her in person only when he is fleeing his mother's funeral. Off to the side of the crowd of women, including Ellen Jamesians, "seeming to have no connection with them," he sees "a wraithlike girl, or barely grown-up child; she was a dirty blond-headed girl with piercing eyes the color of coffee-stained saucers—like a drug-user's eyes, or someone long involved in hard tears" (502). Garp later meets her on an airplane, where she is described as a "nonviolent waif," and "very thin, her girlish hands bony..." (506). Physically, Ellen pales in comparison to her celebrated status, both to Garp and to the Ellen Jamesians. To both Garp and the Ellen Jamesians, Ellen has come to be more than just a girl; she represents their beliefs about their world. In reality, however, Ellen is not a larger than life character; rather, Irving draws her as an unremarkable person trying to live after a remarkable tragedy made her a celebrity that she did not ask to be. For the first of many times in the novel, Irving draws a parallel between Garp and the Ellen Jamesians. Both have piled mythical significance onto a real person whom they've never met, and Irving shows that both have jumped on her "story" to represent their world.

Before Garp ever meets Ellen James, she is larger than life, a legend more imposing than the frail girl she turns out to be. Ellen occupies this mysterious status in the minds of the characters, but he never fleshes out Ellen as a person. Though Ellen is just a young woman trying to survive, she becomes a symbol before she ever becomes a character. Garp writes in defense of her, "Ellen James is *not* a symbol," but in the novel, she is (552). Ellen is essential to *The World According to Garp*; she is the symbol around whom the novel rotates. She functions perfectly as a symbol, a haunting reminder of the best and worst of human capacity. However, perhaps the greatest flaw of her

characterization is that even after her introduction as a human—and not merely symbolic—presence in the novel, she does not really become a character. In a novel in which rape is such a central theme and plot device, the only rape victim character, the central human example of that tragedy, remains swathed in second-hand rumor for most of the story while Garp, whose feelings on women are not always admirable, is characterized more fully.

Ellen's story is central to *Garp's* theme of speechlessness. Her attack symbolizes the worst damage men could do to a woman; they violate her sexuality before she even knows what it is and then prevent her from ever regaining her sense of self through her own voice. Thus, Ellen represents the ultimate tragedy, being forced into speechlessness, losing the tool of speech to heal herself. Irving's recognition of the effects that rape has on voice is similar to a prevailing feminist view. Feminists often refer to Ovid's ancient myth of Procne and Philomela; "Philomela is raped by her sister Procne's husband, Tereus, who cuts out her tongue so that she cannot speak of the deed" (Campbell 85). Philomela does "speak" of her rape through a tapestry that she sends to her Procne, who avenges her sister by killing their son and serving him to Tereus. After this revenge dinner, Tereus attempt to kill both sisters, but they are all turned into birds (Tereus an ugly bird, Procne a sparrow, and Philomela a nightingale). Voicelessness, as in the myth, is an often-cited result of rape. As Elizabeth Ward notes, muteness, and speech disorders are common patterns noted in victims of rape (155). In this way, Irving's characterization is somewhat aligned to contemporary feminist thought, as Ellen physically loses her voice when she is raped, but regains it to express herself through poetry, as Philomela expresses herself in her tapestry.

While rape can impair speech, speech is also seen as one of the ways that rape as a societal phenomenon can be destroyed. Rape has so long been a taboo subject, considered a personal, family issue, but many feminists believe that one way it can be stopped is if women begin to speak against it. Speaking specifically about father-daughter rape, Ward writes, “Like a clean wind blowing away fog, this process of women remembering and asking and talking and validating the truth... is the only way in which the depths of silence and blindness that have crippled most victims are going to be lifted” (206). However, Ellen does not use her new voice to fight against rape in the political arena, as that would be too radical for a liberal feminist.

Though she cannot use her voice, Ellen does use her capacity to love as a way to heal. Through Jenny Fields, Irving has already shown that the exemplar feminist is a nurturer, and so is Ellen James. She becomes a member of the Garp family, bringing her silent wisdom into their world in a time of pain and loss. Ellen is also very maternal; having worked at a daycare center, she is skilled at mothering Jenny Garp, Garp and Helen’s third child (514). Ellen James also represents the greatest recovery, as she becomes a renowned poet. The epilogue states, “Ellen James would grow up to be a writer. She was “the real thing” as Garp had guessed” (584). Ellen fights her trauma by loving others, and fights her voicelessness by putting her voice into words. After Jenny is killed, Irving uses Ellen to fill the role of the ideal feminist who uses her writing to fight her battles. However, while nurturing and writing are valued in Irving’s fiction, Ellen does not use them to fight against rape as a larger phenomenon. Ellen James and Jenny Fields are successful feminists according to Irving’s reserved, liberal sensibilities, but they do not function as successful feminists on a larger scale. On a personal level, they

overcome their own barriers and live according to their beliefs, but they never act in a way that will change the society whose expectations caused their pain in the first place.

iii

Though Ellen James and Jenny Fields are the two most compelling female characters in *The World According to Garp*, the main character, the one who faces the main struggle with feminism, is the novel's namesake. In many ways, Irving makes Garp the perfect example of the enlightened husband. He keeps house and provides the primary care for Walt and Duncan so that Helen can complete her education, teach full-time and write her books and critical articles. In fact, Helen "had agreed to have a child only if Garp would agree to take care of it" (187). Garp takes these traditionally female-oriented duties very seriously, never once making Helen feel guilty. In his family life, Garp is attuned to the changing roles of women and accepting of taking a nontraditional male role in his home

Garp's family life, however, differs greatly from his political views and his treatment of people outside his family. His role-reversal in the household is in direct opposition to many of his opinions about women's rights activism. Though Garp switches traditional roles with Helen, he "has not achieved much understanding or sympathy for women's problems—he exhibits only impatience at this mother's activities" (Miller 117). He is skeptical and resentful of his mother's fame as a feminist, and he holds even stronger negative opinions about the feminists who surround her, especially the Ellen Jamesians. Garp's sexual predilection for baby-sitters, too, shows that his feelings towards women are dangerously ambiguous. Throughout the novel, however, Garp's experiences force him to come to a greater understanding of women's positions in

society, and his dislike of radical feminists and his manipulative treatment of women softens and gradually disappears. Garp's transformation from a rabid enemy of the Ellen Jamesians to a pacifistic supporter of women's causes replicates many of the novel's views on feminism. Most interestingly, however, through Garp's journey to acceptance of feminism, Irving traces a man's struggle with his own masculinity; an endeavor that Stephen Heath reminds us is the most beneficial feminist work a man can do. Therefore, in *The World According to Garp*, Garp himself is the indicator of the novel's stance towards feminism and men's place in it.

For the first portion of the novel, Garp seems to be very supportive of women; he adores his mother and undertakes household duties so that Helen can pursue her interests. However, when Irving introduces the Ellen Jamesians to the novel, Garp's vehement, nearly fanatical hatred of them shows a break in his otherwise positive appearance. Irving's description of these women sides with Garp's disapproval. Irving describes the first Ellen Jamesian that Garp meets as a "large, silent, sullen woman who lurked in the doorway of Garp's apartment"(189) Garp calls her his mother's "tough dyke escort" (189). When Garp asks about the women's silence, Jenny responds, "People in the Ellen James Society have their tongues cut *off*. To protest what happened to Ellen James" (191). From the moment that Garp gains this knowledge, his opinion of the Ellen Jamesians is set. He despises the women and their need to express themselves through public, political actions—actions that would be considered based on radical beliefs. He fights a private war with them, constantly begging his mother to ignore them and to cease her support of them. He publishes diatribes against them; he makes no secret of his

animosity not only for the Ellen Jamesians' political goals, but also for the Ellen Jamesians themselves.

Garp's abhorrence of the Ellen Jamesians is heightened when he comes to know and love the real Ellen James. Garp believes that the Ellen Jamesians have used the girl's rape as a way of publicizing their own political agendas, never asking Ellen what part of it she wants. Because Garp has tremendous sympathy for Ellen and none for the Ellen Jamesians, Ellen James's opinion of the Ellen Jamesians is the one Garp respects the most. When Garp asks Ellen what she thinks about the activists, she replies, "I *hate* the Ellen Jamesians... I would never do this to myself... I want to talk; I want to say everything" (509). Though Ellen says that she hates the Ellen Jamesians, her very personal anger contrasts sharply to Garp's overzealous abhorrence that seems to come out of nowhere. No one could blame Ellen for her anger, and considering what they have done to her life, her calm, composed anger is surprisingly reserved. Garp's proactive, malevolent crusade against them seems out of place in comparison. In fact, his unwavering dedication to this idea strikes more of a resemblance to the single-mindedness of the Ellen Jamesians.

Both Garp and Ellen do have legitimate reasons to dislike the Ellen Jamesians. Garp loves Ellen and he wants to protect her from anything that hurts her. Later in the novel, she writes an essay called "Why I'm Not an Ellen Jamesian," outlining exactly how the Ellen Jamesians hurt her when they appropriated her name. The essay "made what the Ellen Jamesians did seem like a shallow, wholly political imitation of a very private trauma. Ellen James said that the Ellen Jamesians had only prolonged her anguish; they had made her into a very public casualty" (538). Ellen's analysis shows a

persuasive basis for her hatred, and Irving portrays her opinion on that group of women with a great deal of respect.

Ellen only publishes the essay because Garp pushes her to, however. Helen discourages him, but Garp is eager to do anything to discredit the Ellen Jamesians. Even Helen thinks that subconsciously, Garp pushes for the essay's publication not to help Ellen, but because "he wanted a kind of public humiliation of the Ellen Jamesians" (539). Garp will use any available means to shame Ellen Jamesians, even disregarding what might be best for Ellen. His intolerance reveals both the novel's discomfort with the Ellen Jamesians and Garp's own weaknesses and hypocrisy. He takes Ellen's private and personal pain and turns it into a shallow, public maneuver, just as he has accused the Ellen Jamesians of doing.

One of Garp's most obvious reasons for hating the Ellen Jamesians is that he associates them with the exploitation and assassination of his mother. He disliked all of the women who surrounded his mother only after her fame, but he singles out the Ellen Jamesians. Their radical nature angers him more than any other activists who seek out Jenny Fields: "The Ellen Jamesians represented, for Garp, the kind of women who lionized his mother and sought to use her to help further their crude causes" (192). He calls them her "sycophantic friends," really meaning something closer to "psycho-fanatic" (196). Garp's hatred of the Ellen Jamesians intensifies after Jenny is killed. Garp blames the Ellen Jamesians for associating Jenny with what he sees as an extreme form of feminism, an association he believes got her killed. Garp thinks,

It was madness that had killed Jenny Fields, his mother. It was extremism. It was self-righteous, fanatical, and monstrous self-pity. Kenny Truckenmiller was only

a special kind of moron: a true believer who was also a thug... And how was an Ellen Jamesian any different? Was not her gesture as desperate, and as empty of an understanding of human complexity? (536-7).

What he sees as extremism he associates with all forms of extremism, including the extreme hatred that killed his mother. Garp equates radical feminism with radical misogyny, lumping together all activists he sees as extreme.

Though she always supports women in need, regardless of their politics, even Jenny expresses some reservations and disagreement with the Ellen Jamesians' form of political statement. At Jenny's funeral, Garp remembers: "Jenny had finally admitted her disapproval of what they had done—perhaps only to Garp. 'They're making victims of themselves,' Jenny had said, 'and yet that's the same thing they're angry at men for doing to them. Why don't they just take a vow of silence, or never speak in a man's presence?' Jenny said. 'It's not logical: to maim yourself to make a point.' Jenny, always straightforward and no-nonsense, cannot excuse what she, and thus Irving, sees as irrationality.

Even aside from despising the Ellen Jamesians because his mother was killed, and because she too held reservations about them, Garp despises them for their radical views in general. Many times in the novel, he compares the Ellen Jamesians to anyone who holds extreme views and defends them with violence. Josie Campbell writes, "Garp is certainly no feminist and has little interest in politics. What he despises is the maniacal adherence to a cause or an idea, to the exclusion of everything. Thus, he sees the Ellen Jamesians... as horrifying" (79).

What makes this unquestioning defense of an idea even more offensive to Garp is the organization with which they carry out their ideals. The Ellen Jamesians operate underground, but they are closely knit and devoted. Garp never expresses outright fear of their organization, but his anxiety is often apparent. When Garp sees Margie Tallworth coming to his door to report Helen's affair with Michael Milton, he thinks she's an Ellen Jamesian "The next thing you know, Garp thought, they'll be organized like the religious morons who bring those righteous pamphlets about Jesus to one's very door" (350). Garp's fear of organized feminism harkens back to Jenny's discomfort at being associated with organized feminism, but Irving never quantifies what is so distasteful or alarming about being organized. Organization is not violent or offensive in itself, but Irving's uneasiness with organized feminism shows his apprehensiveness about feminism in general.

Though the novel as a whole presents a split view of feminism, glorifying individual feminists who stand for benevolence and vilifying those who defend feminism with force, Garp as a character eventually comes to terms with his hatred of the Ellen Jamesians. Garp must first feel something of a woman's experience, which happens when he goes to his mother's funeral in drag. Garp flees from the funeral in a taxi where the cabdriver spouts off with sexist comments of every variety. Garp may be only wearing women's clothing, but in his assumed persona, he feels the sting of every remark. When Garp hears the cabby say, "It took something like that shooting to show the people that the woman couldn't handle the job, you know?" he finally feels the full force of prejudice against women (504). Reilly writes, "Garp becomes more sympathetic towards the women's point of view when, at Roberta's insistence, he dresses as a woman to attend his

mother's funeral" (67). This is the first step to Garp understanding and forgiving the Ellen Jamesians, though this revelation will not occur for some time.

Eventually, Garp realizes that in his unwavering hatred, "he was rather blind about the Ellen Jamesians" (537). Jenny defends the Ellen Jamesians to Garp's initial hatred of them, and Garp respects his mother's opinions. She explains that not all Ellen Jamesians are trying to make a political statement. She says, "These women must have suffered, in other ways, themselves. That's what makes them want to get closer to each other...Rape is every woman's problem" (192). Because Garp hates the Ellen Jamesians for their political statements, but is sympathetic towards rape victims, he is somewhat persuaded by Jenny's defense. Later in the novel, as Ellen is publishing her essay, Irving offers this explanation for the Ellen Jamesians' self-mutilation again:

"For many of the Ellen Jamesians, the imitation of the horrible untonguing had not been "wholly political." It had been a most personal identification. In some cases, of course, Ellen Jamesians were women who had also been raped; what they meant was that they also felt as if their tongues were gone. In a world of men, they felt as if they had been shut up forever" (538-9).

Though Garp can forgive the Ellen Jamesians who have acted out of personal anguish, this acceptance is not wholly satisfactory. Garp and the novel as a whole still express wariness of women with politics. They can be feminists if they have had personal tragedies, and as long as they are still good to their families, but when they begin to organize, make noise, or especially act with force, they've gone too far. In this characterization, Irving is expressing acceptance of a kind, gentle feminism, but disapproval of any feminism that is too structured, confrontational, or scary.

Though it takes him some time to come to terms with his feelings on the Ellen Jamesians, at his mother's funeral Garp first realizes that his anger was misdirected. Garp is deeply moved by an Ellen Jamesian who gives a silent eulogy in Jenny's honor: "Garp, now touched by the mad woman in front of him, felt the whole history of the world's self mutilation—though violent and illogical, it expressed, perhaps, perhaps like nothing, a terrible hurt. 'I really am *hurt*,' said the woman's huge face, dissolving before him in swimmy tears" (498-9). Garp still believes that the Ellen Jamesians are crazy, but watching this gesture, he understands that the Ellen Jamesians self-imposed silence does make one persuasive statement. It proves to him their pain, and Garp has a deep sympathy for pain. This scene shows that though the novel still posits the Ellen Jamesians as "crazies" (498) their choice to remain forever silent is not completely in vain. Garp cannot ever truly know the painful and destructive effects of rape. But, when he sees that pain orchestrated with a literal rather than figurative silencing, he comes close to understanding it, as close as a man can get.

Garp and Ellen, the Ellen Jamesians' two biggest enemies, only partially accept their existence, but Irving implies that their half-hearted assent comes because Ellen and Garp are guilty of the same faults they see in the Ellen Jamesians. Garp and Ellen both accuse the Ellen Jamesians of making issues too black and white, of making everyone either an enemy or one of them, but they do the same things. Ellen's essay, for example, is as generalizing and hateful as the Ellen Jamesians are: "Ellen James' attack on them was as inconsiderate of the occasional individuals among the Ellen Jamesians as the action of the group had been inconsiderate of Ellen James" (539). While the Ellen Jamesians are willing to use Ellen's name without her permission, she generalizes about

all of them without knowing them either. Both parties are guilty of abusing people from a distance without considering them as individuals.

Garp, however, is the guiltiest. When Garp encounters the Mustache Kid rapist by chance, his first impulse is to attack him. Garp's wish to mutilate the Mustache Kid, even with young Duncan present, however, "is not more constructive than [the actions] of the Ellen Jamesians..." (Miller 115). Garp is as much inflammatory as they are, at times, as single-minded and selfish. Even Helen says to him, "You make people too angry. You get them all wound up. You *inflamm*"(541). She tells him that he writes in response to the Ellen Jamesians' published retorts to Ellen's essay to "*get* to them," to raise their ire, not to prove anything the public doesn't already know (554). In the Ellen Jamesians, Garp sees his own flaws, his tendency to generalize, criticize, and provoke, and when he rages against them, it is in a hypocritical mission to attack the same crimes he is guilty of.

Just as the focused anger gets some of the Ellen Jamesians killed, it is Garp's undoing as well. Campbell notes, "His adamant—and public—opposition to the fanaticism of the Ellen Jamesians is in part what gets him killed by Pooh Percy" (79). Ultimately, Irving does not advocate any group of people attaching themselves to an idea and defending it violently, or without regard for anyone's feelings. Not even Garp can get away with it. Just as Jenny Fields would have, Irving advocates a more palatable kind of activism—strong, but inoffensive.

By the end of the novel, both Ellen and Garp have come to terms with the Ellen Jamesians. In his apology for writing a public denunciation of the Ellen Jamesians, Garp writes, "Although I believe Ellen James was used by these women, who had little concern for the real-life Ellen James, I can see the *need* to use Ellen James in some way was

genuine and great” (562). He has seen the power of their pain, and he can then acknowledge the power they wield when they commandeer Ellen’s story. Even Ellen comes to see them in a different light. Ellen drops her defenses, forgives their public use of her tragedy, and even becomes friends with some of them. The Ellen Jamesians are not, however, ever really acknowledged in the novel for any attention they may have brought to the subject of rape; the idea is never even mentioned.

Though the Ellen Jamesians are disparaged and defended at various times in the novel, they are, by the ending, a mostly defunct group whose once powerful message has nearly disappeared. When Garp wants to kick the Ellen Jamesians out of Dog’s Head Harbor, “the other members of the board were more or less in agreement with him; Ellen Jamesians were not much admired—they never had been, and their radicalism (now) seemed growingly obsolete and pathetic” (534). Garp even feels somewhat sorry for the women who have sacrificed so much and are now waning in influence. In a half-hearted, mostly insincere attempt to keep Ellen from publishing her essay, he says “These women were sick, sad, confused, tortured, abused by others, and now self abused—but what point was there in criticizing them? Everyone will forget them in another five years” (540). Pooh Percy’s murder in the name of the Ellen Jamesians is the blow that finally takes the Ellen Jamesians out of the public view: “Garp’s murder drove them deeper underground, and the occasional surfacing over the years would be largely disguised, even embarrassed” (584). The final disbanding of the Ellen Jamesians shows the fate that Irving gives to feminists who are too radical; too extreme for the general public, they simply fade away.

The novel's overall disapproval of the Ellen Jamesians is shown most particularly in the characterization of the only Ellen Jamesian that Irving gives a name—Bainbridge “Pooh” Percy. From the time that Garp and the Percy's are children, Irving characterizes Pooh as bizarre, unpredictable, and warped. Irving first describes her: “Young Pooh was a strange, scary child” (100). She is an outcast from the Steering Academy crowd because she wets the bed and has to wear diapers until she is an adolescent. Poor Pooh Percy is rotten from the beginning, as if she were genetically predisposed to become Garp's killer. Her characterization can be seen as a microcosm for Irving's stance on all of the Ellen Jamesians because she is the only one Irving characterizes individually. So when her decision to join them is labeled as Bainbridge Percy's “recent madness—to become an Ellen Jamesian,” the novel posits the Ellen Jamesians as mentally deranged (574). Bainbridge Percy embodies all of the qualities Irving associates with the Ellen Jamesians: fearsome devotion, antisocial hostility, and a desire for publicity with murderous intent.

Thus, Irving's real message about the Ellen Jamesians, and radical feminism, is not about their individual mental-well-being; it is about their group mentality. He portrays radical feminism as being motivated by fear, lunacy, and selfishness, and devoid of any objective. According to Irving, radical feminism is in opposition to Jenny's type of helping, healing feminism. Not only is his characterization harsh, but as Marilyn French points out, it is not even realistic. She writes, “Women do not act this way, on the whole. Those who martyr themselves do it *instead of* opposing men, not *in order to* oppose them (15). Irving's drawing of the Ellen Jamesians is a parody, a caricature of radical feminism fueled by a fear of the power of organization. Irving understandably

writes against organized violence in Garp, such as the systematic excusing of rape, but he also groups organized feminism in with this dismissal.

Garp and the Ellen Jamesians are similar in their concentrated anger, but the difference emphasized in the novel— the difference that makes Irving see one group as heroic and the other as crazy— is who is on the side of normality and conformity and who is radical. In a letter to the editor, a woman writes that Irving's treatment of the Ellen Jamesians shows that "clearly, [Irving] would prefer that certain feminists just shut up," but this is a misreading (Sanders 16). Irving's novel mourns their loss of voice while wishing that they would tone down the power they have gotten in return for their sacrifice. Irving rarely picks out the Ellen Jamesians out for individual criticism; he mainly criticizes what he sees as mass lunacy. Irving's portrayal of Jenny Fields and Ellen James is very positive; he admires their individualism, their strength, and their eloquence. By advocating their version of feminism and theirs only, Irving supports a version of feminism without the means to enforce its goals, fight for progress, or change people's minds. The overall message in *The World According to Garp* is skeptical, even critical of organized, radical feminism. This harsh criticism is hard to take from a male author who seems to group feminists either as individual humanitarians or mobs of lunatics, especially when his symbolic radicals are too farcical to be believable.

Irving's most well-intentioned and effective feminist statement in Garp is his negative portrayal of the culture of masculinity. He criticizes the complicity of patriarchal power in rape and other issues of gender inequality. Garp's novel *The World According to Bensenhaver*, for example, portrays men in all of their worst manifestations—rapists, controlling husbands, so-called protectors crazy with their own power. Jilly Sloper, the

average readers whose opinion John Wolf trusts so dearly, says about Garp's novel, "You'd think it was *him* [the husband in *The World According to Bensenhaver*] who got raped, the way he went on and on. If you ask me, that's just like men: rape you half to death one minute and the next minute go crazy fussin' over who you're *givin'* it to—of your own free will! It's not *their* damn business, either way, is it?" (451). Garp is the hero of the novel, but Irving shows little respect for men in general.

Irving condemns even Garp for not suppressing his stereotypically male impulses. Though he takes rape very seriously, he knows that as a man, he is complicit in the patriarchal society that makes rape possible. Garp even comes dangerously close to rape in one case. He seduces a babysitter he and Helen have nicknamed "Little Squab Bones." Though she is very willing to have sex with him, he makes it short, painful, and impersonal. She cries, and as he leaves, "though [she] still had her tongue," she was "unable to speak to him (212). He knows the feeling of wanting power over a woman, and he hates himself for succumbing to those feelings: "Perhaps rape's offensiveness to Garp was that it was an act that disgusted him with himself—with his own very male instincts, which were otherwise so unassailable. He never felt like raping anyone; but rape, Garp thought, made men feel guilty by association" (209). After coercing sex out of Little Squab Bones, Garp thinks, he "didn't want a daughter because of *men*. Because of *bad* men, certainly; but even, because of men like *me*" (212). In this scene, Irving makes a strong statement against masculinity and the power men have over women, and not even the title character is free from that criticism.

Irving's statement against masculinity is balanced by its statement in favor of androgyny. The novel is critical of any extreme predisposition, including towards

masculinity. The answer is breaking down the boundaries of gender, as Jenny advocates in her autobiography. Irving uses Jenny and Garp as examples of people who act outside of their expected gender roles, but the most overt example of breaking gender boundaries is Roberta Muldoon. Irving uses Roberta to demonstrate not only the blurring of gender boundaries, but also sexual prejudices. Roberta encompasses stereotypical views of women as seductive, nurturing, compassionate, and equally stereotypical views of men as protective and physically aggressive. She forces society and the reader to question what they believe about sex by being an exemplar of all stereotypes.

Harter and Thompson write that as Irving destroys extremes of sexual expectations and extremes of sexual activism, he creates a middle ground—a “genuinely androgynous vision” (13). However, some feminists reject androgyny as a feminist idea, stating that it is actually a way for society to stop dealing with women and require instead that they take on male characteristics. Eagleton, for example, writes that androgyny “represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness” (31). Androgyny, as Irving portrays it, cannot be a solution to women’s problems. Roberta lives androgynously as an individual, but that does not change the society she lives in; instead, it suggests that if we all lived a little more androgynously, the world would be a better place. This reform on an individual level that Irving favors is clearly a liberal idea, but it would not solve the widespread problems he highlights, such as rape.

Irving’s fourth novel is definitely pro-women and dubiously pro-feminist, but its ultimate conception of a world in which anger, violence, and sex can all be drawn to a middle ground is still ambitious in its own way. At the time of its publication, it was a rebellious novel, but after 25 years, it seems much less provocative. The feminism Irving

promotes in the Irving seems like standard liberal feminism by today's standards. Irving's first novel to address feminism does so awkwardly, but *The World According to Garp* still poses many provocative questions about sex from a male viewpoint.

### Chapter Three

#### Rape and Revenge: Franny Berry, Susie the Bear, and Family Feminism in *The Hotel New Hampshire*

*The Hotel New Hampshire* is vital to examining Irving's treatment of sexual assault because it is his only novel in which the reader reads about the rape experience and its aftermath. Franny's rape is traced from foreshadowing of the incident to her eventual recovery, so rape as an individual experience plays a much bigger part of this novel's plot than it did in *The World According to Garp*. In both novels, rape is portrayed symbolically, representing the worst human pain aside from death. The Berrys take revenge on Franny's attacker in a scene that is much debated and highly misunderstood by many critics. The story concentrates centrally on one character searching for healing after a brutal rape, but it is also a story about a family who pulls together to take responsibility for that healing. While feminism is a main theme connected to rape in *Garp*, it is not overtly mentioned in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Rape is treated as a personal tragedy that affects the Berry family; in a liberal mode of thinking, Irving places little emphasis on rape as a widespread social occurrence. *The Hotel New Hampshire* is, for Irving, a turn away from seeing rape as a social phenomenon and a movement towards isolating it to individuals.

Because Irving chooses to describe one female character's journey towards healing from rape, his characterization of Franny Berry and her reactions to her trauma must be held up to strict scrutiny. If many feminist critics are wary of men writing feminist criticism, a man writing a personal account of rape can only intensify such suspicions. While men's writing about rape has not attracted substantial attention in

feminist critical writing, Irving's portrayal of this experience can be compared to noted feminist writing on the subject. How realistic is his story? While Irving had commercial success writing about an experience that many women would say cannot be understood by anyone who has not experienced it, some readers may question the novel's neat resolution or its use of rape as a symbol for widespread suffering. A closer look at the novel also yields further answers to Irving's views as a feminist writer. *The Hotel New Hampshire* shows that as in *Garp*, he is critical of group activism; the best kind of feminism, according to Irving, is personal and family-based.

Irving's intentions in making rape the central conflict in *The Hotel New Hampshire* are important to examining rape in the context of the entire novel. In an interview with critic Gabriel Miller, Irving said,

[*The Hotel New Hampshire*] is really less political than it is... making a metaphor, really, of a single sexual act of violence, a single sexual trauma—the rape of my hero... and if Franny was to be a proper force for me, a proper hero, I wanted to give her... the most horrible things to overcome I could imagine (qtd. in Miller 186).

Irving demonstrates the seriousness with which he treats this delicate topic in his careful, painfully detailed portrayal of Franny's attack. In the solemnity with which he approaches the subject, Irving also sets up a fundamental tension in the novel, that of the personal versus the political—the same difference that distinguishes liberal and radical feminism. As in many of his statements about writing, Irving maintains that he is not making a “political” statement, but at the same time, he chooses a politically controversial subject. For this novel, Irving tries to treat rape as strictly personal—the

worst tragedy, he explains, that will make the best hero, a technique that falters when dealing with such a hotly political topic. Irving narrows the experience of rape to the experiences of the victims and victimizers, an approach that allows him to look at certain characters at length but shortchanges rape's larger political context.

Though Irving wants Franny to be "a proper hero," he does not make her an innocent one. At the beginning of the novel, Franny is only nine, but she is already sexually knowledgeable and flirtatious. She inserts sexual references into everyday conversations just for shock value. In a discussion about Dairy School's abysmal football team, for example, "to cause trouble," Franny blurts out, "One of them [the football players] showed me his thing" (49). As the novel moves into the future, Franny gains an affinity with many of the Dairy School boys. She is a sexual aggressor in some of these relationships; Franny knows she can have any boy she wants. At the same time, she is the target of many boys she does not like, especially as she gets older. At Dairy, having sex with Franny becomes the prized goal of the football players, though she scares off most of them. For example, a player named De Meo tells Franny about his groin injury and asks her if she wants to see it. Franny bends the cup in his jock strap into his groin. Later, John asks, "How'd you know about it? The thing in his jock strap? I mean, the cup." Franny responds, "He showed me, another time" (52). Though she isn't interested in De Meo, she tells John that she plans on having a lot of boyfriends when she's older. "I can forget [De Meo] easy," Franny says, "I'm going to have lots of DeMeos when I grow up" (56). These first characterizations of Franny foreshadow her later attacks, showing that she is sought after, and not always with her approval. On the other hand, it also shows

that Franny has a close rein on her own sexuality and a desire for sex, which will make it all the more devastating when her rape makes her lose that control.

When Chipper Dove, Franny's eventual rapist, is introduced, Franny is fifteen; she welcomes his advances, even though he is obviously immature, violent, and unpredictable. Franny, however, is drawn to him, even putting herself into situations that she knows are dangerous. For example, when John and Franny come across the football players abusing Frank, she distracts Dove to let Frank get away. John describes, "I don't know what Franny was thinking, but she said to Dove, 'I want to talk with you. Alone. I want to be alone with you, right now,' Franny told him... 'Right now,' Franny said. 'I want to do it right now—or never,' she said." (82). To distract Dove from Frank, Franny puts herself in a hazardous situation with a boy whom everyone can tell is a danger. Though Irving never blames Franny or implies that she brought it upon herself, one weakness in his portrayal is that he never explains why Franny does this. She is drawn to Dove, but we do not know why. This gap in Irving's characterization might hint at some hidden complexity in Franny's character, but more likely it points to a pitfall of a male writer trying to write about the rape experience from a woman's perspective.

Before Chipper Dove and his two friends rape Franny, her family knows that it will happen. After Franny leads Dove into the woods, Frank suggests that maybe Franny wants Dove, and John thinks, "That was too terrible a thought for me—it was almost as bad as imagining Chipper Dove doing things to Franny that she didn't want done to her..." (84). Imagining Franny wanting Dove, wanting someone they know is dangerous, is to her brother almost as horrible as imagining her getting raped. In the end of this scene, though Irving does not describe the events directly, he implies that Dove did

nearly rape her. John and Frank find Franny, crying and screaming: “I want to talk with you, just *talk!*’... ‘You could have been so nice, but you had to go and be such a super shit of a human being. I hate you!’” (84). Though Franny, John, and Frank know that Dove is untrustworthy and dangerous, Franny seems to still harbor romantic ideas about him, but Irving did not write Franny as a stupid character. Her attraction to Dove against her better judgement is a conflict in her character that Irving never resolves.

Not only does Franny know that Dove is harmful, but she also puts herself in jeopardy with him yet again, and this time, he does rape her. On Halloween night, Franny again goes with Dove voluntarily, but she consents only initially. She seems to even have an inkling of what may happen, because when John says, “Remember what you said, Franny! Remember—about the first time?” She responds “dully,” “It probably isn’t true. It probably isn’t anything” (106). In the haunting woods creeping with costumed threats, in the horror that Halloween is always imagined to be but has now become, Franny may suspect what Dove may try. She even says to John, long after the assault,

Of course I knew what he was going to do... I was prepared for him, I’d even imagined it—with him. I always knew it would be him—the first time—somehow. But I never thought he’d let the others even see me with him. I even *told him* that they didn’t have to force me, that I’d let *him*. But when he *left* me with them—I wasn’t prepared for that at all. I never even imagined that. (112).

Unlike the previous experience, she tries several times to escape, and the three boys, Dove, Pulaski, and Metz, overpower her and gang rape her. Why Franny was willing to half-heartedly have sex with Dove to distract him from her brother is another factor that

is never explained. However, what is clear is that though Franny knew that Dove had evil intentions, she is not at fault.

At this point, Irving has set up a situation in which anyone wanting to blame Franny would have innumerable reasons to do so. She is a flirt. The Dairy School community thinks of her as somewhat “easy,” and she knows that nearly every boy wants her. She knows her attackers, she knows what Dove wants, and she has put herself in dangerous situations with him before. In these ways, Irving creates a perfectly stereotypical blame-the-victim circumstances, but the novel never blames her for any part of her victimization. While Irving creates a situation in which the lines between consent and force are blurred, the novel’s moral understanding of where these lines fall remains clear. Franny was forced; Dove, Metz, and Pulaski raped her.

However, though Irving’s narrative never implies that Franny is at fault, his execution of the rape scenes and the events leading to it may strike some readers as not completely believable. Franny is never threatened with harm great enough so that we would believe she would put herself in Dove’s hands voluntarily. The reader knows that she puts herself in danger partially to protect her family, but the danger to them is not serious. She does want to have sex with Dove, but her attraction to him is not substantiated. Why would Franny, who is worshiped by all of the boys around her, choose the one everyone knows will hurt her? She has not shown any previous abuse or trauma that would affect her decisions. She has strong self-esteem; nothing about her characterization ever indicates that she believes she deserves to be hurt. The reader expects more explanation than that. If Irving were suggesting that women are naturally attracted to violence, that would certainly be an anti-feminist statement. Though Irving’s

description of Franny's rape is not offensive, or strikingly unrealistic, it leaves many questions unanswered.

Though Franny appears strong before her assault, her rape seems to overwhelm her strength. John assumes that Franny will immediately confront her rapists; he says, "Franny will tell" (107). However, Franny cannot even admit to what has happened to her, much less summon the strength to explain it to anyone else and confront Dove so that he can be punished. She says to the infirmary nurse only, "I'm Franny Berry... and I've been beaten up" (115). Franny repeats this vague gloss for her horrible experience often in this section; it is the only way she can express the events. As John says, "'Beaten up' would remain Franny's euphemism for it, although everyone knew she had been raped. 'Beaten up' was all Franny would admit to, although no one missed the point" (115). Franny's loss of words to explain her rape mirrors the themes of speechlessness in *Garp*. In both novels, Irving's characters demonstrate the way that rape removes a woman's powers of expression. While this was an overreaching theme in *Garp*, Irving scales it down in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, confining this theme to only a few characters. Without showing the pervasiveness of rape's significance, Irving neglects in this novel to show the ways in which rape has wide cultural causes and effects.

As the novel progresses, more deep-seated effects of Franny's traumatization begin to surface. Franny vacillates between complete breakdowns and stoical statements to the effect that she was never hurt by anyone. Although she says to John, "Nobody got the fucking *me* in me," her actions belie the strength she shows on the surface (119). She takes baths repeatedly, two or three a day. John writes, "I remember the rest of 1956, from Halloween to Christmas, as the length of time it took Franny to stop taking three

baths a day... from Halloween to Christmas, 1956, Franny did not smell nice to herself” (123). Though she is only 15, Franny senses that her life has changed forever. She cries to John, “Just go out and get me yesterday and most of today... I want them back” (119). Any innocence she had is gone forever, and John cannot get it back for her. Though Irving does not use *The Hotel New Hampshire* to explain rape’s social significance, he does use it to portray some of rape’s possible effects on one individual, a theme that *Garp* did not explore as thoroughly. Between the two novels, Irving seems to be concerned with portraying rape from both personal and social points-of-view, but he does not treat the two perspectives simultaneously.

When the Berrys move to Vienna, they meet another rape victim, a woman named Susie who will be instrumental in helping Franny heal. The Berry family first meet Susie in her bear costume as she sits on a couch in the Viennese Hotel New Hampshire. She retains her bear disguise although she knows the Berry’s are the new co-owners, even making a rush at Freud, the other co-owner, to display her fierceness. Later, the Berry family learns that like Franny, Susie is a rape survivor. In explaining her attack to Franny, she says, “I am the original not-bad-if-you-put-a-bag-over-her-head girl,” because her rapists covered her head with a bag during the attack (245). Though Susie is still struggling to recover from her own sexual assault, she becomes a voice of reason for the Berry family. She demands that the Berrys—Franny most of all—admit to the severity of the rape’s impact and not let Franny pretend that she has recovered until she really has. Susie often acts as Irving’s voice to demand recognition of rape’s seriousness.

Irving portrays Susie’s role as wiser and more experienced than the Berrys when she refutes their idea that Franny wasn’t harmed by her rape. When John tells Susie of

Franny's rape, she doesn't accept Franny's excuses. Susie snaps at John, "Franny was raped, not beaten up. And those bastards *did* get the her in her" (240). Susie also has very strong words about the way that Franny dealt with the crime—and that the family allowed her to cover it up: "Your sister robbed herself of the only weapon she had against those punks—their semen. And nobody stopped her from washing herself, nobody made her *deal* with it—so she's going to be dealing with it all her life. In fact, she sacrificed her own integrity by not fighting her attackers in the first place..." (240). Later, Susie says to Franny that by faking her recovery, by ignoring the damage her attackers caused, Franny has depreciated its severity. Susie sees the Berrys have deliberately remained ignorant by accepting Franny's overtures at healing. They want to ignore Franny's damaged psyche because they cannot face the real pain she is experiencing, and by ignoring her hurt, Irving implies that they are only prolonging it.

Though she proffers advice to the Berrys, Irving provides an abundance of evidence suggesting that Susie has not healed herself. Whereas Franny wants to constantly cleanse her body, Susie hates her body, abusing it and hiding it within a bear suit. Believing that even her rapists found her ugly, Susie ignores her body. She doesn't wash, comb her hair, or take any interest in hygiene or fitness. Campbell writes that Susie cannot get past the perception of her own ugliness: "Unlike Franny, Susie has not suppressed the fact of her rape and expresses her rage about it often. She seems incapable, however, of getting beyond the 'fact' of her ugliness; the bear suit is a 'cover' for her hurt and a defensive barrier to keep people at a distance" (92). Susie's rapists have forever associated Susie's appearance with her attack, and thus having to pay attention to her body, or letting others see it, only reminds her of her rape. Susie's authority on rape

combined with her inability to solve her own problems shows that to Irving, nobody knows everything about rape; nobody is an expert.

Susie will not admit that she wears the bear suit to cover her body; instead, she makes excuses so that her disguise will protect her and make her appear more powerful. She proudly brags that she's the "enforcer" of the hotel's security (246). However, though Susie feigns having the strength to confront her victimization, wearing the bear suit is the only way that she really feels powerful. She says, "I'm not really so tough, but no one tries to fight a bear. I just sort of breathe on the bastards, I just lay a little weight on them. No one fights back if you're a bear" (246). Of course, this makes her a good security officer, but this statement also reveals Susie's own fears about security. She may say she's "dealt" with her rape, but she is still afraid of being attacked. In her own fear, she adopts the guise of something more fearful to protect herself. She is not aggressive; she doesn't want to hurt anyone. She simply wants a non-confrontational way to ensure that no one hurts her. The bear suit also give her a way to hide the body she hates and even ignore that it exists. She has adopted a different body as the source of power, as her own body was an object of abuse. Susie is a source of many contradictions; she is the self-professed supervisor of Franny's recovery and cannot manage her own, and she is the enforcer of the hotel's safety but lives in fear.

Although Irving portrays Susie as the wiser person in dealing with rape, her personal experience—and the fact that she has not dealt with it—also influence her subjectivity. Susie is correct that Franny is hiding the lingering effects of her trauma, but Susie is not perfect. John writes,

“Even before [Susie] started talking to Franny, I could see how desperately important this woman’s private unhappiness was to her, and how—in her mind—the only credible reaction to the event of the rape was *hers*. That someone else might have responded differently to a similar abuse only meant to her that the abuse couldn’t possibly have been the same” (241).

In order to protect this unhappiness that has become such a huge part of her, Susie justifies her anger with her bear disguise while demanding that all women react as she did. She says, “You’ve got to get angry. You’ve got to get savage about all the facts,” but all that Susie has is savagery (242). Neither Susie nor Franny have confronted their own painful experiences, and while Franny has chosen to ignore hers, Susie hides from hers in bear suit and the violent power it affords.

Franny eventually confronts Susie about the fact that instead of healing, she’s is hiding from the world that caused her pain. Franny says, “You dumb bear. You’re just an unattractive girl, with zits—with zit scars: you’re scarred by zits—and you’d rather be a dumb bear than a human being. You think that’s tough? It’s fucking easier to be a bear, isn’t it?” (260). Through Franny, Irving exposes Susie’s hypocrisy—Susie has demanded that Franny face her rape while Susie refuses to face her own. Just as Irving describes one path rape victims might follow through his portrayal of Franny, he describes a second through Susie. She chooses to re-assemble her life by de-humanizing herself and reconstructing herself as a non-human too powerful to ever again be victimized. Susie’s embrace of violence as a response to violence and her self-abuse are reminiscent of the Ellen Jamesians, whom Irving criticized for their bloody tactics towards themselves and others. Irving dismisses Susie’s and the Ellen Jamesians’ anti-social and aggressive

responses to male violence, but he is harsher towards the latter. Susie's saving grace seems to be that Irving writes her as an individual; she chooses her violent, anti-social path as a personal decision, whereas the Ellen Jamesians act as a group. Irving prefers Jenny and Ellen's style of personal feminism, and because Susie makes her choices as an individual, he writes her much more sympathetically than he writes the Ellen Jamesians.

Just as Ellen James is Irving's symbol of loss—loss of innocence, childhood, and speech, Susie the Bear is also a symbol. Irving writes, “[Susie the bear] is a symbol for all the sexually wounded, which is what *The Hotel New Hampshire* is about” (*My Movie* 78). She encompasses a myriad of the feelings surrounding rape: the fear, the anger, the hatred, the denial and the sorrow. Sorrow, in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, is a potent feeling. Sorrow haunts the Berry family for the entire book, marked by Franny's rape and Father's blindness and the losses of the Berry patriarch, Coach Bob, Mother, and the youngest child, Egg. Sorrow is first embodied by the Berrys' dog of the same name, but even when he is lost at sea, Sorrow continues to follow the Berrys, now in the form of Susie in her bear costume: “Franny had warned us: she'd told us to be on the lookout for Sorrow's new poses, for Sorrow's new disguises” (276). Frank says, “Susie the Bear is Sorrow” (276). Susie will not let the Berrys pretend that they are happy; she constantly confronts them with their own pain until they are motivated to solve it.

Susie's bear costume does not just represent sorrow, however; it also represents the power to overcome sorrow. Reilly writes, “In...*The Hotel New Hampshire*, bears suggest the characters' bearish tenacity to survive when conquering those forces” (10). Susie's strength is what John is attracted to in Susie, and Susie and John eventually marry. John says, “Susie was built like a bear... I realized how much I admired her—for

her bearishness, for her complicated courage” (436). Susie’s bearish personality helps her heal herself, and also drives her to push the Berrys towards their own healing.

After seeing the reality behind Susie’s response to her own rape, Franny refuses to take the same path any longer. She has said before, “I own my own rape. It’s mine. I *own* it,” but she now articulates how she will take ownership of her healing. She says, “I’m not going to be a bear... You sweat like a pig in that stupid costume, you get your rocks off making people uneasy, but that’s because *you’re* uneasy being *you*. Well, I’m easy being me” (261). Susie’s and Franny’s parallel experiences work together to help both women see the path to rejuvenation more clearly. Not only do the two women support each other, but both also refuse to accept the lies the other may attempt to pass off. Irving’s choice to portray two rape victims allows him to show the varied nature of rape and its aftermath; women deal with sexual assault differently, though Irving seems to favor Franny’s choices over Susie’s. By characterizing two rape victims, Irving can also expand the trauma to more than just an isolated incident between two women, but it never shows a social context as broad as radical feminists believe is at the root of rape.

Among the many barriers Franny meets while dealing with her rape is Ernst, one of the radicals working in the Vienna Hotel New Hampshire. Not only is Ernst a terrorist, but he is also a pornographer. John writes, “Ernst’s pornography was not erotic...Ernst’s pornography gave us headaches and dry throats... Ernst’s pornography was not about sex: it was about pain without hope, it was about death without a single memory” (266). Irving never describes the pornography, that omission makes Ernst seem an even more menacing and unknown threat. In her essay, “Rape: On Coercion and Consent.” Catherine MacKinnon writes that after a woman is confronted with sexual violence, she

may eroticize violence, though subconsciously (48). Franny's inexplicable attraction to Ernst seems to follow this phenomenon. While the rest of the family is sickened and frightened by Ernst's readings of his pornography, Franny is fascinated by it. John explains, "[The pornography] made her think about Ernst; it made her seek him out..." (267). She follows Ernst faithfully and eventually sleeps with him. Unlike her attraction to Dove, for which Irving never offered a satisfactory explanation, Franny's attraction to Ernst is well-developed, and seems to follow MacKinnon's analysis of the way in many rape victims organize their desires.

Franny's attraction to Ernst reveals much about the inner effects her rape has had on her and the novel's overall message about sexual violence. Franny is attracted to Ernst although no one else in the family can stand him, and for a long time, John cannot figure out why. He finally decides that Ernst closely resembles Chipper Dove, Franny's rapist, in both looks and personality. John writes,

"I knew then... what it was that Franny saw in Ernst. It was more than a physical resemblance to Chipper Dove, it was that cocksure quality, the touch of evil, that hint of destruction, that icy leadership—that was what could sneak its way into my sister's heart, that was what captured her in her, that was what took Franny's strength away" (269).

While Susie has chosen to appropriate the powers of fear and violence into her bear persona, Franny finds herself drawn to others with those powers.

In the book *I Never Told Anyone*, Florence Rush and Ellen Bass write about common aftereffects of rape that may help to explain why Franny would put herself in yet another dangerous situation with a sexually violent man. Florence Rush writes,

“Unsupported in her right to be protected, to be angry, or to express justified indignation, [the rape victim] feels she deserves no more than to be sexually abused” (13). Franny has been supported by her family, but because she has not yet fully expressed her anger, she still blames herself and feels that she deserves more abuse. Though Franny never verbally expresses these feelings, she also does not seek out other men to become involved with. In a similar argument to Rush’s, Ellen Bass writes, “When women are taught through rape and molestation that they have no rights to their bodies, and when, growing up, they do not gain the strength to reclaim these rights, they sometimes allow men into their lives who do not respect women...” (45). Though Franny has pride in her body at the beginning of the novel, and she states that same feeling after her rape; her actions belie her; her repeated bathing shows that she no longer trusts her own body, she no longer owns her body, and that it has been dirtied by the men who raped her. Because Ernst’s pornography shows that he enjoys claiming ownership over women’s bodies, he is in the perfect situation to take advantage of Franny.

Like Dove, when Ernst finally gets what he wants from Franny, he hurts her. He does not force her, but she is very upset by the event. She will only tell John, “It hurts” (342). Ernst does not just hurt Franny, though. He has plans to kill all of the Berrys, a plan that they foil. In the process, John is able to see to the true cruelty of Ernst’s nature, connecting the violence that he portrays towards women in his pornography with the violence he portrays towards the world in his terrorism. John writes,

I realized what a terrorist is. 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, is what they care

about. But they are both lying. Ernst loved his pornography; Ernst worshiped the means... A terrorist *is* a pornographer (354).

Through John's words, the novel posits this theory about violence: it is rarely for a greater purpose or a moral goal. It is always for the cheap excitement of degrading, intimidating, and holding power over others. Though Irving has said that he wanted to make *The Hotel New Hampshire* a personal story of rape, by connecting sex, violence, and terrorism, he expands his story into a larger political and philosophical statement about the psychology of violence, though it is only in this one scene.

Irving closely connects this particular terrorist with violence and rape, just as some feminists cite rape in general as a form of sexual terrorism. MacKinnon writes, "In feminist analysis, a rape is not an isolated event or moral transgression or individual interchange gone wrong but an act of terrorism and torture within a systemic context of group subjection, like lynching" (42). Irving makes this point more overtly in *Garp*, where rape is seen on a somewhat larger scale, but he portrays the same relationship between rape and terrorism in Franny's relationship with Ernst. Similar to Irving's earlier formulation, Angela Carter writes, "The pornographer has it in his power to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of [sexual] relations" (21). Irving uses the group of terrorists working in the Berry's hotel as a symbol for the kind of institutionalized mindset that drives people to commit violent acts against one group, whether it is bombings against capitalists or rape against women. By drawing his representative pornographer and terrorist together with his representative rapist, Chipper Dove, makes rape-as-terrorism a theme of *The Hotel New Hampshire*, but it is a minor theme.

Though Franny's rape by Chipper Dove seems to connect directly to her sexual attraction for Ernst, Irving also maintains that rape ultimately has nothing to do with sex; it is an act of violence. Franny says that whether she has sex with someone has "nothing to do with being raped. Sleeping with someone is very different" (218). Later in the novel, Susie expresses a similar view of rape as violence, not sex. She says, "A rapist is using his prick as a weapon. Nobody uses a weapon without *getting* you" (242). Though rape very much affects a victim's views of sex, in Irving's portrayal, the rapist is making a display of power over his victim through violence. Sex is a means of enacting that power. Irving closely connects sex and violence, thoroughly characterizing both Dove and Ernst as vicious men who enact through violence through sex.

Dove is absent from the Berrys' life during the Vienna section, but he remains a potent presence in Franny's thoughts and memories. MacKinnon writes, "Women often feel more traumatized from being raped by someone known or trusted, someone with whom at least an illusion of mutuality has been shared, than by some stranger" (47). For Franny, this heightened trauma causes her to try to preserve her imagined intimacy with Dove. She writes to him repeatedly—he never answers. She says to John, "It seems that once someone— or some people—get to have you, you don't ever hear from them again" (218). John is confused at to why she would ever want to speak to him again, but Franny confides that she is still attached to him. "I was in love—and maybe I still am," she says. Even harder for John to digest is that she fantasizes about him. She says, "One day, Chipper Dove might fall in love with me" (219). Though Franny says that she could use love to hurt Chipper Dove, John doesn't believe her, knowing that he must keep her

away from Dove until she can regain her strength. Until she does, though Dove may not be a physical threat, his memory is a threat to Franny ever banishing him from her mind.

Susie offers an additional reason to explain Franny's continued attachment to Dove. She says that it is not Franny's love, but her fear of Dove that keeps her romanticizing him, writing to him, and treating him as if he were her first love rather than her rapist. Susie says,

It's her fear that makes her do it—write to him all the time. Because if she can address him, in a normal voice—if she can pretend that she's having a normal relationship with him—well... then he's no rapist, then he never actually did do it to her, and she doesn't want to deal with the fact that he did. Because... she's afraid that Dove or someone like him will rape her again (294).

Susie is right: when Chipper shows up at the Stanhope, Franny is too scared to speak, even to her family. She is still afraid of him, and will remain so until she makes him feel that same fear. The surfacing of this palpable, terrorizing fear is the first true evidence that Franny has not at all healed.

If Susie's disguised violence is an unsatisfactory way to deal with rape, then what does Irving posit as an acceptable way? The remainder of the novel shows that Irving does not wholly reject violence as a mode of revenge against rape as he does when portraying Susie and the Ellen Jamesians. He justifies the revenge the Berrys take because instead of using violence flippantly, they use violence to allow Franny to recover her own voice against Dove, again using the theme of speech-as-power that Irving began in *Garp*. The idea of dealing with Chipper Dove and freeing Franny from her pain, hovers over the novel until the family moves from Vienna to New York, where John

accidentally encounters Chipper Dove on the street. After she knows that Dove is in New York, Franny wants to avenge her rape; “I want to kill him!” she says (389). Though they can never truly do to Dove what he did to Franny, and they cannot kill him, they can do to him what Irving asserts is the next worst thing. They can make him fear rape.

From the beginning of the plan to extract revenge from Chipper Dove, the Berrys know that they cannot do anything that replicates what he did to Franny. To avenge her rape in the closest way, Franny suggests, “I think you could scare him enough by almost doing it” (391). In this way, Irving’s novel resonates with Carter’s argument that the fear of rape is nearly as terrifying as the actual act: “Somewhere in the fear of rape, is more than merely physical terror of hurt and humiliation—a fear of psychic disintegration, of an essential dismemberment, a fear of a loss or disruption of the self which is not confined to the victim alone” (6). The Berrys will not physically violate Dove; they do not want to be part of his evil. They will, however, replicate the fear that he has made Franny live with. To “scare him *almost* to death,” (392) Lilly, the fourth Berry child, writes the revenge play that they believe will make Dove feel the force of his crime. The skit allows all of the Berrys to take part in the revenge, just as they have all taken part in Franny’s pain.

Though all of the Berrys gain from participating in the revenge, Susie benefits most from helping Franny. Susie has spent the whole novel hiding in a bear suit from the world, showing them only her anger. Her anger is incensed by the revenge play: “I’ve never felt so much like a bear,” she says (395). But, by enacting the bear part against Chipper Dove, she also frees herself from the confines of the costumes she had hidden herself in. After acting in the play, “Susie the bear took her bear’s head off; she would

never need to wear it again” (402). Lilly says, “The *bear in you* gets out today, Susie” (395). Susie has used her bear suit to feign power, but in the play, her bear disguise empowers her to help Franny, and that new feeling saves her. Irving excuses her aggression when it is to help someone else, not when it is to inflict fear. Only by displaying this animalistic anger one last time in the name of helping her friend through the same pain Susie has felt for years, does Susie find the strength to “deal” with it, as she has always told Franny to do.

Lilly’s revenge play on Chipper Dove is both admired and faulted by various critics. Some critics find the scene to be an unfulfilling attempt at closure, but ultimately a petty failure. For example, Miller writes,

Treating of a grimly serious subject, the crime of rape... the author and his protagonists settle for a simplistic and shallow reciprocal threat... Somehow the poetic justice of their revenge seems inadequate to the realistic tragedy of Franny’s rape drama, as if Irving is struggling for catharsis of a real-life hurt by means of make-believe therapy; the fairy tale’s rigorous standard of proportional consequences is lost (168).

Miller’s main criticism of the revenge scene is that it is a disproportionate crime compared to Franny’s rape, a crime that Irving treats with seriousness. Miller does not believe that the revenge on Chipper Dove is great enough to punish him, and thus he argues that Irving trivializes the gravity of Dove’s crime.

However, Miller does not take into account that the characters in *The Hotel New Hampshire* choose their method of revenge with the full knowledge that it will be inadequate. They discuss how to undertake a proportional revenge against Dove and

decide that it is impossible. Campbell writes, “Critics who see this scene as misdirected, as silly, and even as trivializing rape... totally miss the point. Irving is underscoring the awfulness of rape” (106). The revenge scene shows that rape is too terrible even to use against rapists; it is too terrible for any of the other characters to contemplate enacting. The only act even close would be to make Dove fear rape. After Lilly’s suicide, John writes, “[Lilly] authored one masterpiece, which she never gave herself enough credit for. She wrote the screenplay for the movie starring Chipper Dove... She knew just how far to go with that story (422). Irving explains that the revenge scene should leave readers feeling unfulfilled. He says, “That whole opera of revenge that they act out on Chipper Dove is, of course, or should be, ultimately very disappointing—anything short of killing the sonofabitch is going to be a letdown, which they realize...that to have done anything measured, in kind, would have been too much” (qtd. in Miller 187). Franny’s rape is never fully avenged, but in the revenge scene, the Berrys and Susie find enough closure to move on. Compared to this achievement, Dove’s punishment seems unimportant.

As in *Garp*, Irving does not make use of feminist issues in *The Hotel New Hampshire* without making some questionable choices. For example, Franny’s detailed struggle to come to terms with her rape seems abruptly ended by the revenge scene, though the allegorical meaning of the scene is well developed. After the Berrys enact their revenge on Dove, Franny seems automatically healed. Again reversing the Victorian fallen woman stereotype, Franny marries Junior Jones, who had previously rescued her from her attackers, and they end the novel happily. Both Susie and Franny end up in happy marriages with wonderful men. Unlike *Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* does not indict masculinity. It seems to posit rapists as individual crazy men because it does not

critique society as eroticizing violence or other men as possessing violent tendencies. Irving's critique of masculinity in *Garp* leaned towards a radical view, but it is a viewpoint erased in this novel. Irving writes about rape in this novel as if it were the actions of individuals against individuals, and suggests that aside from the deranged few, like Ernst and Dove, society is a fairly safe place.

Susie also ends the novel in a happy situation that would have been unknown to the fallen woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She is neatly cured by the revenge play, and she and John marry. On one hand, these endings seem unrealistically pretty. On the other hand, neither woman erases rape from her life. Franny goes on to play herself in the movie version of Lilly's book *Trying to Grow*, where Franny must relive the experiences she works so hard to forget. Susie also invites more reminders of rape into her life, opening first a women's shelter and then a rape crisis center. Because, as the novel demonstrates, the experience of rape is personal and variable, it cannot be said that these endings are wholly unrealistic, but they do seem too easy.

Because *The Hotel New Hampshire* portrays political issues in the context of complicated, detailed personal relationships, it is difficult to discern exactly what political stance Irving takes in this novel. On one hand, in the obviously symbolic character of Ernst, Irving briefly expands his novel's vision of sex and violence to universal, metaphorical proportions, associating rape with sexual, sexist terrorism. Irving's favored feminism, as portrayed in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, however, is ultimately a personal belief so divorced from any activist group that the novel does not seem to have a message about feminism as a movement. In this way, Irving's vision of feminism in *The Hotel New Hampshire* resembles Jenny Field's vision—a liberal

feminism that is nurturing, not political. The novel also expands on Irving's idea of feminism as a family issue, another *Garp* theme. The Berrys make the choices they do through solidarity with their family, not identification with any political group. By writing about rape—the main political concern of this novel— without writing overtly about feminism or rape's cultural context, Irving reveals that his version of feminism appreciates personal, individual decisions more than overtly political ones.

## Chapter 4

### Women Making and Breaking the Rules: Melony, Rose Rose, and the Abortion

#### Polemic in *The Cider House Rules*

Though *The World According to Garp* is Irving's most well known novel, *The Cider House Rules* is arguably his most controversial. The debates about abortion between the two main characters, Homer Wells, an unadoptable orphan, and Dr. Larch, the St. Cloud's orphanage director, have garnered praise from several liberal organizations<sup>4</sup> and fire from several pro-life publications<sup>5</sup>. Though women are central to this plot, compared to Jenny Fields and Franny Berry, most of the female characters in *The Cider House Rules* are tame. Nurse Edna, Nurse Angela, and Candy Kendall are dedicated nurturers, but they stay on the sidelines. Irving's characterization of another St. Cloud's orphan, Melony, is central to his formulation of a feminist statement in both this novel and his entire body of work. Melony is the most delicate, detailed treatment in his female victim/hero motif. She is not a sketch, but rather a memorable, believable woman who becomes the moral voice of the novel. Like the Ellen Jamesians and Susie the Bear, Melony exhibits impressive anger and violence in response to society's misogynistic violence, but Melony's portrayal is the first time that Irving exhibits an understanding, and even sympathy, for feminine anger. Melony's capacity for violent rage is frightening to the other characters, but it expands the range of Irving's characterization of women—for the first time, Irving writes a female character who is capable of both love and hate, but whom he does not punish in the end.

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<sup>4</sup> Planned Parenthood and other pro-choice organizations have expressed support for the novel and its movie version.

<sup>5</sup> See McNellis and Weinkopf.

Melony is one of the most intricately developed characters in Irving's body of work. She is at once terrifying, sympathetic, rough, sexual, moralizing, and brutal. Harter and Thompson interpret the parallels that Irving draws between her violence and her sexuality as pointedly negative. They call Homer an Adam, and conversely, call Melony "a perverse and violent Eve," and write that "as an evil Eve she is associated in Irving's fable with the snake and penis" (141). However, in the scenes where her violence overcomes her, it comes from her uncontrollable anger, which in turn comes from the great pain she feels as a result of being abandoned and left without any knowledge of her origins. She is a fallen woman, but she is tough and victorious in the end. Irving portrays Melony as neither perverse nor evil; her violence stems from palpable human pain that Melony fights to exorcise through her physical and sexual powers.

In her unclear origins and very clear anger, Melony resembles an archetypal female literary character— "the temptress." The temptress is often discussed in feminist interpretations of literary characters, such as the discussions in Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* and Judith Fryer's *The Faces of Eve*. Fryer writes that in her sexuality and violence, the tempting dark lady breaks the boundaries of society's restrictions on feminine behavior. In her dissension from typical female behavior, the dark lady resembles the Victorian fallen woman, but the dark lady holds much more power. The temptress archetype has the misogynistic possibility of creating female characters who use mysterious, dark sexual powers for the pleasure of men, or characters who mischievously brandish their sexual powers out of hatred of men. Irving, however, chooses to turn Melony's temptress traits into a positive characterization, giving her a

well-developed sense of sexuality, sympathetic explanations for her violence, and a moral voice that tempers her rage.

The temptress, Fryer writes, “is deadly because of her alluring yet frightening sexuality, which threatens to destroy the self-reliant hero” (24). Before this novel, only Irving’s peripheral female characters have had both violent anger and captivating sexuality. For example, in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, John Berry becomes entangled with the alluring terrorist Fehlgeburt, who is dedicated to her terrorist cause but to John, sexually attractive. Though Irving’s central female characters before *The Cider House Rules* at times displayed either sexuality and violence, he never featured a woman with both of these capacities before Melony, and she perfectly fits the archetype Fryer describes. “None of [fiction’s] dark ladies have mothers,” Fryer notes, and neither does Melony (38). In fact, Melony is obsessed with her mother’s abandonment of her, a betrayal she vows to avenge. Fryer’s dark lady is also associated with “the poisoned garden, the snake imagery... dangerous sexuality, and her alienation from the human community,” symbols which play heavily in Melony’s characterization (40). Irving uses the temptress motif in Melony as a way of answering the powerlessness of the fallen woman with the power of anger and sex. Melony’s infinite capacity for anger and her sexual charisma, her “temptress” traits, are her weapons against a world in which she has no place. She uses her powers in both love and violence, but in the end, Irving’s characterization of her is still tender and loving.

Melony’s lack of a definable history immediately cues readers familiar with Irving that she will be a wild card. Irving’s characters always have a well-defined sense of past, grounding in a place they have come from. Melony’s history is obscured and

fuzzy. Dr. Larch knows that she was left at St. Cloud's at around the age of five, but no one knows for sure. She does not begin to talk for another four years, a fact Dr. Larch contributes to her anger, possibly the most remarkable and well-developed aspect of Melony's character. Dr. Larch writes, "Melony was always angry... We don't know about her origins, or her early years, and she might not know herself what all the sources of her anger are" (82). Later, in a conversation, Melony confirms that her lack of parentage is closely tied to her insuppressible anger. When Homer asks her why she wants to know who her mother is, she says, "To kill her... Maybe I'd poison her, but if she's not as big as I am, if I'm much stronger than she is, and I probably am, then I'd like to strangle her" (99). Because Irving typically writes histories even for peripheral characters, Melony's uncertain origins signal that she is an unusual character. Without knowledge of where she came from, neither the reader, nor Melony herself, knows where she is going.

Even when Melony is older and has established a solid life for herself, her anger is still solid in the memories of the staff at St. Cloud's. They are scared of what response Melony might send in for the orphanage questionnaire: "They must believe her response would be negative—not because Melony was necessarily negative...but because Melony was so angry. [Larch says] 'She was born angry, she will always be angry, and even if she means us no harm, one day she will be angry enough about something, about anything—so that she'll respond to the questionnaire'" (512). The people around Melony have intricately contradictory feelings about her. They love her and fear her. These conflicting feelings point to the appealing fullness of Melony's character; she is both

endearing and scary, and because of her contradictions people are both attracted to and repulsed by her.

One of the possible sources for her anger is an experience she shares with many of Irving's other heroines. While Larch will only allude to her "several unfortunate experiences" in foster homes, later description is more explicit (82). While Melony's own tendency towards violence ruins her chances with her first foster family, "Melony had run away from the second and third families, alleging that the men in the families, either fathers or brothers, had taken a sexual interest in her" (83). Whether her allegations were true or untrue is never decided, but the reader is never given reason not to believe her. The abuse she has suffered remains in the background of her character, and when Melony's insuppressible anger and violent sexuality erupts, the reader is left to wonder what connections might exist between her rage and her abuse.

When Irving first describes Melony, he concentrates mostly on her prominent, unusual physical appearance and strength. She is "strong enough to pick [Homer] up and run with him in her arms across the finish line" in a three-legged race, we are told (30). Even her name reflects her robust figure: "She was about sixteen (no one really knows her exact age), and there was a fullness of her breasts and in the roundness of her bottom very much the suggestion of melons" (30). Melony's physical magnitude represents her enormous presence. The paranoid stationmaster, for example, thinks of her as "that fat nightmare of a girl from the orphanage: who 'had caused so much damage' and 'that great big ruffian girl—the destroyer'" (164). Her great size is a physical manifestation of her great power to inspire fear.

While Melony holds the power of her anger most strongly over Homer, she also abuses the other orphans at St. Cloud's. One incident involving her worshipful sidekick, Mary Agnes, demonstrates the conflicting feelings that Melony has about her size and strength. In her anger at Homer's departure from St. Cloud's, she twists Mary Agnes' arm behind her back and steps on her, breaking her collarbone. When Dr. Larch asks her how this made her feel, Melony replies, "Sick, I guess, but strong. Sick and strong" (226). Her shame for her actions coupled with her fascination with her own power shows a fundamental contradiction in Melony's character. As Larch says, "She's a baby thug!" (227). She is cruel, controlling, and manipulative, and yet hungry for love, approval, and security. This contradiction of traits, this full, rounded characterization, will make Melony so desperately needful and yet abusive towards Homer Wells.

Melony's sexual aggressiveness is one of the most notable aspects of her characterization, and though it is never directly connected to her own sexual abuse, she replicates her experiences by intertwining her own sexuality with violence. Like Franny Berry before her assault, Melony is a sexually forward girl who is very comfortable with her body. For example, when Homer reads *Jane Eyre* to the girls' division for the first time, Melony "sits cross-legged, "her underpants not quite big enough for her... her considerable bosom thrust forward..." (75-76). Melony's relationship with Homer is second only to Homer's relationship to Dr. Larch in terms of development and meaning. She uses her anger and sexuality to hold power over Homer, attempting to consume him, trying to tie him to her forever. As Dr. Larch reflects, Melony's "potential for educating Homer Wells seemed to be both terrible and vast" (84). As it pans out, Melony educates

Homer in two ways, first sexually initiating him, and then in a subtler way, morally educating him

Though Melony and Homer are only a couple for a short period of their respective lives, her presence is constantly in the background of Homer's life and the novel. Melony doesn't simply introduce Homer to sex. She knows that her sexuality holds power, and she uses it to make Homer do what she wants. She shows him a picture of a woman fellating a pony and says, "If you'd like me to do that to you, Sunshine, all you've got to do is get me my file—get me my records" (91). Her willingness to trade sex for her St. Cloud's file shows the importance that recovering her history holds for her.

While Melony never forces Homer to have sex with her, she is both the initiator and the enforcer; he is too terrified of her not to obey. In the act of enticing Homer with the promise of oral sex, she bites his finger just as a hawk kills a snake against the roof of the sawmill where they meet secretly. Connecting Melony and Homer's sexual connection with both Homer's pain and the hawk's killing of the snake, a phallic symbol, draws obvious connections between sex and pain, echoing the scene in *Garp* in which Helen bites off Michael Milton's penis. Melony's own forcible sexual coercion of Homer is mirrored by the hawk beating the snake against the roof, symbolizing the way that she will both seduce and threaten him.

When Melony finally decides to reward Homer for his attempts to find her history, the sexual encounter is quickly connected with multiple images and associations of death. They are in the sawmill, whose beams "shriek" and threaten to "collapse and kill them both" (100). Lying on an old mattress, Homer's thoughts turn from Melony's advances to the violent history that the mattress must have had. Melony's breathing

“reminded him of little Fuzzy Stone and the energy of those mechanisms that struggled to keep Fuzzy alive. That such wet, breathy effort was made in Fuzzy’s behalf seemed to emphasize how fragile his life was”(100). Fuzzy will die, and having already been described as clinging to death perilously, the connection between this sexual encounter and death is unequivocal. In her anger at Homer’s inability to cooperate, Melony turns her anger on the sawmill, dismantling it and throwing the pieces in the river. When she cannot release her anger through sex, she must release it through violence, a violence that is foreshadowed when the hawk kills the snake. Melony’s anger is too great not to have an outlet, and if she cannot connect with Homer, she must destroy to discharge her overwhelming pain.

Homer follows through with Melony’s request for her files, and she follows through with her promise. However, he is less reciprocal in keeping his promises to her. At the saw mill where she and Homer experiment sexually, Melony says, “Promise me you’ll stay as long as I stay, Sunshine” (100). He promises. Because Melony places such emphasis on the sacredness of promises, Homer holds the power of his promise of her just as firmly as Melony holds her physical power over him. Though Homer does not understand the weight she places on his promise, his promise establishes a kind of symmetry in the power each holds over the other: “That hold that Dr. Larch imagined Melony had on Homer was balanced by a hold Homer had on Melony (Homer’s promise to her, which Larch couldn’t see)” (107). Homer eventually leaves Melony and St. Cloud’s, and his broken promise haunts Melony for the years after she eventually leaves the orphanage. Though she is angered and tortured by Homer’s disloyalty, the allegiance

she shows in her fifteen-year-long search for him redeems her character as she becomes the moral voice of the novel.

When Melony leaves St. Cloud's, her moral dedication is shown through her respect for fairness and justice, even in acts of violence. She dresses in men's clothes and does men's work, factors that get her into fights often, as if in demonstration of Catherine MacKinnon's assertion that "battery is often precipitated by women's noncompliance with gender requirements" (47). But, Melony always fights fair. For example, after getting caught trying to steal from some Navy officers, "She'd managed not to have sex with the men, but they had broken her nose, which had healed crookedly, and they had chipped her two front teeth—the big uppers" (272). She fights off two orchard workers who try to assault her by stepping on the driver's face, jumping on his back, and biting his ear before whipping his accomplice with the driver's belt, taking chunks out of his flesh and face. Melony heads back to the orchard, where "she told the foreman, in front of the women who working on the sign, that two of his men had tried to rape her" (276). She proceeds to prove she would be a better worker than the two men would together, and threatens the foreman with police action if he does not give her a job.

Melony's strength, independence, and intimidating presence also prompt men and women to make assumptions about her sexuality. When Melony first arrives at York Farm, the apple mart women call her a tramp several times, and as she is leaving, they say "the slut" (331). When she won't let a college boy flirt with her girlfriend, Lorna, at a bar, he calls her a "fucking dyke" and she breaks his nose (449). Like Jenny Fields, Melony wants to have sex (or not) with whom she wants, and dress and act as she wishes, but because she does not fit people's expectations, they attempt to punish her. What they

do not bargain for, however, is that Melony will not bow to other's expectations, and she defends her independence with her strength. In portraying people's sexual censure and violence towards Melony, Irving is showing another way in which women's bodies may be controlled by others. Irving uses Melony's treatment at the hands of abusive men to question the ways that society threatens women's liberty in addition to denying them reproductive autonomy. In this way, Melony's characterization combines with Dr. Larch's and Homer's abortion debate to create the novel's overall message that women face numerous threats to their freedom, often forcing people to resort to violence, like Melony, or break the law, like Larch, to afford women the independence they are denied.

Of the rape victims in Irving's fiction, Melony is the one who retains the most control over her own sexual and physical power. Like Ellen James and Franny Berry, Melony's life has handed her a fate that would have meant death to a female character in Victorian literature, but Melony retains firm ownership over her sense of control. She resembles the dark lady that Fryer describes in her sexuality and her fearsomeness. The destruction of the snake in her sex scene with Homer is an obvious parallel to the destruction of the phallus and suggests the male fear of castration, but Melony is not merely a misogynistic creation. Instead, Irving admires her for her unfaltering dedication to Homer, and more importantly, for making him keep his promise and live truthfully. Melony also does not succumb to the fate of the archetypal dark lady, who dies because her social trespasses will not be tolerated. Fryer writes that the dark lady's "tragedy is inherent in her posture of defiance to societal mores," but Melony's story is not a tragedy (24). Her violent experiences combine with her abandonment, her loss of Homer, her

anger at men and the world, and her unfaltering dedication to truth to create of Irving's most powerful and unforgettable characters.

Melony's dedication to rules and promises is a theme Irving draws throughout the book, positing her as the moral voice of reason in the novel. She will not let any discrepancy, lie, or ambiguity get past her. When Homer reads to her *Jane Eyre's* line: "Even for me, life had its gleams of Sunshine," Melony scoffs at the optimistic palaver. "Let her come here!" she exclaims. "Let her show *me* the gleams of sunshine!" (77). After this confrontation, Melony names Homer "Sunshine," an ironic nickname that reminds him she will not let any equivocation slide. She has a keen eye for missing information, what Larch calls "Melony's law—a law of records, or written history..." (95) Melony also has an intolerance for lying. Though she steals Mrs. Grogan's coat, she returns it and the money when she has steeled her life. And when Homer has fulfilled his promise to her by returning to St. Cloud's, Melony keeps her end of the deal by returning as well. Even though just her dead body returns, Melony has kept her promise.

Melony's role as the moral voice of the novel is highlighted when she makes her way to Ocean View Orchard to see Homer after a fifteen-year separation. Melony, who "possessed a quality that could never be bullshitted," notices evidence of Angel's real parentage and Homer and Candy's affair immediately. True to her character, she confronts Homer immediately. She is deeply let down, and says to Homer, "I somehow thought you'd end up doin' somethin' better than ballin' a poor cripple's wife and pretendin' your own child ain't your own" (497). She continues, "You knocked up somebody you shouldn't 'a' been fuckin' in the first place, and you couldn't even come clean about it to your own kid" (498). Melony's analysis shows that Homer is quick to

make rules for other people and to expect them to be obeyed, but he creates rules to fit the lifestyle he wants to lead. While the abortion rules are criticized for trying to control all people without regard for circumstance, Melony shows that making rules for each person's context does not make sense either.

In his book *My Movie Business*, Irving writes that Melony had to be left out of the movie *The Cider House Rules* lest her presence overwhelm the movie's condensed story line. He writes, "Left out of the movie was the book-length character of Melony... I eliminated her from the screenplay; she was simply too overpowering a character" (11). Irving's choice to leave her out of the movie testifies to the power of her character. No other female character in an Irving novel has this kind of dark charisma. Melony is an unlikely heroine, but she is one of the heroes of this novel.

Rose Rose, the other female hero of the novel, is a victim of the rules made by her father, Mr. Rose. His tight grip both keeps and destroys fairness and order. Mr. Rose keeps order by making real, enforceable rules about violence and aggression, keeping them both under wraps with the threat of his own knife. Homer thinks, "In a fight with Mr. Rose, there would be Mr. Rose's own rules, whatever they were. The real cider house rules were Mr. Rose's" (379). Mr. Rose demonstrates the futility of the cider house rules in a conversation where Homer expresses concern that no one seems to follow the posted rules. Mr. Rose replies, "We got our own rules, too" (455). He goes on to explain that the black workers have internal rules about dealing with the white people and fighting amongst themselves. Though these rules function smoothly for some time, Campbell writes that Mr. Rose "has gone too far with his rules" (120). Though Mr. Rose's rules are highly effective, Mr. Rose's unbending enforcement makes them dangerous, posing the

ultimate danger to Rose Rose, whom he rapes and impregnates. Mr. Rose's rule that raping his daughter is acceptable is a rule that allows a man to hold power over a women, just as abortion rules do, and the particular tragedy of Rose Rose's abuse shows the way that rules can abet suffering in the name of affording protection.

The various rules that characters make and break come into conflict when the characters discover that Rose Rose is pregnant with Mr. Rose's child, and Homer decides to break his own rules and perform an abortion for her. This scene highlights the perverseness of Mr. Rose's rules. Even after his rape of his daughter has been discovered and Rose Rose has been taken away, Mr. Rose still wants Rose Rose back, according to the "rules" he considers the ordering principles behind his life. Muddy, one of the migrant workers, comes to Homer's house saying, "[Mr. Rose say to tell you they got their own rules. He say you breakin' the rules, Homer]" (572). Mr. Rose is willing to defend his rules even when they are so clearly wrong, even when they allow him to rape his own daughter. Homer's decision to give Rose Rose an abortion also stresses the error of Homer sticking to his own rules without considering their consequences. He decided that he was not going to perform abortions, and though he could not fully justify his rule, he stuck to it. Homer's decision to break his rule shows that rules cannot be made forever; they should be malleable for time and circumstance, but most importantly, to help people in need.

When Rose Rose stabs her father and escapes, and he lets himself bleed to death, the resolution is not satisfying. In a book where the characterizations are so thorough and detailed, Mr. Rose and Rose Rose remain sketches. In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison outlines a new critical project

that helps explain why African-American characters in American fiction are rarely characterized in full, detailed ways. She argues that white perception of the African-American presence, or as she terms it, the “Africanist presence,” has been one of the most overlooked motifs in American literature, and white American authors are a source of the “invention and effect of Africanism in the United States” (15). To analyze the effects of this invented presence, she calls for a project that would seek out “the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (17). In *The Cider House Rules*, Irving uses Mr. Rose and Rose as symbols for the pitfalls of white society, vehicles for talking about the rules and mores written by white society, and as catalysts for the white characters to fulfill the destinies that he lays out for them.

One reason that Mr. Rose and Rose do not receive much narrative attention is that Irving uses them as symbols. Mr. Rose is a sketch of tyranny and Rose is a sketch of helpless innocence. Morrison writes that African-American characters are often used by white authors to “ease and ... order external and internal chaos” (53), and in a novel where rules and morality are malleable, Mr. Rose and Rose help the other characters see moral decisions in more defined terms. Other than representing innocence and evil, Rose and Mr. Rose are relatively undeveloped. They appear and disappear with the changing of the seasons, and because none of the main characters really gets to know them, the reader does not either. Still, Rose and Mr. Rose are absolutely integral to the plot and theme of the novel because their presence forces the white characters, Homer in particular, to reevaluate themselves and pursue their fates. Morrison

writes that white authors often use black characters in this way, as “surrogates and enablers” for white characters who need direction (51). Because Rose Rose and Mr. Rose help Homer reexamine his ethical rules and come to terms with his future as an abortion provider, their main purpose is “to define and enhance the goals of white characters” (Morrison 53). Mr. Rose and Rose Rose demonstrate the pitfalls of rules, but they have no real stories of their own. Once they show Homer the way, they vanish, Mr. Rose dying of a stab wound and Rose Rose disappearing into the night.

Race affects the characterizations of two important characters, but Irving does write several scenes that highlight racial tensions. The orchard workers make various racist gestures, from apple mart worker Florence Hyde stating that the migrant workers are “simple children” to orchard worker Vernon Lynch beating up a migrant worker with little reason. Mr. Rose points out the racism in the Ocean View community to Homer several times. For example, when Muddy sees Homer fall off a bicycle and says, “Sometimes, it don’t help if you’re white!” Mr. Rose replies, “It help, if you white, most of the time” (555). Therefore, Irving is not simply using the African-American characters without reference to the racial realities of the time period, but the African-American characters are not used as characters in their own right. As Toni Morrison describes, they are used to push the white characters along the lines the narrative sets out for them, but the narrative never has a place for the African-American characters to progress. Irving’s characterization of Mr. Rose and Rose Rose shows that though he has made progress in his portrayals of women, he has much to work on in portraying characters of color.

The characters in *The Cider House Rules* grow as they define to themselves and others the rules they will or will not follow. St. Cloud’s has its own set of rules, but they

are not the kind of ignorant, merciless rules of Mr. Rose or the abortion laws. Dr. Larch disobeys the abortion laws because the lawmakers, represented by the clueless St. Cloud's Board of Director's, cannot make laws to govern people whose lives they do not understand. After witnessing the horrid situations of women with unwanted pregnancies, the unsafe and brutal conditions of illegal abortions "Off Harrison," and seeing the dead body of a woman to whom he had refused an abortion, Dr. Larch concludes that breaking the rules and performing abortions is the only humanitarian choice. He decides, "He would deliver babies. He would deliver mothers, too," by being both an obstetrician and an abortion provider. (67). Having seen first-hand the pain and death that these ignorant rules inflict on women, Dr. Larch is driven to disregard rules made by people who have not seen the rules' brutal consequences.

Everyone in *The Cider House Rules* breaks rules that are not right for their lives and make rules to replace them. The representation of the different rules and their makers shows the pitfalls of absolute rules, the folly in making laws to control everyone. Irving uses the futility and accepted dismissal of the cider house rules to draw a direct parallel to the dismissal of rules that takes place at St. Cloud's. The cider house rules are useless because they are written by those who have no knowledge of the real lives of the people those rules are going to affect. Like the women who cannot obey the abortion laws, the Mr. Rose and the migrant workers cannot obey them because they have no say in their creation or enforcement. The important difference between Larch and Mr. Rose, however, is that in disregarding the abortion laws, Dr. Larch does not create new rules that would be just as unfair and controlling, as Mr. Rose's rules are. Mr. Rose "represents the phallic father of the nuclear family and the patriarchal society" (Campbell 119). Dr.

Larch says repeatedly that he will not make a woman's decision for her. There are no rules about who gets an orphan or an abortion: he will "give a woman what she wants." On the other hand, Mr. Rose represents rules that are only successful because they are enforced with threats and knives: "Mr. Rose *is* the rule—the law—carried to its most egregious and dead end" (Campbell 123). Mr. Rose's rules are created by a leader for his community, but they are obeyed and enforced so unquestionably that they are destructive.

Determining what message *The Cider House Rules* sends about feminism is difficult because unlike in *Garp*, no one in this novel has a conversation or makes an argument about feminism. As in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving's feminist message in *The Cider House Rules* must be found in the plot elements less directly tied to a feminist, political message. As Irving has stated, this novel was intended to be a novel with a message. It presents a debate between Dr. Larch and Homer, and Dr. Larch, with his interests clearly with the welfare of women, wins in the end. Dr. Larch proves that abortion laws, like the cider house rules, are made by people who do not understand the lives of the people those rules will affect. The men who make laws do not know a woman's life, and so they make laws that hurt women. The novel demonstrates one way in which women are in a particular position to be held at the mercy of others' rules, rules that can be deadly.

Through Melony and Rose Rose, Irving also shows ways that women can subvert the rules that stifle their independence and freedom. The abortion theme demonstrates that rules are often made to hurt women, and those rules deserve to be broken, and these two characters are the embodiments of that theme. Melony lives by her own rules, rules that often make other characters wary of her, but she is also a moral voice who criticizes

Homer when he makes rules that hide the truth. She is a modern illustration of the dark lady that Fryer describes, but she subverts the dark lady's dismal end, turning her stereotype of evil into power. Unlike many characterizations of powerful women, as in *The Odyssey* or *Macbeth*, Melony is not a threat. She is a hero in her own right. As in *Jane Eyre*, the novel Melony carries with her in her fifteen-year search for Homer, Melony creates a life according to her own rules and standards, refusing to live by anyone else's expectations.

Melony's combination of anger, power, and compassion marks a new turn in Irving's female characterizations. For the first time in any of his novels, he writes a female character with the compelling unification of sensitivity and rage. Her character sets up an understanding of feminine anger that Irving expands in his later, book-length character of Ruth Cole, the protagonist of *A Widow for One Year*. Had Irving not written Melony with such fury and grace, he could not have constructed Cole, the deeply intellectual, loving woman who also breaks a man's kneecaps without apology. Through characters like Ruth and Melony, Irving shows that although feminism, and feminists like Jenny Fields, have greatly improved women's lives, women still live in a misogynistic society that sometimes deserves to bear the brunt of their anger and violence.

While Rose Rose, on the other hand represents the victim of harsh rules that injure people, she also exacts revenge for her crime. Irving had previously written female characters who take revenge on their attackers, but unlike Franny, who merely scares her assailant, Rose Rose kills her assailant—her own father. Though Rose Rose's characterization is not well developed, her revenge on her abusive father is triumphant, and like Melony, she shows that sometimes violence is an understandable reaction to a

violent society that victimizes women. Both women are victims and heroes, but neither is subjected to the disgrace of a Victorian fallen woman. Instead, they evade the laws that men make to control them and make the rules for their own lives. *The Cider House Rules* demonstrates through the abortion laws and through Melony and Rose Rose that as long as women have no control over the rules, they have no control over their lives.

## Chapter Five

### Irving's legacy—politics, metanarrative, and rewritten women

#### Victorian “fallen women” revised for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

After examining Ellen James, Franny Berry, Susie the Bear, Melony, and Rose Rose, Irving's mission to rewrite the Victorian fallen woman is clear. In his endeavor to be a modern Victorian, he has updated the Victorian notion of female sexuality. Irving adapts the Victorian obsession with fallen women, but the midst of that imitation, he brings sex out of hiding. His rewriting of the Victorian concerns suggests that he believes that sex is no longer something our literature can contort to fit some unrealistic standard. The Victorians sought to write novels that addressed their world and lives, but Irving recognizes that to make such large statements about the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he must portray sex in ways the 19<sup>th</sup> century refused to.

The Victorian tradition stunted the characterization of women in many particular ways that Irving chooses to reverse. Women could not be the main characters in novels and live to see the end of them because the moral codes prevented them from doing anything interesting. If authors did write female characters with love affairs or adventures, they almost always killed them off for their moral blunders. Irving, on the other hand, writes women into the centers of his novels. Women in Victorian writing were either infallibly pure or sexually deviant, and Irving does not bow to this opposition. Many less obvious details about Irving's female characters suggest that he is attempting to reverse the fallen woman stereotype. For example, Mitchie writes that the “most positive female characters in nineteenth century novels are most often frail and weak. Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontës, and even George Eliot use plumpness in their female

characters as a sign of a fallen nature” (22). Irving, on the other hand, emphasizes Melony’s and Susie the Bear’s large frames. Their physical strength is no essentialist precursor to their being sexually immoral. After returning to America, Franny becomes a well-known actress, a profession that was equated with certain sexual corruption in Victorian times. Mitchie writes that aside from prostitution, acting was the most morally corrupt occupation for a woman, requiring substantial public use of the body for display and expression (67). In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, however, Franny’s willingness to portray her own traumatic life for the public shows that she has healed. In each of these cases, Irving takes a characteristic that would have been destructive in a Victorian woman’s characterization and reverses it, giving it new life in his own characters.

Mitchie argues that Victorian literature stifled representation of the female body in a way that feminist literature has tried to remedy. She writes, “A major though not always articulated task of feminist writing has, so far, been the full and responsible representation of the female body, the breaking of codes and taboos that have trapped it in a ‘Victorian’ past” (Mitchie 125). By writing literature that attempts to portray women’s experiences and bodies truthfully, feminist literature can rescue the female body from the Victorians’ imagined, unattainable ideals. Irving’s female characters do break all of the rules that confined Victorian female characters and relegated them to the background.

Irving’s work attempts to merge Victorianism and feminism, but he meets with mixed success. Because Irving reveres the Victorian narrative style while breaking from their style of female characterization, he is sending a message that the Victorians’ notion of female sexuality does not belong in the literature of our time, but the Victorian style

can be used to rewrite women as literary characters. On the other hand, while feminists strive to prove in the political arena that women's bodies should not be controlled by men, Irving writes novels that address the same issues of female sexuality and then claims that they are not political. His resurrection of the Victorian fallen woman holds less power when Irving refuses to admit that such a task might have political significance.

### **Writing women: Irving's feminist metanarrative**

Because of Irving's unwavering dedication to the revival of 19<sup>th</sup> century storytelling over the powers of politics, it is not surprising that the feminists of his novels make their most important statements through writing. In fact, in every one of his novels, Irving writes one of his characters as an author. This technique allows Irving to make statements about the nature of writing not in the first person, but through a character who shares Irving's chosen vocation and hence may be supposed closer in some ways to Irving's consciousness. Though not all of these characters could be described as feminist authors, Irving seems to value feminist characters most when they make their statements through writing. The feminists in his novels wield the most power when they wield it with words.

In *The World According to Garp*, the power of speech and the affliction of speechlessness are key symbols associated with nearly every main character. From Technical Sergeant Garp reduced to "Arp;" to lispng Alice Fletcher, Garp's mistress; to Helen biting her tongue giving Michael Milton an intimate goodbye, characters with impaired speech populate the novel. However, the themes of speech and speechlessness are most compelling when Irving couples them with the effects of rape on language, as they are in the characterizations of the girl in the park, Ellen James, and the Ellen

Jamesians. In the cases of the former two, “sexual abuse either literally or figuratively robs the victims of language—robs them of the distinguishing mark of humanity” (Harter and Thompson 98). Speechlessness, however, is not just a side effect that compounds rape’s trauma. Irving also draws it as a parallel to rape’s destructive effects. Because Ellen is raped, she cannot be herself; because her tongue is cut out, she cannot speak for herself. Without speech, her ability to express her individuality is impaired, reflected by the fact that the Ellen Jamesians appropriate Ellen James’ self. Thus, as Irving writes it, rape removes a person’s ability to be the sole definer of her existence and even the ability to exist as an individual at all.

However, though Ellen is deprived of her ability to speak, she regains her means of expression and self-definition through writing, as many of Irving’s characters do. For example, Jenny Fields, Irving’s favored feminist, makes her most influential public statement through her autobiography. Throughout the beginning of the novel, she lives according to her unpopular philosophies, but only in her writing can she make others take her seriously. As Campbell writes, Jenny’s autobiography “gives her a credible voice” (78). Her beliefs make her a locally famous eccentric, but her writing projects her into the limelight. Shostak explains, “In newly identifying the constraints under which she has operated as a mid-century American woman, [Jenny’s] narrative rewrites popular knowledge about the social construction of identity such that Jenny becomes the leader of a national movement.” Because Irving so clearly values Jenny, who expresses her feminism, however erstwhile, through writing, he obviously favors a feminism that transfers to the popular page and mass audience. Jenny’s form of feminism is not unlike Irving’s—easy to digest and lucrative to publish.

The writings of Jenny Fields and Ellen James sharply contrast to the writing of the Ellen Jamesians. Both Ellen and the Ellen Jamesians have lost their voices, but while the Ellen Jamesians sacrificed their own, Ellen uses her poetry as her voice. Though she cannot even read her own poems, Roberta Muldoon reads them “while Ellen [sits] beside her, looking as if she were wishing very hard that she could say her own poems” (586). The main writing that the Ellen Jamesians do, on the other hand, is portrayed as canned, programmatic, and impersonal. The Ellen Jamesians are known for the notes they use to communicate and spread their message. Jenny explains to Garp, “All Ellen Jamesians carry little note pads around with them and they *write* you what they want to say” (191). Their crude, repetitive form of expression annoys Garp. He “felt only disgust at her grown-up, sour imitators whose habit it was to present you with a card. The card went something like: ‘Hello, I’m Martha. I’m an Ellen Jamesian. Do you know what an Ellen Jamesian is?’ And if you didn’t know, you were handed another card” (192). In this contrast between Jenny and Ellen and the Ellen Jamesians, Irving’s narrative judges the different feminists for how they use their voices. Ellen has had her physical voice taken from her, but she replaces it with a literary voice. The Ellen Jamesians, on the other hand, voluntarily disable themselves and the words that replace their voices are unoriginal and disingenuous.

While one of Irving’s problems with the Ellen Jamesians seems to be their political motives, his other objection to them is their voluntary sacrifice of their own means of expression. Through his writer characters, Irving shows a deep reverence for expression. Through Garp, the novel expresses confusion and disgust with activists who would purposefully remove their own means of spoken expression and replace it with

what Garp sees as jargon written on note cards. Garp assumes that “[Ellen Jamesians] were probably all lousy at talking, anyway; they probably never had a worthwhile thing to say in their lives—so their tongues were no great sacrifice; in fact, it probably saves them considerable embarrassment” (192). Miller analyzes the novel in a way that seems to agree with Garp’s perception of these issues. He writes that *Garp* highlights

the strange connection between the world of the word and the energies of sex, rape, and violence... In this novel any rape of one’s sensibility involves, ultimately, an inability to communicate. Garp’s anger at the Ellen Jamesians is, therefore, justified, because if the perversion of sex is rape, the perversion of language is propaganda, hysteria, and other forms of voicelessness... Language and sex are related in that both are potentially creative, connective forces whose uses, however, must be tempered with some constructive restraint; both may become powerful divisive influences when misused or abused (Miller 109).

According to Miller, the Ellen Jamesians are guilty of the same essential crime that they are protesting. Garp is disgusted by the Ellen Jamesians because they take their anger about the degradation of sex, one form of life-affirming human contact, and turn that anger into the destruction of another life-affirming power, speech. According to Miller and Garp, the Ellen Jamesians have wasted part of their lives while protesting the abuse of another part.

Both Miller and Garp assume that voicelessness is not a form of communication or at least not a form they can respect. However, as Garp realizes at his mother’s funeral, the Ellen Jamesians’ lack of communication is communication in itself. By not speaking,

they demonstrate their pain without words. Josie Campbell makes a similar argument about the effectiveness of the Ellen Jamesians' self-silencing. She writes,

The Ellen Jamesians, who are obsessed—mad—with rape, choose a horrifying method of protest: they cut their own tongues out. Garp fails to understand their self-mutilation, that by cutting their tongues out, these women correctly point to the essence of rape. Garp, as a writer, is understandably disgusted with the Ellen Jamesians' action; he believes they deprive themselves of words, of the ability to tell a story. What Garp fails to understand is that their self-mutilation “speaks” the very subject of rape. The Ellen Jamesians' cut flesh becomes the word for rape—but it does not make for a pretty story (85).

Though her analysis is persuasive, Campbell offers more of a defense for the Ellen Jamesians than Irving offers in the novel. No character ever defends the Ellen Jamesians with depth or sincerity, so it must be assumed that the novel as a whole rejects their metaphorical demonstration of rape and its consequences. By favoring written expression over the abstract but forceful methods of the Ellen Jamesians, Irving condemns radical feminism without considering its power to influence.

In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, successful action for women is also connected to writing. However, the main female character, Franny is not the writer; her sister, Lily is. Her dwarfism prevents her, in her mind, from leading a normal life, so she makes her life's mission to record the Berry family's history. Aside from that memoir, *Trying to Grow*, the only piece of writing that Lily completes is the script for the revenge play against Chipper Dove. Writing the script for the revenge scene not only allows Lily to take part in Franny's revenge; it also makes the vengeful plot against Dove seem less

violent and malicious. The script is highly detailed, cuing entrances and exits, music, and dialogue. By carefully scripting the entire event, including the exact moment that Susie the Bear's assault will stop, Lily gives the seemingly uncivilized scene an air of structure and order. Because it is written, it cannot go astray, and the act of writing becomes an alternative to blind violence.

Because Lily writes a script for the skit, Irving implies that the act of revenge against Dove is more justified than a random, unorganized act. The composition of the revenge denotes planning and forethought; the Berry's are not punishing Dove out of raw anger or uncontrolled passion. Campbell argues that by making revenge ritualized, it transforms a mere act into a "magical" act: "Ritualizing the threat of rape has been transformative" (106). Though direct connections are not made between the revenge play and feminism, the revenge is the novel's ultimate action against rape. Irving surrounds the revenge scene in writing to give this dramatic, extreme act authority and credibility.

Many of the pro-choice feminist statements in *The Cider House Rules* are also quoted in characters' writing. Unlike the other two novels, the feminist writer in this novel is Dr. Larch, whose writing supporting abortion rights is quoted at length. He crafts his entire story of St. Cloud's in order to further the work he is doing to benefit women. His views are also expressed in the letters he writes to Homer at Ocean View Orchard; much of the abortion debate between the two characters takes place in writing. In his last move to ensure that St. Cloud's will continue to give safe, affordable abortions, Dr. Larch rewrites many of his records and writes forgeries of documents to create Dr. Fuzzy Stone, Homer's new alter-ego who takes over the orphanage to continue Larch's work. Dr.

Larch's writing not only argues for the benefit of women; it also physically creates a new way for St. Cloud's to keep helping them.

While Dr. Larch writes to break the rules, Homer's writing is a metaphor for maintaining the rules. Every year he rewrites the cider house rules, and Irving draws parallels between these laws and abortion laws. Every year that Homer remains at Ocean View, away from his destiny, writing rules for people who do not need them, he is replicating the writing of the abortion rules. As Homer is a white man imposing rules on African-Americans without having knowledge of their experiences, the lawmakers are white men isolated from women's experiences imposing rules on all women. While Dr. Larch's writing helps women, this writing hurts them. When the rules are discarded, Homer discards his own beliefs against abortion and returns to St. Cloud's. In this way Irving portrays writing as the central of the novel's main conflicts, showing the ways that writing can hurt or help women.

Irving gives metanarrative a great deal of power in the feminist conflicts of these novels. Because of the prominence that Irving places on language in his characters—more than a handful of them are writers, lecturers, or filmmakers—removal of language from an Irving character is a grave offense. Thus, Irving's most lucid feminist statement is in his connection between feminism and language. His novels emphasize the power that language holds for women and the ways that male power can rob them of that language, sending an overall message that language and writing are the avenues Irving prefers to further feminist ideals. Conversely, Irving is resentful of people who want to take political action and refuse to use their voices to do so, instead resorting to nonverbal forms of communication that push away human contact. Indeed these messages in his

novels mirror the action Irving has taken himself. Though he will not accept his role as a political writer, he produces writing that highlights feminist causes, just as the characters in his novels do.

### **Irving's damning contradiction—the apolitical feminism**

Though his novels have approached women's political issues in a very public way, Irving is not willing to take on the label of a political writer. Irving says, "I'm not a political commentator... A social commentator? You bet. A moralist? Sure. But I would like to be judged by how well I set up the shop" (qtd. in Bernstein). Still, in many public arenas, Irving has been cited as a feminist writer, and according to a loose, general definition of feminism, his novels do seem to fit the billing. For example, Maria Lauret defines feminist literature in *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America*. She writes that "we need to regard feminist fiction not as an intrinsically female genre, but as a set of diverse cultural practices which contest both dominant meanings of gender and established standards of 'literariness'" (4). Irving's fiction, especially in *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and *The Cider House Rules*, does challenge conceptions of gender and the gendered expectations of both the 19<sup>th</sup> century and our own. However, though Irving's works in general fulfill the general expectations of feminist fiction, closer inspection of each of these three novels has revealed that Irving is in fact wary of many types of feminism, and that often his wariness borders on dismissal of feminism that fights for public recognition or political gain.

In *The World According to Garp*, for example, Irving pits two types of feminists against each other. The novel favors Ellen James and Jenny Fields. Jenny is an ardent feminist figure, but she personally dislikes the political term "feminist." Jenny's most

important role is as the maternal figure who nurtures Garp and then uses her feminist fame to attract and nurture the constant flow of abused women who stay at her home. Ellen James is a powerful figure, but underdeveloped; she also functions as a nurturing figure. She joins the Garp family after they lose Walt, both mothering the family and replacing their lost child. Even Bainbridge “Pooh” Percy, the most demonized Ellen Jamesian, becomes a maternal figure. After she murders Garp, “her rehabilitation [is] so impressive”; she takes care of the mentally retarded and after having a child, is a dedicated mother (588). While the novel as a whole questions notions of gender, the characterizations of his individual feminist characters do not always challenge society’s gendered expectations.

The opposing sort of feminists Irving portrays are the Ellen James Society feminists, whom he characterizes as misled, psychotic zealots. However, they are also the feminist characters with the most potential to challenge the concepts of productive or unproductive feminism in *Garp*. Each of them makes a public statement that no one can ignore, and while their statement is unpleasant, there is no doubt that it heightened awareness of rape in the novel. Even Garp must admit that the Ellen Jamesians’ physical demonstration of silence is effective on some levels. However, though the characters admit the effectiveness of the Ellen Jamesians’ activism, Irving’s characterization still pointedly criticizes their desire to gain attention for their political views. It seems that Irving is acting out his own distaste for politics on his view of feminism in this novel. Because Jenny and Ellen are private and family-oriented, they are the right kind of feminists, but the Ellen Jamesians’ goal of political recognition is reason enough to dismiss their form of activism. Irving has not made a great effort to challenge the

Victorian ideal if his best feminists are always maternal, and he has not made a great effort to further feminist ideals if the feminism in his novels gets offensive when it gets political.

*The Hotel New Hampshire* avoids the issues of feminism and politics almost entirely because the novel is so self-contained. As a fairy tale, the novel takes place in an imagined world all its own, and of Irving's novels, it contains the fewest references to actual events. Therefore, this novel does not contain a character or group who can be labeled as its representative feminists. The closest anti-feminist symbol is Ernst, the pornographer whose violence towards the world is concentrated on women; he terrorizes Franny just for the thrill. Aside from this one symbolic character, the novel simply does not concern itself with making a statement about feminism outright.

In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, feminism is a personal belief resulting from personal tragedy. Though the term "feminism" is never articulated, the subplot surrounding Franny's rape and recovery challenges gender expectations and creates Irving's vision of a woman's struggle in a sexually violent society, generally feminist concerns. The pitfall of this novel's feminist statement is that it does not make total sense to portray obviously feminist responses to rape in an imaginary world outside the influence of feminism in the public sphere. In fact, the only actual philosophy treated at any length is Freud's. The idea of feminism or any political activity for women is mentioned only in passing in reference to a dispensable character, even though the novel is set in the early 1960s, the beginning of the modern feminist movement. Thus, Irving's portrayal of Franny and Susie's experiences seems to say that women can recover from rape and lead healthy lives in a world where feminism does not exist. So once again, the

unity of family and human empathy takes precedence over feminism as part of the sphere of “politics.” Though *The Hotel New Hampshire* may be read as a feminist treatise on male violence and its survivors, it operates as if it were in a vacuum, isolated from the feminist thought contemporary to its composition. This isolation from political context is a liberal trend in Irving’s feminist portrayals.

Irving’s statements about politics and feminism become most complicated in *The Cider House Rules*. On one hand, the novel’s characters do not discuss feminism as a distinct concept because the novel takes place during the 1940s and 1950s, before feminism was a popular term. On the other hand, this novel places an abortion debate, a very politically controversial issue central to the feminist and anti-feminist movements, as a central conflict. In fact, Harter and Thompson argue that Irving’s politics overwhelm this novel: “As ‘polemic,’ the novel is seriously flawed and since Irving’s ‘correct political vision’ sometimes distorts the book’s larger theme—the problematic nature of personal and social ‘rules’—the difficulties with [*The Cider House Rules*] are considerable” (114). These two critics denounce the fact that the novel’s ultimate opinion about abortion is obvious, and by the story’s end, even overwhelming. Although Irving tries to avoid political writing, this argument shows that Irving’s politics do play an important role in this novel.

However, Irving claims that he did not decide to make abortion an important issue in order to further a political agenda, though his overtly political actions on behalf of the movie version seem to point otherwise. The novels’ ultimate slant on the issue is unequivocal, but the novel does not preach. Dr. Larch preaches, Mr. Rose preaches, even Homer preaches. But, the novel’s multivocal discussion amongst characters about the

issue does not end in a pro-choice slogan or bumper sticker-sized moral. Different characters offer many perspectives that complicate the issue. As Davis and Womack write, "*The Cider House Rules* also affords Irving a venue for challenging our assumptions, fears, and prejudices about abortion, that most fractious of social issues... Irving challenges his readers to consider the abortion debate from a host of vantage points, rather than merely adopting a 'correct political vision.'" *The Cider House Rules* is a didactic novel, as Irving has stated several times, so it does not hide its particular version of feminism, and for this novel, feminism is choice. Dr. Larch gives a woman what she wants—"An orphan or an abortion," and does not try to sway her decision, for it is her right to choose, a belief certainly influenced by today's feminism. In light of the important place that abortion and feminist beliefs have in this novel, it is surprising that Irving will admit that it is a didactic polemic, but not political. The impossibility of this combination suggests Irving is splitting hairs to avoid the political label while still addressing political issues.

Whether or not Irving is a "feminist author," his novels certainly make compelling statements about women, especially in his treatment of sexual violence. While his portrayal of women was weak in the beginning (the only prominent woman in his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, seems mainly drawn as an adolescent fantasy), his portrayals have since gained in complexity and prominence. Feminist issues—rape, incest, abortion, and other issues of bodily freedom— make up some of the central conflicts in several novels. Irving's works emphasize women's rights as being closely connected with women's bodies and issues surrounding their health, their sexuality, and their physical autonomy. Though a male writer might not be labeled feminist by many

feminist theorists, Heath writes that just because men cannot take central roles in feminism does not mean that “men might not have, ought not have, something significant and real and unoppressive to say about women and women’s sexuality” (206). These arguments towards an anti-Victorian vision of women’s sexuality are some of Irving’s strongest feminist statements.

The feminists that Irving’s novels most often portray in a positive light are equally ardent proponents of human rights as of women’s rights. They are often portrayed as nurturers (Dr. Larch) and mothers (Jenny Fields, Helen Holm, Susie the Bear, and Candy Kendall). Though Irving’s celebrated feminists are caretakers, his characterizations and narrative style do not always label liberal feminism as meek and soft either. Irving preserves the strength of the feminist message is by the continual repetition of words that were once taboo, but that many feminists have tried to bring to light in order to address. Though Dr. Larch and the nurses use the code phrase “the devil’s work,” the word abortion is used without hedging or apology. In *Garp*, the word “rape” is used unflinchingly, and the description of Ellen James’ violently mutilated tongue is repeated several times. In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, though Franny at first can only explain that she was “beaten up,” the words “rape,” “rapist,” and “gang-bang” are repeated numerous times. A typical example is when Lilly says, during the revenge play, “It’s not good for her—this lunatic raping, raping, raping everyone!” (401). These two novels repeat this loaded word not for shock value, but because it is the only word that can express the horror of the act. When the reader recoils at the repetition of “rape” he or she is reacting to the continued reminder of that terrible crime. Irving’s novels have succeeded in bringing many feminist issues to the attention of millions of readers, so his

type of feminism is obviously one that many people are interested in reading about, whether or not they agree with it.

However, Irving is discriminating in the type of feminism that he will endorse. He portrays the Ellen Jamesians, who commit violent acts against themselves and others for political effect, as the “wrong” type of feminists. Irving seems to have a problem with any type of “radical.” The simple act of being extreme is an offensive trait in his characters. For example, in *Garp*, the Ellen Jamesians are described as “an inflammatory political group of feminist extremists” (539). What is so wrong with being inflammatory, political and extreme? Yet the phrase is written into the novel as if those words alone are derogatory. One must wonder why Irving would take such pains to criticize women’s political movements if he refuses to be political himself. Heath writes, “Is it helpful, appropriate, feminist for men to stand in judgement of feminism and its theoretical works and its political debates, brandishing an assumed standard of autonomy in the one hand and its foregone dismissal in the other? (204) Irving’s tendency to judge feminism and criticize radical feminism is his strongest impediment against being called a feminist writer.

While Irving addresses feminist issues with ardent force and informed eloquence, his standing as a feminist novelist is not as secure as the popular media portray. He values feminism when it is more philanthropic and less threatening, and holds back no criticism when characterizing feminism that takes a public stage for political gain. Thus Irving creates his own brand of feminism, accepting some aspects of liberal feminism while rejecting most basic tenets of radical feminism. Though his intentions are positive, the potential negative aspects of a liberal-friendly male author wearing a popular feminist

title while criticizing some aspects of the movement are many. Heath writes that the specter of male power is too strong to make such judgments:

This is, I believe, the most any man can do today: to learn and so to try to write or talk or act in response to feminism and so to try not in any way to be anti-feminist, supportive of the old oppressive structures. Any more, any notion of writing a feminist book or being a feminist, is a myth, a male imaginary with the reality of appropriation and domination right behind (201).

According to this logic, Irving's power as a male writer is more likely to do detriment to radical feminism than it is to support liberal feminism. Though the popular media may continue to brand him as a feminist, his status as a "feminist novelist" is tenuous.

Irving's attitude toward feminism is clearly linked to his ongoing toil to avoid political labels. One would not expect his political messages to come through clearly if his novels place controversial issues at the center while he waxes innocent to interviewers about writing stories, not diatribes. However, literature has always been a source of political debate; as Judith Fetterly writes, "Literature is political" (xi). The idea of separating art from the political runs counter to both Victorian and feminist ideals. Victorian art—both visual and literary—addressed political issues without regret. Nineteenth century authors often had an agenda and they didn't try to hide it. Dickens especially wrote about orphans, child labor, and poverty not only because they are rich in narrative possibility, but also because they were political concerns he was highly active in. In recent years, novels like Anonymous's *Primary Colors*—high on political gossip and low on literary value—have made headlines, possibly making Irving wonder if the best novels are timeless and if political novels will be dated by the issues they address.

Perhaps Irving is hesitant to identify his writing as political lest he be lumped in with more gimmicky writers.

By consciously distancing himself from political writing, Irving also creates barriers to embracing feminist ideals in his writing. One basic tenet of radical feminism is that everything is political—striving to hide issues from public debate only compounds their personal consequences. The type of feminism that Irving endorses, however, the type epitomized by Jenny Fields, is almost wholly personal—Irving often shortchanges the broader, societal context of feminism. Irving cannot expect to be wholly successful as a feminist if he wants to be a non-political writer. If Irving wants to write about feminism and write about it well, he needs to acknowledge that he is contributing to a political conversation and take responsibility for the political baggage that comes with the territory. Janet Todd concludes the chapter on men in feminist in her book *Feminist Literary History* with this argument, “No one should enter [feminism] without knowing that he or she takes a political position” (134). Perhaps the reason that Irving addresses feminist issues with such energy and yet misses the mark on so many occasions is because he refuses to acknowledge the political nature of his writing. While Irving’s novels seems to have found a way of writing about politics without having to answer for them, his fence-straddling mars both his feminist and neo-Victorian trademarks.

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