

Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*: Women's Rights or "Fetal Rights"?

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Abstract

While hotly debated in political contexts, abortion has seldom figured in explicit terms in either literature or film in the United States. An exception is John Irving's 1985 novel *The Cider House Rules*, which treats abortion insistently and explicitly. Although soon thirty years old, *The Cider House Rules* still functions as an important voice in the ongoing discussion about reproductive rights, responsibilities, and politics. Irving represents abortion as primarily a women's health issue and a political issue, but also stresses the power and responsibility of men in abortion policy and debate. The novel rejects a "pro-life" stance in favor of a women's rights perspective, and clearly illustrates that abortion does not preclude or negate motherhood. This article discusses Irving's novel in order to address abortion as a political issue, the gender politics of fictional representations of abortion, and the uses of such representations in critical practice. A brief introduction to the abortion issue in American cultural representation and in recent US history offers context to the abortion issue in Irving's novel. The analysis focuses on abortion as it figures in the novel, and on how abortion figures in the criticism of the novel that explicitly focuses on this issue. The article argues that twenty-first century criticism of Irving's text, by feminist scholars as well as explicitly anti-feminist pro-life advocates, demonstrate the pervasive influence of anti-abortion discourses illustrates, since these readings of Irving's novel include, or reactively respond to, the fetal rights discourse and the "awfulization of abortion." The article further proposes that the novel's representations of reproductive rights issues – especially abortion – are still relevant today, and that critical readings of fictional and nonfictional representations of reproductive rights issues are central to feminist politics.

Keywords: Abortion, *The Cider House Rules*, gender, John Irving, motherhood, representation.

Introduction

As seen in the latest election campaigns,¹ the abortion issue is central in US politics today, and a Presidential candidate's stance on the issue is important to voters. We have also witnessed some astounding statements by US politicians about abortion, “legitimate rape” and divine interventions. Abortion, it is clear, continues to be a controversial topic, forty years after its legalization. This article uses John Irving’s 1985 novel *The Cider House Rules* – an unusual novel in its insistent and explicit treatment of abortion – in order to address abortion as a political issue, the gender politics of fictional representations of abortion, and the uses of such representations in critical practice. Although Irving’s novel will soon be thirty years old, it can still function as an important voice in the ongoing discussion about abortion/reproduction in terms of rights, responsibilities, and politics. After a brief introduction to the abortion issue in American cultural representation and in – mostly recent – US history, the discussion turns to the abortion issue and Irving’s novel. First, to address abortion as it figures in the novel, and second to address how abortion figures in criticism of the novel that explicitly focuses on this issue. This is done in order to argue the continuing relevance of the novel’s representations of reproductive rights issues – especially abortion – today. But it is also the purpose of this discussion to demonstrate that in recent critical texts Irving’s representations of abortion and abortion rights are framed in ways that signal the pervasive influence of anti-abortion discourses and developments, such as the “fetal rights” movement and the “awfulization of abortion.”²

Although the following discussion focuses on the US context, some connection needs to be made to the Swedish and European context. In part because this is the one within which I am writing and, at various times, have taught Irving’s novel. And in part because here, too, Irving is a much read author, which raises questions about how the novel’s “America” can be understood in this other geographical context. Sweden, in its mainstream variety, is a very different and much more secular culture than the US, and I would venture to say that until very recently, although there has been a minor “right to life” movement here as well, abortion as a free right for all women has been taken for granted by many since its legalization in 1975. Does *The Cider House Rules* and its early twentieth-century/covert 1980s America, perhaps also its main theme of “abortion rights,” function for a (mainstream and secular) Swedish reader only as an exotic (and undereducated) “other”?³ I would suggest that the novel is urgent reading also within a European and a Swedish context today, even more so than at its time of publication. While the abortion issue is central in US politics today, it is also rising on the agenda of European politics, even as I write this article. In 2010, a major decision was taken in the European Council, the result of which is that no one can be held responsible for refusing to perform, facilitate, or assist in abortion, or any action that could result in the death of a human fetus or embryo (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet*); although

this is a recommendation, not legislation, it may come to have far-reaching effects in all of Europe, including Sweden. In the fall of 2012, Tonio Borg, an avid anti-abortion advocate from Malta, a country where abortion is prohibited by law and may result in up to three years in jail for both women who seek them and doctors who perform them, took a seat as the EU official responsible for health issues. At this time, as well, the European version of a “fetal rights movement” (“One of Us”), supported by the Pope, sought to limit women’s access to abortion across Europe. These developments signal the urgency of addressing and critiquing cultural representations of abortion, and for analyzing abortion as a social phenomenon, from feminist perspectives.

Abortion and Cultural Representation

While hotly debated in political contexts, in twentieth century fictional representations abortion has seldom figured in explicit terms in either literature or film in the US. Recent years have seen the publication of studies on representations of abortion, for example in film (Arp 2008; MacGibbon (2006)), comic books, poetry, and short stories (Myrsiades 2002) and novels (Koloze 2005; Baker-Sperry 2009).⁴ Researchers contend that because of its controversial nature, but also as a result of the Comstock Laws, abortion has typically been addressed via narrative indirection, allusion, or circumvention (Wilt 1990; MacGibbon 2006).⁵ An exception to this rule, however, is Irving’s *The Cider House Rules*. Given Irving’s very explicit treatment of abortion, contraception, and childbirth, this is probably the only bestselling, mainstream novel to speak so thoroughly and continuously about abortion, written by a major American author.⁶ Between its publication in the 1980s and the present, Irving’s novel, besides being treated by literary scholars, has also figured as a pedagogical tool within areas as diverse as medicine, law, and interdisciplinary abortion studies.⁷ *The Cider House Rules* remains a central American “abortion novel” – as witnessed by its inclusion in book-length studies on abortion in American fiction, including Judith Wilt’s pioneering study of motherhood and abortion (Wilt 1990).

The novel was published at a time when the movement for “fetal rights” gained momentum (Kaplan 1994) and when abortion rights were “under siege” but the assault had yet to reach its heights (Rockwood 1996/2004: 124). Additionally, the 1980s was the decade that saw the publication of many groundbreaking academic feminist studies on abortion, including Kristin Luker’s *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984) and Rosalind Pollack Pechesky’s *Abortion and Woman’s Choice* (1986). The 1990s saw the continuation of academic as well as activist publications on reproduction, both on the history of abortion (Raegan 1998) and on the myths of motherhood (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky 1998), but this was also the decade when various reactionary men’s movements like the Promisekeepers called for a “return” to a patriarchal family order, and abortion clinics and those

who worked there increasingly became the targets of anti-abortion terrorism (Levine 2002: 118).⁸

In the twenty-first century, studies such as *The Reproductive Rights Reader* (Nancy Ehrenreich 2008), *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (Nelson 2003), and *Interdisciplinary Views on Abortion* (Martinelli-Fernandez et al. 2009) signal the continued need for producing, collecting, and reprinting feminist and gender-critical scholarship on reproduction issues, that takes women's diverse perspectives into account, as does the forthcoming new edition of Luker's study (2012). Meanwhile, stridently "pro-life" publications on abortion and American culture such as Stetson's *The Silent Subject* (1996)⁹ and Koloze's *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction* (2005) continue to present abortion not as a matter of reproductive rights for women, but as a question of moral philosophy that strangely erases sexuality, gender – and women's bodies – social situation, and medicine from the picture. These divergent strands of scholarship that stretch from feminist/women's reproductive rights perspectives to anti-feminist pro-life perspectives can also be traced in the history of abortion as a public issue in the US.

Reproduction and Abortion in the US

As a public concern in the United States, abortion has gone from being a non-issue before the 1850s, to being an issue of great concern for medical professionals, theologians, and legislators in the period 1850-1960, and then to becoming a highly divisive political issue in the past forty years (Luker 1984; Reagan 1997; Nelson 2003; Ehrenreich 2007; Radosh 2009). We are now at a point when – as seen in the 2012 election – no presidential candidate can remain silent on his/her stance about abortion/reproduction, and his/her stance on abortion seems decisive for voters (*New York Times* articles e g); abortion is an issue in national politics, as it is in state politics.

Many anti-abortion advocates in the US, including the Republican Party, call for a total ban on abortion as a "return" to "traditional" family values. As researchers have noted, however, abortion has been legal, not illegal, for most of US history; only in 1859 did abortion become illegal (first in Maine, and subsequently in other states), and even then, physicians would often perform abortions, and they continued to do so under certain circumstances until *Roe vs. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruling that made abortion legal in 1973. Furthermore, public opinion has been rather consistent over the past few decades, with 22 percent of the American population stating that abortion should never be legal in 1975 as well as in 2005, while a majority of the population supports abortion as a legal right for women: "support for abortion on demand, or under some circumstances, has remained at about 78 percent of the American population for 30 years" (Radosh 2009: 26). Nevertheless, ever since *Roe vs. Wade*, federal and state legislature has

resulted in a dramatic decrease in the availability of abortion. This began with the Hyde Amendment in 1979, which meant that abortion was no longer covered by Medicaid, and thus made it substantially less accessible for poor women. We are now – in 2012 – at a point where, in approximately 97 percent of counties outside metropolitan areas there are no abortion providers, and “[i]ronically, abortion is probably less accessible today than it was two hundred years ago” (Radosh 2009 31).¹⁰ In the twenty-first century, medical schools can decide to not include abortion procedures in the skills required of students who plan to become gynecologists (Levine 2002: 124),¹¹ family planning centers will suffer discontinued financial support if they choose to address abortion in any other than negative terms; in some states, doctors are required to misinform women who seek abortion that they “suffer increased risk of suicide by undergoing the procedure” (*Newsday*). Sex education has morphed into “abstinence education” in US schools (although proven to be ineffective in decreasing teen sexual activity or teen pregnancy), supported by special funding from Congress. “Nonmarital sex, educators are required to tell children, ‘is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects’” (Levine 2002: 92). Due to the reluctance to include abortion in sex education, many Americans are misinformed both about the history of abortion, and about the procedure as such.¹² In the early 1990s, when researchers ran focus groups on abortion with thirteen-to-nineteen-year-olds, teenagers expressed “erroneous and anecdotal evidence about abortion more often than sound knowledge, portraying the procedure as medically dangerous, emotionally damaging, and widely illegal” (Stone & Waszak, quoted in Levine 2002: 122). Since the 1990s especially, fathers’ rights and men’s rights movements have also affected the abortion issue; demands for male partners’ consent to abortion and the parental consent rule that operates in many counties clearly signal paternalistic attitudes about pregnant women.

These developments are signs that reproductive rights as formulated and fought for by feminists especially in the late 1960s and in the 1970s are suffering a severe and drawn-out backlash. One result of this is a tendency to include anti-abortion arguments and rhetoric into *any* statement about abortion; the “pro-life” rhetoric has influenced even the ways that pro-choice proponents now frame their arguments. For example, because “pro-lifers” claimed that “pro-choicers” were anti-family, as Judith Levine observes, “[a]s early as 1980, American pro-choice feminists started to cast themselves as ‘pro-family,’ some even implying that if the state provided good child and health care, everyone would want babies, and abortion would become obsolete” (Levine 2002: 120). Hence, abortion is increasingly spoken of, also by supporters of abortion rights, in negative terms, to the point that “by the beginning of the twenty-first century, one can hardly speak of abortion without a note of deep misgiving or regret, if one speaks of it at all” (Levine 2002: 119). Australian scholar Marge Ripper calls this the “awfulisation of abortion” a development that has had the effect of more qualified support, as

well as sinking support for abortion rights in the US; and also has had the effect of making proponents of abortion “its apologists, espousing the arguments of their antagonists, slightly softened: abortion is an evil, though a ‘necessary evil’. It is a deeply private ‘family’ affair and never preferable to contraception.” (Levine 2002: 120; Pheterson 2009: 103). In other words, it has become increasingly difficult to speak straightforwardly about abortion as an unconditional right for women. As Luker (1984) demonstrates, the polarization of feminist pro-choice perspectives and the “pro-life” movement was already in place in the 1980s. While many of the same arguments can still be heard, what has developed further since then is the “pro-life” discourse on the rights of the fetus, a discourse that values “the unborn” above the life of the mother and uncannily often separates the fetus from the maternal body. The following discussion centers on the ways that Irving’s novel forcefully counters such discourses.

Representing the Issue: *The Cider House Rules*: Abortion, and Gendered Power

Set in New England, *The Cider House Rules* centers on two male protagonists, Wilbur Larch and Homer Wells, in a sprawling and complex plot that stretches from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. At a time when abortion is illegal, Dr. Wilbur Larch – a young gynecologist and obstetrician arrives in Maine to run the St. Cloud’s orphanage as well as a covert abortion clinic. He performs abortions from a deeply felt wish to allow women a choice, giving them, in the doctor’s own words, “an orphan or an abortion” (Irving 1985: 102). “He was an obstetrician; he delivered babies into the world. His colleagues called this ‘the Lord’s work.’ And he was an abortionist; he delivered mothers, too. His colleagues called this ‘the Devil’s work,’ but it was *all* the Lord’s work to Wilbur Larch” (Irving 1985: 93). The other main character in the novel is Homer Wells, born at St. Cloud’s in the early 1920s, an orphan whose birth parents are never known. Despite several attempted placements in “proper” families, the boy keeps returning to the orphanage as a result of parental abuse, ignorance, or negligence. Finally, a teenager and the oldest orphan in the boy’s division, Homer is trained by Dr. Larch in obstetrics and gynecology, in order to “be of use”; Larch hopes that Homer will continue the abortion practice, but unlike Larch, the young man initially takes a recognizably “pro-life” stance.

The time of Homer’s premature medical apprenticeship is also the time of his relationship with St. Cloud’s overage orphan girl, Melony, who he promises he will never abandon. However, Homer leaves the orphanage at age 20, invited to come and stay at an apple orchard, Ocean View, with Wally and Candy, a young attractive couple who come to St. Cloud’s for an abortion. Melony soon runs away from the orphanage to find her own way and, initially, to find Homer. Over fifteen years pass, during which Homer and Candy have a son, Angel, who they

pretend Homer has adopted. This lie is maintained to spare the feelings of Wally, who returns from World War II an invalid and marries Candy. Life at Ocean View, where Candy and Homer continue their relationship in secret, and seasons are marked by the coming and going of the African-American work crew each fall, is juxtaposed to the continued work of the aging Dr. Larch at St. Cloud's until his death. Finally, Homer is confronted by Melony, who questions his situation based on secrecy and lies, and by the situation of the African American girl Rose Rose, who, pregnant by her own father, needs an abortion. Homer returns to the orphanage to take up the doctor's work as abortionist, teaming up with a Nurse Caroline to "be of use" to women in need.

Ending in 1960, the temporal setting predates the large-scale introduction of the birth control pill which resulted in a drastic drop in numbers of unwanted pregnancies, and abortions (Baker-Sperry 2009: 158). The plot also temporally predates the second wave of the women's movement that among other things would result in the legalization of abortion with *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973. As legal scholar Bruce Rockwood observes, "[w]riting in the 1980s, Irving could easily have portrayed these problems in the lives of contemporary Americans, but by choosing to set the story in the context of American history, he gives both depth and distance to his theme [. . .] allowing us to talk about it in an almost 'objective' voice, by the pretense that we are not, really, talking about ourselves" (Rockwood 1996/2004: 129).

The novel represents abortion as a social practice involving both men and women, and stresses gendered and sexualized positions of empowerment and need. Although as a whole, the narrative is a voice in favor of women's "right to choice," agency is distinctively gendered: women are predominantly patients at the mercy of male physicians (Wilt 1990; Wahlström 2001; Baker-Sperry 2009). Whereas there are both male and female "quack" abortionists in the narrative, when it comes to accurate medical procedure, men are the doctors until the end of the novel, although Nurse Caroline is more of an equal to Homer than Dr. Larch's nurses were to him. Critiquing Irving's assignation of gendered power, Wilt observes that his novel "alone takes up at length the issue *Roe vs. Wade* made key in America: the 'choice' is an affair 'between a woman and her doctor'." To Wilt, this is problematical: "Since men have taken over the medical establishment of the West from midwives, a second male role, a final 'fatherhood,' enters the arena of maternal choice" (Wilt 1990: 118).¹³ The novel also represents women characters as central decision-swayers, but not as decision makers. Women's limited power of influence on issues of reproduction may be read as consistent with the actual situation in the US during the time when the novel is set, and hence as "realism," but given its time of publication, it also sets up a tension between its characterization of women and the powerfully vocal women's movement.

Irving continues to stress the power and responsibility of men in abortion policy and debate, when, in an interview organized by Planned Parenthood in Ver-

mont in 2006 he states that “Men who believe in legislating against abortion should watch a few childbirths. It’s a painful experience, but it’s a great experience – provided it’s a wanted child. What man with a conscience wants to put a woman through the experience of childbirth when the child is unwanted?” (Michniewicz 2006). And indeed, although the “saviors” of women in the novel are predominantly men, so are the culprits: the men who “father” children in the strictly biological sense only to abandon them; violent and domineering men who see women alone as responsible for pregnancy. As one critic observes, “Implicit in the text is the tension between the *needs of women*, in the words of Dr. Larch, for either an orphan or an abortion [. . .] and the simultaneous *power* (as doctors, judges, lawmakers, and pimps) and *absence* (as fathers) of *men*, who both cause the misery and control the response of society to it” (Rockwood 1996/ 2004: 129). Meanwhile, women are often shadowy figures seeking help, and motherhood is often erased in the narrative.

Towards the end of the novel, however, there is a significant shift when women’s voices, and more especially their voicing of needs, demands, and expectations – turn Homer’s trajectory back towards St. Cloud’s orphanage and hospital. It is the fate of Rose Rose, and Candy’s revelation to Homer that “[Rose’s] father is the father” (Irving 1985: 694) that makes Homer accept his responsibility to work as an abortionist, and it is Melony’s confrontation with Homer after looking for him for 15 years, when she disappointedly states that he is a liar and an adulterer who is “lying to his kid” and “ballin’ a poor cripple’s wife” (Irving 1985: 612) that brings him to tell Angel the truth about his birth and parentage.

Another central aspect of the novel is that, unlike many of the pro-life voices that seem to dominate debates today, it makes abortion almost universal, a part of normative reproduction practices. This representation is true to the reality of abortion in the US — where studies show that all kinds of women have abortions, including “pro-lifers,” Catholics, and republicans (Levine 2002: 119). The novel also provides a rather straightforward solution to the issue, based in a realistic and scientifically informed *as well as* women-oriented perspective. I have already stated that the “women-oriented” abortionists’ stance on the plot level is complicated by Irving’s choice to place men as heroes and women as in need of rescue; the relative erasure of mothers and foregrounding of fathers and sons can certainly also be problematical from a feminist perspective (Wahlström 2013b). However, the novel ends in a “pro-choice” (or pro-reproductive rights) stance, and I would argue that it can be read for progressive feminist purposes on several points.

The first of these is that the novel illustrates that abortion does not preclude or negate motherhood. In this, the novel forcefully counters the image promoted by anti-abortion activists that women who have/support abortion are against motherhood (Luker 1984). Instead, in the novel, a close proximity of abortion and motherhood is established through a variety of narrative strategies, such as the adjacent rooms for births and abortions in the clinic at St. Cloud’s; and via characters like

Candy and Rose Rose, as well as numerous unnamed women, who are envisioned both as mothers *and* as women who have abortions. Abortion in *The Cider House Rules* is represented as one element on a reproductive continuum and a part of normal female sexuality. Likewise, the narrative counters the notion that people who favor free abortion are “anti-family.” In the words of sociologist Polly Radosh, “[t]o advocate for abortion choice was to advocate against the family in the post-*Roe vs. Wade* political polarization.” (Radosh 2009: 29). Instead, the notion of kinship bonds is foregrounded in Irving’s novel although it does not favor the nuclear family (Wahlström 2013a).

Importantly, motherhood (like family) carries many different meanings for women in the US; meanings that are inextricably linked to class, race, sexuality, and religion and that for many – but *not* for the majority of women – result in clear political stances for or against abortion as practice (Luker 1984; Radosh 2009). Many feminist scholars have investigated the reproduction/gender/power nexus, and formulated ideas about social change (Cornell 1995; Nelson 2003; Rothmann 2000). Kristin Lukers’ crucial study *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984) clarifies how conservative and liberal ideas in the early 1980s about meanings of motherhood take shape for “pro-choice” and “pro-life” women activists due to these women’s very diverging situations in terms of education, economic status, and religion and how these meanings are forceful factors in the debate over reproduction in the US. The activists’ almost diametrically opposed views on motherhood– as women’s natural purpose in life, placed in a “separate sphere” that women but not men have access to on the one hand; motherhood as a possible but not necessary and certainly not an exclusive purpose for women, one that can be shared with men, on the other – still circulates in the debates on reproduction today.

Second, the novel rejects a “pro-life” stance and a “fetal rights” perspective in favor of a women’s rights perspective. Homer Wells at first lets his view of the embryo as a “person” override his concern for women, and states that he will not perform abortion procedure. However, he later changes his mind, and performs an abortion on the first occasion that a woman – a girl, really – actually asks for his medical expertise; upon the death of Dr. Larch he becomes an abortionist and moves back to St. Cloud’s to do “the Lord’s work,” to “be of use” to women. In this way, Irving places the categorical anti-abortion stance with a protagonist whose change of opinion comes at the same time as his decision to be honest about his parenthood and also his decision to return to the orphanage from the flawed Eden of Ocean View – in other words, Irving shifts Homer over to the pro-choice stance as a part of his growth into responsible adulthood. Importantly, too, abortion is not presented only as a long line of individual cases but also as enmeshed in structural gendered power relations between women, abortionists, and authorities.

According to Luker, the rise of the fetus as a public concern since the 1980s comes from the “visibility of the embryo via new technologies in medical procedure” as well as “improved medical procedure for abortion” combined with the fact that birthrates in the US are among the lowest in the world (Luker 1984: 4). E. Ann Kaplan also suggests that the use of “fetal images” in US film and media since the 1980s signals a deep worry over women’s freedom to choose motherhood, or not choose it, and explains the important role of the fetus in the national imaginary as an effect of men’s desire to control life and “eradicate the need for woman herself in reproduction” (Kaplan 1994: 34). The fetal rights debate in the US can hence be seen as the continuation of a long tradition of thinking about women’s place as reduced to motherhood, but where the female body is erased (Pollitt 1990). Indeed, an understanding of the fetus as a separate, autonomous human being, as Cornell observes, “rests on the erasure of the woman; it reduces her to a mere environment for the fetus” (Cornell 1995: 48). It has also been pointed out by feminist critics that activists in the fetal rights movement live by a double standard, for while very concerned with the conditions of the fetus, they seem unconcerned about living children who suffer poverty and economic hardship, and little concerned with the hardship of mothers and women. In Irving’s novel, Dr. Larch argues with such a stance and proposes more concern for “the born” (Irving 1985: 495). In a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt, he writes:

These same people who tell us we must defend the lives of the unborn – they are the same people who seem not so interested in defending anyone but themselves after the accident of birth is complete! These same people who profess their love for the unborn’s soul – they don’t care to make much of a contribution to the poor, they don’t care to offer much assistance to the unwanted or the oppressed! How do they justify such a concern for the fetus and such a lack of concern for the unwanted and abused children? They condemn others for the accident of conception; they condemn the poor – as if the poor can help being poor. One way the poor could help themselves would be to be in control of the size of their families. I thought that freedom of choice was obviously democratic – was obviously American! (Irving 1985: 488)

The Hyde amendment, which withdrew Medicaid funding of abortion and left the poorest women (incidentally also disproportionately women of color) without access to abortion, was already in effect as Irving wrote his novel. Today, Dr. Larch’s words have gained new significance, given the development of the fetal rights movement in the US in the past two decades, which among other things has resulted in new forms of criminalization of maternal behaviors, with addicted mothers being arrested for providing illegal substances to minors (the children they carry), and in some instances being incarcerated upon delivery of their baby (Pollitt 1990/1998).

Finally, medically sound abortion procedure is represented in the novel – in spite of the fact that moral issues are continuously discussed by the central male characters in the book – as primarily a women’s health issue and a political issue that also has effects for men and for children. Representing abortion as finally

more a health issue and a political issue than a moral issue, the novel in a sense combines two temporally located strains: on the one hand, it returns to the time when male medical professionals were leading the debate on reproduction/abortion; on the other it lands in the present of the time post-*Roe vs. Wade*, when abortion was formulated by feminists as a gender-political issue. It also firmly represents abortion as a social issue, since the availability of abortion to all women is a central point, illustrated not least by the many cases of women who experience botched “back-alley” abortions or who attempt to end their own pregnancies, often with fatal results for themselves. Read in the current context of the continued and seemingly ever louder debate over reproductive rights in the US, and of conservative twenty-first century policies regarding sexual education and family planning, Irving’s novel complicates all these issues but ends in a clear support for women’s right to access abortion; hence, in spite of its gendered tensions, the novel may even be seen as doing feminist work (Wahlström 2004).

Addressing the Issue: *The Cider House Rules* and the Critics

The Cider House Rules is, then, a novel that treats abortion unusually insistently and explicitly, and not only in negative terms; the narrative does not reproduce the otherwise culturally dominant “awfulization of abortion.” However, such awfulization does have effects on the criticism of *The Cider House Rules*. Having read the available research on the novel, I have selected the studies that specifically address abortion and reproduction for analysis here. In the following discussion, I introduce these studies. As I will demonstrate, the simultaneous presence of women’s rights discourses and a “fetal rights” discourse sometimes creates problematical tensions even in criticism that proceeds from an expressly feminist perspective.

Irving’s novel got generally good reviews upon publication, but the theme of abortion was apparently problematical for some critics. One example of this was a review which claimed that the novel demonstrates how “the history of compassion cannot have a stop and must perpetually demand larger generousities than those hitherto conceived. By responding to that demand we may, tomorrow, invent ways to abolish *nightmare choices between born and unborn.*” (DeMott, quoted in Davis & Womack 2004: 15; emphases added). While the first sentence is vague and curiously disembodied, the second one establishes that abortion is a “nightmare choice,” although it is not really represented as such in Irving’s novel. Another reviewer sees the novel as having “force and integrity,” but in his wording – “doctors mustn’t *commit* abortions” – the reviewer rhetorically aligns himself with a perspective that equals abortion with crime (Lehmann-Haupt 2004: 120).

In the decades since the publication of the novel, literary and cultural scholarship has addressed its abortion problematic variously, but often in ways marked by reluctance or negativity. To Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack, Larch and

Homer's "debate over the morality of abortion exists as a microcosm for the much larger, although *equally disjunctive*, dispute that occurs on national and international stages *across the globe*" (Davis and Womack 2004: 14; emphases added). By positing the opinions of Homer and Larch as a "disjunctive dispute" these critics fail to stress the ultimate agreement between the two male protagonists in terms of practice (while also situating "the issue" on a global scale, rather than in a specifically US context). Josie Campbell's scholarly introduction to the novel is unremarkable except in its wording; the critic claims that the novel ends in "tragedy" and "compromise all around," and that "[o]nly Angel (*whose parents chose not to abort him*) [*sic!*] lives in love and happiness" (Campbell 1998: 123; emphases added). Although it is perhaps difficult to agree with Irving's own suggestion that the novel has a "triumphant ending" (Michniewicz 2006), like the novel as a whole, the ending actually offers a positive vision of combining family life and working life and for expanding conventional definitions of family and parenthood (Wahlström 2013a).¹⁴ Campbell's response to the novel's ending rings of the anti-abortion rhetoric, where abortion practice is automatically anti-family and anti-children; abortion is always a "tragedy," if not an outright crime.¹⁵

In the first full-length study on representations of abortion and motherhood in English language literature, Judith Wilt stated – in the late 1980s – that she was aware of "a new spirit abroad, as *Roe vs. Wade* comes under increasing attack: a spirit which would delegitimize the rough and multiplex female experience that went into the abortion law reform movement in favor of more totalizing perspectives of law or art" (Wilt 1990: xii). We now know that Wilt's prognosis on the times was correct; there was indeed a new "spirit abroad." Whereas reproduction issues are social issues that have everything to do with gender and power, many recent studies treat reproduction and abortion only as moral or moral-philosophical issues, shying away from the links between poverty, race/ethnicity, and reproductive rights (Brent 1996; Koloze 2005; Arp 2008). Indeed, in some of these, women hardly figure at all, demonstrating the uncanny separation of woman/mother and embryo typical of the "fetal rights" discourse that has been critiqued by feminists (Cornell 1995; Pollitt 1990/1998). Even studies that explicitly profess a pro-women's rights perspective at times draw upon the ideational framework of anti-abortion proponents.

Recent contributions to criticism on *The Cider House Rules* illustrate this tendency. Pro-life advocate Jeff Koloze's study *An Ethical Analysis of the Portrayal of Abortion in American Fiction* (2005), frames the novel as detrimental and lacking a Christian moral compass; it is also seen as consistent with representations of abortion in US fiction by major male writers, since it contains three themes Koloze defines as central to such representations:

First, parenthood and children are further devalued in explicit terms of either worth to the larger society or worth to their parents. Second, a disrespectful attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church or an often-strident anti-Catholicism is evident in

recent fiction. Finally, opponents of abortion are demonized and marginalized in an effort to categorize such opinions as out of the mainstream of American life. (Koloze 2005: 250)

While Koloze's observation that anti-abortionists are villains generally applies to Irving's novel, it hardly applies to young Homer, and as already mentioned the novel does not devalue family, parenthood, or children. Koloze makes the point that Irving's novel seems morally divided or undecided; however, it does not create "schizophrenia" as he claims, but, as discussed previously, the narrative lands in a firmly pro-women's rights standpoint. In a novel that maximizes the presence of abortion in the narrative, it seems strange to claim that the narrator attempts to "minimize abortion" (Koloze 2005: e.g. 215, 216). It is, however, evident that the critic himself minimizes abortion as a reproductive rights issue. He does this by stating for example that "[i]f women became pregnant under less-than-perfect circumstances, some twentieth-century fiction suggested that abortion could be a viable, indeed a suitable, alternative to the social disgrace of being pregnant out of wedlock," which has little relevance for Irving's novel, where abortion certainly is not only sought to avoid "social disgrace," and where the circumstances of women who seek abortion are often much more serious than the phrase "less-than-perfect" suggests.

Koloze mentions that Larch wants to deliver babies, but also to "deliver women" – "his euphemistic term for performing abortions" (Koloze 2005: 212). He never goes further into the issue of helping women; instead, Koloze focuses on Larch and Homer's decisions to "Play God" as abortionists, thereby rather effectively erasing women from his own discussion. It is not surprising, perhaps, that a pro-life advocate attempts to cast women who have abortions as selfish; this is common anti-abortion rhetoric, as is the lack of recognition for women as gendered beings *beyond* motherhood.¹⁶

In a reading that contrasts greatly with Koloze's, Janet Engstrom and Ramona Hunter state that it "would be impossible to read [Irving's] book and not be moved by its relevance to women's health" (Engstrom and Hunter 2007: 467). In their article "Teaching Reproductive Options Through the Use of Fiction: The *Cider House Rules* Project" (2007) Irving's bestseller is useful literature in concrete terms. Engstrom and Hunter teach women's and children's health and family nursing and read the novel within the framework of a pedagogical project involving future health care professionals.

There are many issues in this book that are relevant to reproductive and overall health. The obvious issues relate to contraception and its availability and the absence of safe and legal abortion services. But, like any good novel, the book includes many stories, many of which relate to sexuality and unintended pregnancy such as adultery, incest, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, domestic violence, racism, parenting, dishonesty in describing reproductive options, lack of access to reproductive services, and poverty. All these issues can have a profound effect on women's health. (Engstrom and Hunter 2007: 469)

Engstrom and Hunter's paper argues for the benefits of using complex fictional narratives to teach students about complex life issues. Stories, they contend, can be "helpful in developing critical thinking, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence" because they can "provide insight into *worlds that are unknown and unimagined*, thereby helping students understand circumstances and experiences that they may never personally encounter" (Engstrom & Hunter 2007: 465, emphases added). Stories, in other words, offer "alternative realities" that broaden the scope of students' experiences, albeit in fictional form. This, however, suggests that in the specific case of *The Cider House Rules*, abortion is an "unknown world" for students, and the novel is taught to "sensitize" students to the experiences of "others" – women who may need abortions.

Although there are many interesting elements in the article, I will only point to a few of them here. The first is that the authors formulate the "moral dilemma" posed by Irving's story as "whether safe abortion procedures should be provided to women even when the procedure is illegal or whether women should be left to their own devices and seek and accept unsafe abortion care" (Engstrom & Hunter 2007: 467). This raises the question whether this *can* be the central dilemma for the contemporary American reader, who reads within a context when abortion (although difficult to access in a majority of counties today) is *not* illegal. Formulating the moral dilemma in this way stresses the "illegality" of abortion procedure. This may or may not run counter to the ideas of the writers, who are overall very supportive of access to a broad range of health care to women, but in fact refrain from expressing any direct support for abortion procedure. Nevertheless, they point out that while Homer and Dr. Larch "argue the issues for and against abortion in multiple encounters throughout the book [. . .] the women kept coming. Slowly, the reader becomes aware that the deeper moral dilemma of the novel has to do with depriving women access to safe reproductive services, including abortion" (Engstrom & Hunter 2007: 467). But abortion access is still described as a "dilemma," not a clear stance, in the novel. Carefully, Engstrom and Hunter then suggest that in the novel, "there are repeated instances of people who just 'wait and see' [. . .] in essence, doing nothing" and that "the book challenges students [to] 'be of use' [. . .] to do something to help women" (Engstrom & Hunter 2007: 469) but avoid suggesting what that "something" might entail. Clearly reluctant to position themselves regarding abortion procedure, the writers of the article claim that the novel does not take sides concerning abortion rights:

Many readers may assume that the moral of the story is the same as the moral dilemma posed by the story – that is, the issue of whether abortion is right or wrong, or the tension between the needs of the conceptus and those of the mother. *But there is no answer to that question in this book.* (468)

"That question" is in fact two questions, and while the first (moral) one may not be clearly answered in Irving's novel, the second (social, political) one certainly is. The carefulness and the seeming neutrality of Engstrom and Hunter's uses of

the novel signal the fraught nature of the abortion issue; the dominance of abortion-as-negativity finally seems to be directing several of their findings concerning Irving's novel, resulting in their claim that the needs of the "conceptus" are represented as being as great as those of women walking to St. Cloud's.

Unlike Engstrom and Hunter, sociologist Lori Baker-Sperry's study "Orphans, Abortions and the Public Fetus in *The Cider House Rules*" expressly sets out to show that "the social story clarified in *The Cider House Rules* is one that is consistent with the political and moral debate surrounding reproduction and abortion in the U.S. today" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 147) and hence signals aims similar to those of the present article. However, as in the previous example, although this is an instance of explicitly feminist critique, ideational goods from the anti-abortion advocates, especially the fetal-rights discourse, enters in ways that create ambivalence in the text.¹⁷

Baker-Sperry makes some very relevant observations concerning representations of gender and power in the novel, and their links to the current "political and moral debate," for example that "*The Cider House Rules* is really about a man's world with abortion as its topic of interest [. . .] men in the U.S. hold positions of power: political, medical, etc., and have significant control over the availability of abortion services [. . .] much of the abortion question today is answered by men and a male perspective" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 165). She also comments on the problematic lack of access to factual information about abortion and reproduction in the US, noting that "Irving clearly traces the connections between education about birth control, the birth rate, the abortion rate in St. Cloud's." Baker-Sperry is critical of the focus on "abstinence education" in US schools, and suggest that "possibly the most frightening element of the abortion question is our lack of real, clear, and accessible information about sex, sexuality, and birth control" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 168). Also, she notes that Larch as a character conveys that "the culprit is not illicit sex but the mistreatment of women" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 168). However, she ignores the shift Homer undergoes from pro-life to pro-choice, stressing instead the differences between Larch and Homer in assigning responsibility for abortion:

Interestingly, those who Larch holds most responsible are not likely the women themselves, but the men he believes should have helped them, including his early self. The current pro-life (anti-abortion) position, depicted in Homer's character, also addresses the issues of blame [. . .] Homer did not blame Larch for performing abortions per se, and the text leads the reader to believe that Homer understood some of Larch's motivation [. . .] Homer, however, does not absolve Larch from responsibility, nor does he reserve blame for the (often missing) men, as he holds the mothers accountable as well – he believes abortion to be a woman shirking personal responsibility. (Baker-Sperry 2009: 153)

Most importantly, Baker-Sperry sees Irving's novel as "carefully constructing the characters of the women, *juxtaposed with Homer as walking, public fetus*" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 160, emphases added). Although the issue of the fetus as a

person is initially raised by Baker-Sperry as highly problematical, her analysis here aligns itself with the discourse of “fetal rights” where the fetus is understood a living, separate human being. But in Irving’s novel Homer is an orphan, not a fetus. Although Homer as a child is confused about the boundaries between fetus and orphan, he recognizes that his life as an orphan may be a coincidence, and – also in his childhood years – thinks that the ill orphan boy Fuzzy Stone “looks like a fetus,” the novel as a whole does not confuse fetuses with orphans; it does not confuse “fetuses” with “people.” It is also clear in its representations of the women who come to St. Clouds, at times visibly pregnant and there to give birth, or not visibly pregnant, and there for an abortion. These women, who often meet young Homer, relate to him as a child or a man, not as a “walking fetus,” and Irving indeed makes a point of how Homer relates to the women differently than does Dr. Larch: whereas Larch tends to “overlook women” at St. Cloud’s, “Homer Wells did not overlook women; he looked right into their eyes” and indeed is often represented as sympathizing with women (Irving 1985: 249). Here, then, Baker-Sperry positions Homer in opposition to women in a way that the novel itself does not.

Conclusion

[T]he abortion debate has become a debate about women’s contrasting obligations to themselves and others. New technologies and the changing nature of work have opened up possibilities for women outside the home undreamed of in the nineteenth century; together, these changes give women – for the first time in history – the option of deciding exactly how and when their family roles will fit into the larger context of their lives. In essence, therefore, this round of the abortion debate is so passionate and hard-fought *because it is a referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood*. (Luker 1984: 193, emphases original)

Twenty-first century criticism of Irving’s text, exemplified by feminist scholars as well as explicitly anti-feminist pro-life advocates, illustrates how readings of Irving’s novel include, or reactively respond to, the fetal rights discourse and the “awfulization of abortion.” In the words of Judith Levine, “by the beginning of the twenty-first century, *one can hardly speak of abortion without a note of deep misgiving or regret, if one speaks of it at all*. ‘Abortion on demand and without apology,’ a feminist demand before *Roe*, is as rare in 1999 as it was in 1959.” (Levine 2002: 119, emphases added). Luker suggested in the 1980s that the ferocity of the abortion debate then signaled an ongoing struggle over the meaning of motherhood; as it was then, the abortion debate in our present is therefore also a struggle over meanings of “femininity” as such.

In the US, motherhood has been upheld as women’s patriotic duty and natural calling for centuries – including the present one: “an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal.¹⁸ In this model, responsibility for mothering rests almost

exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child's formative years" (Glenn et al. 1994: 3). Abortion obviously disrupts this image of women as "mothers-only." In the words of cultural critic Katha Pollitt, the "fetal rights" rhetoric signals

[. . .] deep discomfort with the notion of women as self-directed social beings, for whom parenthood is only one aspect of life, as it has always been for men. Never mind that in the real world, women still want children, have children, and take care of children, often under the most discouraging circumstances and at tremendous emotional, economic, and physical cost. There is still a vague but powerful cultural fear that one of these days, women will just walk out on the whole business of motherhood and the large helpings of humble pie we have, as a society, built into that task. And then where will we be? (Pollitt 1990/1998: 296-97)

The re-mobilization of conservative American "family values" in the post-9/11 period is traced in Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream* (2007). At this time, media representations increasingly focused on women as mothers who by giving birth to a new generation of Americans provided hope for the nation, and on American men as rescuers and heroes who would save women and children. These are also "hard times" of financial and social hardship in the nation, when Americans are called upon to be patriotic and stand together as "one American family,"¹⁹ and such framing of the national context, such a "national imaginary," provides little space for the legitimacy of abortion practice. What Irving's novel stresses is that the rights of women – "the born" – need to be voiced again and again, preferably without borrowing the rhythms of anti-abortionist rhetoric.

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Notes

- ¹ The US Presidential campaign of 2012.
- ² The expression was coined by Hadley (1998) and elaborated by Ripper (1996); see also Pheterson 2009.
- ³ What is striking about the situation in the US, seen from my own secular Swedish perspective, is both the strong Christian bent of the national politics, but also the seeming lack of

basic knowledge about sex and reproduction. The recent election campaigns witnessed several infamous statements by Republican politicians, including Congressman Todd Akin's claim that legal abortion is unnecessary as a measure for terminating unwanted pregnancies that result from "legitimate rape," [sic!] since women cannot become pregnant when raped (Saletan). Even a minimal analysis of this astonishing statement leads to the conclusion that information and education about conception, contraception and abortion, while not generally available in the US (Levine 2002), when available – as it should be to highly educated men with considerable social power (such as Congressmen) is not necessarily acquired, which makes informed decisions difficult to make.

- 4 Film and abortion has been addressed by some scholars, and the filmatization of Irving's novel also figures in a few studies. However, I stay with the original novel here and leave cinematic representation for another study. For insightful analyses, see e. g. Kaplan (1994) on 1980s film and "fetal rights"; MacGibbon (2006) on abortion as tragedy in US film of the early twentieth century. The film version of *The Cider House Rules* (1999), although maintaining abortion as a central theme, is a seriously watered-down version of the book; however, for an interesting feminist study of the film, see Booth (2002). As one critic observes, in Hollywood, "if a pregnancy lasts on screen, abortion is never an option and always a tragedy. Indeed, the A-word is rarely even uttered." (Levine 2002: 120)
- 5 The so called Comstock Law, or *An Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use*, was enacted in 1873, and upheld by the Supreme Court into the 1960s. Its purpose was to stop the spread of information about contraception or abortion expressly to hinder adultery and divorce, but also to enforce the responsibility of women to "the duties imposed on her by the marriage contract." Later, in order to save the population from moral corruption, the law expanded into an effective censorship of "obscenity" in literature and film, as well.
- 6 On Irving's status as a major writer, see Davis and Womack 2004: 1.
- 7 The difference between rightful law and "rules" is the topic of a study on *The Cider House Rules* from 1996, where legal scholar Bruce Rockwood looks at US abortion laws, to argue that "*Roe v. Wade* was a unique statement of moral principle linked to clear, pragmatic bright-line rules based on the trimester system set out by Justice Blackmun that included, for the first time, the concerns of women in constitutional discourse as a fundamental right. *Webster*, *Rust*, and *Casey*, and all other decisions which cut back on *Roe*, are just cider house rules" (Rockwood 1996; 2004: 139). Another critic notes that "[t]he woman has completely dropped out of the picture as a source of concern in the post-*Roe* cases" (Cornell 1995: 59).
- 8 "From 1993 to 1997, the Justice department recorded more than fifty bombings and arson attacks at abortion clinics, and from 1993 to 1999, seven people, including clinic workers and doctors, were killed by anti-abortion terrorism" (Levine 2002: 118).
- 9 The title of course echoes that of the infamous anti-abortion film "The Silent Scream" (1984).
- 10 For reports on development of abortion access in the US in recent years, see for example *The New York Times* online; <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/a/abortion/>; for statistics on teen pregnancy, abortion statistics in the US compared to other nations, and sex education in the US, see for example the Guttmacher Institute; www.guttmacher.org.
- 11 "Almost a third of obstetrics and gynecology residencies failed to teach abortion procedures in 1992" (Levine 2002: 124).
- 12 The 1995 survey of state laws on sexual educations conducted by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) found that only nine states specifically named abortion in their sex-ed statutes. Of these, only Vermont required giving students neutral information on the procedure; the others either forbade teachers from talking about abortion as a reproductive health method or allowed discussing its negative consequences only. (Levine 2002: 122-3)
- 13 She continues: "Excluded from the maternal scene as 'the father,' man comes back to take control as 'the doctor' . . . But whose doctor is he? Is he the mother's instrument? The father's? The state's?" (Wilt 1990: 129).

- ¹⁴ On domestic spaces as work spaces in the film, see Booth (2002).
- ¹⁵ Writing about the film version of Irving's novel, critics again deal with abortion only reluctantly. For example, Film Studies scholar Robert Arp seems somewhat conflicted about his own professed "pro-choice" stance, ending his article by telling presumptive readers/students that: "if someone had chosen to abort you, you wouldn't have been here to ponder these issues!" (Arp 2008: 31).
- ¹⁶ Koloze's analysis of the text is deeply problematical for gender-political reasons, but also because of its poor scholarship; there are numerous inaccuracies in the description of the very plot development.
- ¹⁷ Other discourses also compete in this article. Baker-Sperry's discussion about women reproducing while men are "in business" in *The Cider House Rules*, which strengthens the notion of "separate spheres" is not true to the representation of gender and work in the novel (Baker-Sperry 2009: 165-6); homophobia – or at least heterosexual normativity – may explain why she claims that Melony dies "angry and frustrated, despondent and unsatisfied" (Baker-Sperry 2009: 166) when we are told that Melony's lover Lorna writes Homer and tells him that Melony died "relatively happy" (Irving 1985: 717).
- ¹⁸ The US is not singular in the way it treats women and mothers as bearers of the nation, for woman-as-mother is the most highly valued aspect of femininity in patriarchal societies across the world (Therborn 2004). In many nationalist projects, women are mainly valued in their role as reproducers of the nation's (right) citizens; that is, their maternal function overrides their personhood, and conversely, if women are not mothers, they are not proper citizens (Cornell 1995; Tyler May 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997; Eduards 2007).
- ¹⁹ An idea repeated by most US Presidents, including Barack Obama in his victory speech 2012.

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Women are victims, and so are you.â€• John Irving, *The Cider House Rules*. tags: abortion, freedom-of-choice, law, women. 64 likes. Like. â€œHow we love to love things for other people; how we love to have other people love things through our eyes.â€• John Irving, *The Cider House Rules*. 56 likes. Like.â€• It's because even a good man can't always be right, that we need rules.â€• John Irving, *The Cider House Rules*. tags: law, morality. *The Cider House Rules* (1985) is a novel by American writer John Irving, a Bildungsroman, which was later adapted into a film (1999) and a stage play by Peter Parnell. The story, set in the preâ€• and postâ€•World War II era, is about a young man, Homer Wells, growing up under the guidance of Dr. Wilbur Larch, an obstetrician and abortionist. The story relates his early life at Larch's orphanage in Maine and follows Homer as he eventually leaves the nest and comes of age in the world. *Reproduction, Politics, and John Irving's The Cider House Rules: Women's Rights or Fetal Rights?* Article (PDF Available) â€• June 2013 with 334 Reads. How we measure 'reads'. A 'read' is counted each time someone views a publication summary (such as the title, abstract, and list of authors), clicks on a figure, or views or downloads the full-text. Learn more. DOI: 10.3384/cu.2000.1525.135251.â€• reactively respond to, the fetal rights discourse and the â€œawfulization of abortion.â€• The article further proposes that the novelâ€™s representations of reproductive rights. issues â€œ especially abortion â€œ are still relevant today, and that critical readings of. fictional and nonfictional representations of reproductive rights issues are central. to feminist politics.