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Desperate Laughter

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DESPERATE LAUGHTER

SARA FARRIS

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Desperate Laughter

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BY

Sara Farris

THESIS

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Thesis Abstract

Desperate Laughter

Frank Berry tells us, in The Hotel New Hampshire, that in this world there "is only arbitrary slapstick and arbitrary doom." His grandfather, Iowa Bob, knew this, but he also knew that "the way the world worked--which was badly--was just a strong incentive...to be determined about living well." This philosophy gives the Berrys incredible strength, and the ability, not only to accept sorrow, but also to find or creat great humor in their pain.

This is the world view of The Hotel New Hampshire, and it differs only slightly from the world view of The World According to Garp, in which Garp tells one of his readers "...that people's problems are often funny and that people are often and nonetheless sad."

Irving devotes much of these two novels to this apparent contradiction--the coexistence of comedy and sorrow, not only in the situations he creates for his characters, but also in the commentary of the characters about their lives and about the world at large.

Such comic sorrow is most intense in Irving's frequent, and frequently grotesque, sex scenes. Irving explains that he uses sex scenes because of their intensity, because such scenes allow us to see the greatest strengths and greatest

weaknesses of his characters.

I have chosen to examine Irving's sexual comic sorrow for two reasons: first, as a preliminary measure, to compare Irving's use of sexual comedy and sorrow to the comedy of other popular American black humorists, and second, and more important, to show how Irving offers comedy as consolation for sorrow. Sometimes the consolation is for the characters and reader, sometimes only for the reader, and sometimes, as in the case of Garp, for the writer. Garp tells Irene Poole that he has nothing but laughter to give as consolation, that "laughter is [his] religion and in the manner of most religions...is pretty desperate."

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Sara Farris

19 August 1985

Desperate Laughter

When Lilly Berry, the tiny novelist in John Irving's The Hotel New Hampshire, fails in her attempt to "grow," and commits suicide, Junior Jones offers a possible explanation: "Not enough laughter in her, man" (379). By implication, then, the remaining Berrys survive because they do have laughter, because their laughter provides them with resilience, or perhaps their resilience, which Lilly lacked, allows them to laugh; however it is, the Berrys, and the audience of The Hotel New Hampshire need the laughter Irving offers as consolation for the ever present form of Sorrow.

Irving also offers this consolation in an earlier novel, The World According to Garp, though in Garp the humor consoles only the reader, rarely comforting his characters with the desperate laughter that runs throughout the novel. Garp and his family are usually too caught up in the pain they are experiencing to appreciate the humor. When Helen performs fellatio on Michael as her way of ending the affair and saving her marriage, she thinks, "Even Garp might appreciate this...but one day, not right away" (Irving, Garp 263). For the Garps, there are always fresh wounds which keep them from reflecting on the humor of past sorrow.

In The Hotel New Hampshire Irving's characters are consoled by the humor which they find in their sorrow, and the

reader is consoled through the humor of the Berry's reactions to pain. In The World According to Garp the reader finds consolation in the insane humor of the Garps' lives--the humor is often at the Garps' expense.

Regardless of who is being comforted, Irving's black humor is nearly always sexual. Irving captures his characters at their most emotionally and physically vulnerable moments, and turns these situations into the blackest comedies. Sexual scenes are, by nature, intense, and when such situations become comic, they become intensely comic; the opposite is also true of these scenes--when they become tragic they are intensely tragic, though no less comic. Even in the case of rape--the most extreme act of sexual violence--Irving retains a sense of hilarity that is still sympathetic to the victim. Because of the intensity of such scenes, Irving uses them also to test his characters. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Irving explains:

When you place characters in extreme sexual circumstances you are able to reveal a lot about them and their natures. In these kinds of extreme situations--sexual situations or violent ones or whatever--the best and worst aspects of ourselves are bound to come out...(14).

Through the disasters, often the sexual disasters, suffered by Irving's characters, his readers are able to know those characters, their strengths and their weaknesses.

While Irving's often grotesque sense of humor is not limited to these two novels, I have chosen to limit my discussion to two novels for several reasons. First, The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire exemplify the the brand of humor found in The Water-Method Man, The 158 Pound Marriage, and Setting Free the Bears. Second, the violence of The Cider House Rules is found in early twentieth-century medical procedures, not the sorrowful comic disasters of The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire. The humorless violence is politically motivated "to force his readers to see the consequences of making abortion illegal," and does not have the desperate laughter of contemporary black humor (Chaplin 6). Third, it was with the publication of Garp that Irving became recognized as an important writer of popular literature, and I wish to show Irving's work in the context of other popular American novels. His earlier, less ambitious novels establish him, like Garp, as a "small but serious writer," a label which Garp hated and which Irving has implied he hates as well (McCaffery 9).

What I will explore in my discussions of Irving's first two best-selling novels is his use of black humor, created out of sexual violence and sorrow, as consolation. Through a brief discussion of some of Irving's popular contemporaries, I also plan to demonstrate how Irving is different from and similar to other black humorists. Irving's use of comic sexual violence is by no means original--

writers such as Tom Robbins, Rita Mae Brown, and Philip Roth have all written novels filled with the dark humor of sexual adventures and catastrophes. However, Irving's work may be unique in its persistence in offering this comedy as consolation for violence and the ensuing sorrow. A brief study of black humor in novels, such as Catch-22, published in the fifties and sixties, will demonstrate how this humor has evolved, from a humor meant to "startle us into an awareness of something new about ourselves" (Greiner 4), to a need to console us in our painful awareness. Raymond Olderman, in Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties, defines black humor as

a kind of comedy that juxtaposes pain with laughter, fantastic fact with calmly inadequate reaction, and cruelty with tenderness. It requires a certain distance from the very despair it recognizes, and it seems to be able to take surprises, reversals, and outrages with a clown's shrug.... It sees life not just as absurd but as a joke.... It is difficult to fathom how the black humorist can laugh, knowing what he knows (26-7).

Both Olderman and Donald Greiner, in Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes, discuss the twentieth-century impossibility of maintaining a firm grasp on reality and the subsequent need for black humor, but their explanations of why we need black humor differ, to varying degrees, with what Irving sees as our need for black humor. In his

introductory discussion of twentieth-century chaos and the response of novelists to that chaos, Greiner explains:

Given the fragmentation of the twentieth century, realistic depiction of it does us little good. We already know that things are bad. Life cannot be made to seem reasonable if it is ridiculous. The more important question posed by a black humorist is how to live with one's self and with others in a fractured world. Laughter may not save the world, but it can help us live our lives (Greiner xv).

Black humor, Greiner says, "comments on the world's absurdities" (Greiner xii). However, Olderman introduces a slightly different aspect of the black humor of the sixties which may exist somewhere between the humor of awareness and Irving's humor of consolation:

The black humorist must recognize the insanity that surrounds him, and he must recognize simultaneously his own contribution to that insanity; then he laughs to gain control over himself so that he will cease to contribute to the world's madness (Olderman 28).

More than simply making us aware of insanity or absurdity, much black humor allows control over and distance from the insanity of the world. Olderman is implying that we can be, or should aspire to be, better or stronger than the events which control our lives. While Olderman does not

use the word consolation in his discussion, laughter as consolation also allows us to deal with pain and take control. First black humor was used to make us aware of the world's absurdities, and that being accomplished, its purpose now, according to Irving, is to offer comfort.

Irving, through Garp, often tells his reader that he intends his humor to be accepted as consolation; but most writers do not have the convenience of a character who is a novelist and who can comment on the craft of writing. When Irene Poole complains in a letter that Garp's work laughs at people's problems, Garp tells her in a lengthy response that he was not laughing at people, but sympathizing with them. This explanation might just as easily come from Irving to a reader troubled by the comedy in Technical Sergeant Garp's death, or the accident in which Walt is killed. Garp sincerely believes that laughter is related to sympathy, and in an earnest attempt to explain this notion tells Irene, "'I am ashamed...that you think I am laughing at people, or making fun of them, I take people very seriously, in fact'" (Irving, Garp 166-7). He tells her a comic/tragic story to illustrate his point, and concludes his argument by telling her that laughter is all he has to offer for consolation. He further explains that "'laughter is [his] religion and in the manner of most religions...is pretty desperate'" (Irving, Garp 167).

Instead of offering this desperate laughter as consolation, Joseph Heller's Catch-22, one of the first novels

discussed in Olderman's Beyond the Wasteland, typifies the black humor of awareness, the humor meant to make us recognize the absurdities of the world. Such humor forces us to be intellectually aware of the world's insanity while allowing an emotional distance. Certainly the world of Catch-22 is insane and desperate. What saves Yossarian is his wonderful sense of logic and his refusal to give in to the system which would, if he let it, destroy him. Even though most readers of Catch-22 have not experienced the horror of war, we are, like Yossarian, "...an age weaned on silent tension and despair" (Olderman 9) and we allow the insane humor of Yossarian's world to distance us emotionally from the unbearable intensity of the lives of Screaming Joe, Dunbar, and the soldier in white.

Yossarian is a lead bombardier on an island near Elba during World War II, and in Catch-22 style, "he has decided to live forever or die in the attempt" (Heller 30). His sole dedication to his own life allows him to see and take advantage of the insanity of his comrades and superior officers. This dedication to self, however, is no guarantee of Yossarian's safety--like Irving's Ellen Jamesians and the Viennese radicals, Major Major, General Dreedle, and Colonel Korn are dangerous in the power they assume. We laugh at their ineffectual mediocrity ("Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some men have mediocrity thrust upon them. With Major Major it had been all three") [Heller 85]), but we cannot ignore

their military rank which allows them to volunteer their men for more and the most dangerous missions.

When Yossarian is not flying a mission or hiding in the hospital, he is drinking in the Officers' Club, arguing with other soldiers about the identity of the people trying to kill him:

'They're trying to kill me,' Yossarian told him calmly.

'No one's trying to kill you,' Clevinger cried.

'Then why are they shooting at me?' Yossarian asked.

'They're shooting at everyone,' Clevinger answered. 'They're trying to kill everyone.'

'And what difference does that make?'

'Who's they?' he wanted to know. 'Who, specifically, do you think is trying to murder you?'

'Everyone of them,' Yossarian told him.

'Everyone of whom?'

'Everyone of whom do you think?'

'I haven't any idea.'

'Then how do you know they aren't' (Heller 17).

Yossarian takes it as a personal affront that complete strangers are trying to murder him. His logic at first seems twisted, but as we laugh we realize he is right--if he is murdered it will make no difference that the enemy did not want to kill him specifically, but only wanted to win a battle.

Another popular debate for Yossarian is the existence of God. Yossarian does not believe in God, but this does not stop him from debating the nature of God with Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife, who also does not believe in God. Yossarian sees God as a "colossal, immortal blunderer ...who [found] it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in his divine system of creation" (Heller 184-5). Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife, in contrast, imagines a God who is good and just and merciful. Finally Yossarian laughs and proposes "a little more religious freedom...You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to" (Heller 185).

The terror of Catch-22 is much too intense to be tolerated without an emotional outlet of some kind, and the distance provided by the humor works, not as consolation, but as an anesthesia. The humor of Yossarian's seeing everything twice provides a distance from the soldier in white, whose life was cut short by a nurse who took his temperature. The insane comedy of the new three-hundred-and-forty-four-millimeter Lepage glue gun makes bearable the final awful truth of Snowden's death. While Irving consoles with laughter, Heller uses laughter to distance his reader from the pain that comes with awareness.

Less frightening, but certainly more comic, is Philip Roth's Portnoy's Complaint. More like Heller's humor than Irving's, the grotesque comedy of Roth distances both Portnoy and the reader from the insanity of the Portnoy

family and the consequent neuroses. Near the close of the chapter called "Whacking Off," Alex tells the silent Doctor Spielvogel, "...this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke..." (Roth 39). Portnoy moves closer to the pain of his confusion, begging the doctor, "Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me whole!" and then retreats again into near hysteria: "Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!" (Roth 40).

Most of Portnoy's complaint is the guilt he is made to feel over his constant masturbation. In spite of his repressive upbringing, nothing and no place is safe from being a party to adolescent Portnoy's masturbation. From his baseball glove in a burlesque theater to his sister's underwear in the family bathroom to his windbreaker on a public bus, nothing is spared. In fact, Portnoy's darkest confession to his doctor involves a piece of liver stolen and returned to the refrigerator: "So. Now you know the worst thing I have ever done. I fucked my own family's dinner" (Roth 150).

The unrelenting humor in Roth's novel finally culminates with American-born Alex exiled in Israel, terrified that The Monkey, left behind in Greece, will call the New York City mayor and ruin his career; he is completely unable, perhaps for the first time in his life, to sustain an erection. At the close of the novel, Portnoy, still

asking the questions of his heritage and family that have run throughout the work, decides to live big by tearing the tag off his mattress. He imagines the crime, the police and the blazing guns, and goes out with a triumphant shriek of defiance when, finally, the ever silent doctor speaks: "So. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?" (Roth 309).

However sympathetic we are to Portnoy, this is not the humor of consolation. The novel, one long tirade in his doctor's office, has a surreal quality which distances us from Portnoy even as we are reading his most private thoughts. The novel is a parody of a life rather than a collection of memories. Portnoy is the son in the Jewish joke and he never becomes more real to us than the characters in a joke. Even to Portnoy, perhaps especially to Portnoy, his suffering is laughable:

...is this human misery? I thought it was going to be loftier!...something perhaps along the line of Abraham Lincoln. Tragedy, not farce! Something a little more Sophoclean was what I had in mind (Roth 283).

Less desperate than the laughter of Portnoy's Complaint is the comedy of Tom Robbins' Even Cowgirls Get the Blues. Sissy Hankshaw, born with thumbs which eventually comprise four percent of her total body weight, rejects the world of Richmond, Virginia for the world she creates. She recognizes the dismal world she was born to and sets out to

create a better reality as a world famous hitchhiker and model. She succeeds in this life because of her huge capacity for joy and for life, and she sets out to write her story in a manner all her own: "Traffic was her element, her medium, the vocabulary from which she snatched her poem" (Robbins 313). And of course, the aspect of Sissy which allows her to succeed as her own creator is also the aspect which makes it necessary:

These thumbs. They had created a reality for her when only somebody else's crippled notion of reality, some socially sanctioned parody of reality, was to be her lot (Robbins 114).

The black humor, then, in Robbins' novel is not so much offered as a comfort for the sorrow of Sissy's life, but rather as a celebration for what Sissy has created out of the world's "crippled notion" of what is sorrowful.

If the humor is offered for comfort to anyone, it is for those struggling to leave the world of Richmond, Virginia, those struggling to recognize their own spiritual poverty. Robbins offers his audience comic relief in the forms of Miss Adrian and the Rubber Rose Ranch, a fat farm named for a line of douche bags, and the Countess, a gay feminine hygiene tycoon. We applaud Sissy and Jelly, we cheer for the cowgirls in their revolution to overtake the Rubber Rose, but we cannot live in their created reality. We may not be doomed to Richmond, to "lace curtains,... measles epidemics, baloney sandwiches--and men who knew

more about the carborator than they knew about the clitoris," but we cannot live in the fantasy world of the Rubber Rose and the Chink, in the world of a tribe of children with large thumbs thriving peacefully in the wild. If the humor is offered as consolation, it is for the audience which is caught between the dismal world of Sissy's parents and the satisfying world of Sissy's creation.

The primary function of Robbins' humor is to reflect adequately the comic/tragic confusion of twentieth-century reality. In an essay by William Nelson called "Unlikely Heroes," Nelson comments on Sissy and Garp as fitting twentieth-century heroes. "The way the world works," says Nelson, "requires the comic grotesque to do it justice in literary form, and an unlikely hero hovering between the tragic and the absurd to be its chronicler" (167). Nelson explains that our world is at once tragic and comic--we cannot believe in the happy ending of comedy, nor can we "sustain the dignity of the tragic mode" (170). Because we cannot avoid this contradiction, we must find a way to reconcile the comic and the tragic, and heroes like Yossarian, Sissy, Garp, and the Berrys become our models.

The consciousness of such contradiction causes popular literary representation to take the form of the grotesque and their most important characters to be unlikely heroes (Nelson 170).

Another unlikely hero is the grotesquely comic prostitute, Blue Rhonda Latrec, in Rita Mae Brown's Southern

Discomfort. Brown's funny and sorrowful novel of Montgomery, Alabama in the early twentieth century is a storehouse of sexual oddities, if not perversions, and her humor, like Irving's, is consolation for her characters and her audience. Blue Rhonda and her best friend and partner, Banana Mae, are friends with the other Water Street women who work in whore houses, but Blue Rhonda and Banana are content with their "cottage industry." These women, through their occupations and through their careful observations, know more about the private lives of Montgomery's wealthy families than those families know about themselves. The secret affairs and worries of these families, entangled in the lives of the Water Street women, create a soap opera quality in Southern Discomfort which is tempered only by Blue Rhonda's wonderfully comic response to her world. Throughout most of the novel Rhonda is a tough character, likable, loyal, but impenetrable, both to her friends and her customers. The first sign of vulnerability in Rhonda comes when her fading health becomes obvious, and she suddenly develops an interest in theological questions, even attending the church of the hated Bible-thumper, Linton Ray. Previously bored with religion, Rhonda is inquisitive, though without any thoughts of conversion. More than anything, Rhonda relishes her debates with the humorless Linton Ray, who finally asks her why she must turn everything into a joke. "'Because we're afraid,'" she responds, showing a tenderness completely missed by the

preacher (Brown 217). This humor is not the anesthesia of Heller's humor--it does not end her fear or her feelings, but like Irving's humor, it is her only consolation.

The epilogue of Southern Discomfort follows a painful suicide and a painful, humorless murder in which a lovable child learns the truth of her parentage. The events of the novel have built to a sorrowful conclusion, until the death scene of Blue Rhonda, which is sorrowful, but surprisingly comic. Rhonda is resting in bed with her friends gathered around for what they all know is the end. A nurse, parroting stereotypical nurse advice tells her, "'You rest, honey. All this talk will tire you out.'" Rhonda looked up at the figure leaning over her and said, 'Christ, what tits,' and died" (Brown 248).

The final joke has yet to be played, however. The day after her death Banana reads the letter left by Rhonda, explaining what had been discovered when the body was prepared for burial: that Blue Rhonda Latrec, whose sole talent as a prostitute was fellatio, who never let even Banana Mae see her nude because, "'Mother taught me to be modest,'" was a man. Coming so closely after her death, this comic news is a comfort to her friends, though Lottie has to be told that she is supposed to laugh; and coming so closely after the painful scene at the Banastre house, this humor is a comfort to the reader, not deadening the reader's emotions, but lending some of Blue Rhonda's strength and gaiety to a sorrowful conclusion.

None of these novels enjoys the high tragedy of Sophocles. The unlikely heroes of the twentieth century live in a fragmented world where comedy and tragedy overlap and chaos is the controlling factor. J.F. Federspiel prefaces his dark social comedy, The Ballad of Typhoid Mary, with a line by Thomas Wolfe: "Life is strange and the world is bad" (Federspiel vi). As simplistic as this is, it is characteristic of much twentieth-century writing, and reflects the need for the desperate laughter of writers such as Heller, Brown, Roth, Robbins, and Irving. Writers of popular literature in other eras have enjoyed the comfort in believing that life is planned, and the world only seems bad when we fail to trust that a higher order is at work. Contemporary writers no longer have the luxury of belief in an ordered, or orderly universe. As Frank Berry says in The Hotel New Hampshire, there is only "arbitrary slapstick and arbitrary doom" (Irving, Hotel 231).

It is our awareness of the arbitrary quality of our world which makes us both need desperate laughter and allows us to enjoy it. Comedy is no longer a diversion from intense or tragic events in our lives. The insanity of the world is too much with us--we cannot forget or be diverted from it, so we learn to see humor in the insanity and the tragedy. And we feel free to find humor in such "inappropriate" places because we no longer have to respect our misfortunes. Previously men have believed, Job-like, that there must be a reason for misfortunes, but as Job

eventually did, we learned that there is no reason. God, if he exists, is not concerned with international hostage crises, or wars, or the tragic deaths of children, and so we feel no need to respect the misfortune (or to revere the source, since there is no controlling source). Finally, all that can be said is that "life is strange and the world is bad;" if we are to live strange lives in a bad world we must have consolation, and that consolation, desperate as it is, is laughter.

This generation of writers is not of the generation which created or recognized the waste land; it is the generation which grew up in the waste land, which has never known anything different, which cannot remember before or look beyond and so must find comfort in the waste land. Again, this comfort is humor: Blue Rhonda cannot pray and so she laughs. But this laughter does not have the hope that prayer once gave. In much twentieth-century fiction, this laughter is comfort for the way things are without hope that things will ever be better. There is little hope at the end of Catch-22 or Portnoy's Complaint that Yossarian or Portnoy will ever escape the absurdities of their worlds. Montgomery, Alabama will continue to allow men to die because they are black and the ambulance carries only whites. The racial and social injustices of Montgomery will continue long after Blue Rhonda Latrec's death. Only in Robbins' novel is there hope--hope that the world of Sissy's creation will continue with her children.

Irving's novels are not as optimistic as Robbins', but they are also not as bleak as much twentieth-century fiction. Laughter does work as consolation, but it also represents a hope that life will eventually improve. The World According to Garp closes with an epilogue detailing the lives of the rest of the novel's characters, telling the audience that after Garp's death, what was best about him, his energy and his joy, continued to influence his friends and his children. The Hotel New Hampshire comes to its close in a hotel that finally works, with its inhabitants waiting for a new child--it takes incredible faith in people for these characters to have a child and risk another lifetime of tragic misfortune and the desperate need for consolation.

However, in spite of this hope, these novels are haunted with images of the Under Toad and Sorrow. The world's forms of insanity, as told through Garp and John Berry, are compelling, violent and frightening, though not without sympathy; the events of these two novels, The World According to Garp and The Hotel New Hampshire, are random, destructive, even dehumanizing, but tempered with the "happy fatalism" of Iowa Bob. Sorrow floats, and takes many forms; the Under Toad is never far away, yet the Garps and the Berrys, in spite of "air in the pipes" and "shit in their hair" have "good memories" (Irving, Hotel 400).

In the Hotel New Hampshire sense that "everything is a fairy tale," the comedy in these novels lends a cautious optimism to their conclusions (Irving, 400). The Garps and

the Berrys can exert some control over their lives by creating their "fairy tales." Garp and Helen can hold on to their anger and grief over Walt's death, blaming each other, or they can comfort each other, have another child, and continue with their lives. The Berrys can face each form of sorrow with humor and perserverence, or, like the man in the lobby of the Stanhope, they can complain about the shit in their hair. The strength and energy of Irving's characters indicates that though sorrow floats, and we can be sure that it does, the Garps and the Berrys will continue to use the consolation of laughter as a way of "passing the open windows" (Irving, Hotel 401).

The difference, not between the Garps and the Berrys, but between the events which fill their respective novels, lies in Irving's fluctuating sense of humor. The World According to Garp is composed of series of carefully constructed situations which are outrageously comic but ultimately tragic. The comedy is black, often desperate; the reader's laughter is followed closely by shock. The scene of Walt's death is at once the funniest and the saddest scene in the entire novel. In contrast, The Hotel New Hampshire is composed of equally carefully constructed situations which are comic only in the reactions of the characters to tragedy, in the character's resilient refusal to give in to melancholy and despair. When Franny is raped Halloween night, the reader responds much as the kidnapped trick-or-treaters do: speechlessly we watch Franny repeat her once

innocent, now knowing, "I hate Halloween," and tell Mrs. Butler, "I was beaten up" (Irving, Hotel 101). The World According to Garp is tragic/violent comedy--comedy that is tragic by nature; The Hotel New Hampshire is comic tragedy--tragedy made bearable by the determined laughter of the characters.

Before Garp is even born, Irving sets the stage for a life riddled with sexual violence and tempered with humor. One of the first glimpses we get of Jenny, a gentle, compassionate nurse, is when she slices open the arm of a soldier in a movie theater. In the midst of this bloody, though relatively harmless violence--when one considers what is likely to be on a World War II news reel--is Jenny's terse explanation to the police: "If I'd wanted to kill him I'd have slit his wrist. I'm a nurse. I know how people bleed" (Irving, Garp 8). Added to this scene are Garp's wry understatements: "My mother was not romantically inclined," and "My mother went through her life on the lookout for purse-snatchers and snatch-snatchers" (Irving, Garp 7,8). Even this early in Jenny's life she is considered by her family to be, as she later terms it, a "sexual suspect." Jenny's brothers' comments, "If only you'd stayed at Wellesley," and "It's best not to get involved with married men," comically and sadly demonstrate that Jenny again has been misunderstood by her family (Irving, Garp 9). Jenny's family has always misunderstood her, though, and she is used to this attitude. When she quits school and

becomes a nurse, she becomes the recipient of dozens of pairs of nursing shoes and "hot water bottles" (douche bags) from her parents. "It struck her that they were thinking: 'If she is to be a whore, let her at least be clean and well shod'" (Irving, Garp 16). While there is little here that is violent, there is much in Jenny's younger days which forms her opinions on lust, a topic about which she has strong opinions. Her views on lust lead to her autobiography which makes her and her son public figures, which in turn leads to her controversial role as a feminist.

Jenny is not, however, spared her exposure to violence until after she is a well-known feminist. It is through her job as a nurse that she meets Garp's father, a soldier who has been wounded in the war. Technical Sergeant Garp was a ball turret gunner; Irving describes the turret as a "nest," a "cocoon," "a nipple on a bomber's belly" (Irving, Garp 15). George V. Griffeth, in his article, "Jarrell According to Garp" compares Irving's imagery with Randall Jarrell's imagery in his poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner":

Each describes the womb-like shape of the plane's turret. Jarrell's gunner is 'hunched in its belly'; T.S. Garp 'looked like some dangerous fetus suspended in the bomber's absurdly exposed amniotic sac...' In his death in the turret each is 'born,' the Gunner of the poem washed

out with a hose, T.S. Garp emerging a childish gunner whose 'ultimate regression' is a 'painless journey back into the womb'" (Irving, Garp 20).

Technical Sergeant Garp is a Goner--a patient who, in addition to physical injuries, has suffered extreme brain damage. He is the perfect sex partner for Jenny, who wants a child but wants as little as possible to do with a man.

Garp Sr. is seen as a gently comic character who is made gentle and comic by an event neither gentle or comic. By the time Jenny meets Garp he is a child with a one word vocabulary and a nearly constant erection. When Jenny asks him if his food is good, he responds agreeably, "Garp!" and when she admits that his food is bad, he gags "Garp!"

In much the same way, Tom Cullen, a gently comic character in Stephen King's The Stand constantly spells M-O-O-N to express himself. King's popular novel is about a flu epidemic which destroys most of the world's population, leaving only a few survivors who have an immunity to the disease. Tom Cullen is one of these survivors, left helpless and alone until, by chance, he meets another survivor who takes care of him. Tom, a mentally retarded adult, tells his new friend, "Tom Cullen's tired...M-O-O-N, that spells tired," or he protests, "Hey, mister, you can't do that!...That's illegal! M-O-O-N and that spells il-legal" (King 334, 266).

King and Irving are not cruel to make us laugh at these characters. Garp and Tom are victims of great catastrophes,

yet they remain gentle, pitiable and comic. The comedy is of no comfort to either Garp or Tom Cullen--neither of them can understand either the humor or the vast despair of their situations. The humor here is for the reader, who can understand the tragedy and needs the humor to make the sorrow bearable.

Yet even Garp's childishness is not the desperate, black humor of much of Irving's work. If there is any of this brand of humor surrounding Technical Sergeant Garp, it is the farcical love scene between Jenny and Garp. There is no love present at Garp's conception, save the love Jenny is confident she will have for a child. There is no seduction, no romance, nothing traditionally connected with sex. The sex act takes place in the hospital bed, the "lovers" surrounded by other patients, one screaming obscenities and another calling softly to God. The sexual horror of this is at first shocking, but eventually we come to expect these scenes; aberrant sex has become an Irving trademark.

The black humor of this scene is followed by the gentle despair we witness at Technical Sergeant Garp's regression. After Jenny has impregnated herself she notices that Garp Sr, himself is becoming an infant: he loses his interest in nursing, and he kicks his legs in his dreams, as if he were swimming; the healing process has even stopped and he sleeps curled up in a fetal position. Jenny imagines, when she sees him kick, that she can

already feel a kick in her womb. She is concerned with Garp's death, not as a lover would be, but more as an interested onlooker, which is all she is:

Jenny anticipated his last phase with some anxiousness. Would there be a struggle at the end, like the sperm's frantic struggle? Would the sperm shield be lifted and the naked egg wait, expectantly for death? In little Garp's return trip, how would his soul at last divide? (Irving, Garp 22-3)

This is a gentle mournful passage, allowing the audience, perhaps even more than Jenny, some curiosity about Technical Sergeant Garp. In making us wonder about his soul at the time of death, Irving is suggesting questions concerning his soul before Garp began his "return trip." All we know of him is that he is an orphan who would probably have died in a field hospital, had the U.S. Navy not needed him to boost a flagging public image. In response to angry letters contending that only politically connected soldiers were allowed to return to American hospitals, a U.S. senator claimed that "if any of the severely wounded were lucky enough to get back to America, 'even an orphan would get to make the trip...'" (Irving, Garp 18).

Thus, while Technical Sergeant Garp is a minor character, Irving uses this person to evoke a full range of emotional reactions from his readers. We are angered, not only that Garp is used as an instrument of war, and that

his life is wasted, but also that politicians so handily and unfeelingly use his death to further their own aims. We mourn, in a way, the loss of two people--the man he was and the child he becomes. And for this reason we need the consolation we get from the black humor of the conception scene and from Garp Sr.'s childish antics. Finally Irving allows his audience to chuckle at the last reference to the tiny soldier: "Thus was the world given T.S. Garp: born from a good nurse with a will of her own, and the seed of a ball turret gunner--his last shot" (Irving, Garp 24).

Irving is consoling his audience with more than humor here, though. We can also find comfort in the optimism that comes with the birth of a new child. Garp Sr. is dead, but his son is a well-loved infant and we have hopes that his life will be happier, less treacherous. This hope is short-lived, however, when in the next paragraph Garp makes a flippant remark about his father and his own life: "Like my father, I believe I have a knack for brevity. I'm a one-shot man" (Irving, Garp 25). While Garp's early years are relatively safe, this remark warns us that Irving will continue to create situations which reflect the insanity and the danger of the world. Garp's life will be treacherous and the reader's consolation will continue to be found in the hilarity of Garp's misfortunes.

The only comic violence in Garp's childhood is the Bonkers incident. The result of this scene is not catastrophic, as in most of Irving's violent humor, for while

Bonkers is potentially dangerous, nothing more than part of an ear is ever lost to the beast. More than anything, the scene is harmlessly funny; we laugh and marvel at the stupidity of the Percys, but this humor is not violent. Perhaps, though, we should be warned of the Percys' potential for harm--because of their ignorance they subject the neighborhood children to a dangerous beast, but still they are largely ignored because of their obvious inferiority. What Garp and the audience do not, at this point, recognize, is that it is the Percys' inferiority (only Jenny understands their potential for harm) which makes them such a threat.

Still, in the first Bonkers episode there is nothing that is sexually violent or humorous. This comes years later, in the second Bonkers episode, in which, in a desire for revenge, Garp bites Bonkers' ear off. Thus one of Garp's earliest memories of sex is comically violent, for he and Cushie are sneaking back to the infirmary to sleep together when Bonkers confronts them and is attacked by Garp. Before Garp can give Cushie his full attention, he must go to see his mother to make sure the blood smeared all over him is Bonkers' and not his own.

However, this is not Garp's initiation to sex, for Cushie has already taken him to the cannons, an historical landmark in Steering, and a popular place, among the Steering students for "getting banged," a pet phrase being, "I got banged at the cannons!" (Irving, Garp 70). Garp,

though, is completely inexperienced, and neglects to bring along a condom. The empty-headed Cushie, finally having the upper hand with Garp, instructs him to look into the mouth of the cannon, an image both violent and phallic, where he sees countless used rubbers. Since Garp is an old friend, Cushie performs fellatio on him, and he promises her that next time he won't forget.

There is much in this scene to warn the reader of coming violence: the image of the cannons filled with used condoms, broken glass, and a battered doll's head with one glassy eye staring at Garp. The doll is especially ominous, in the light of the accident in which Duncan loses an eye and Walt is killed while their mother, in the other car, is performing fellatio on her lover. Instead of being foreshadowing of a single event, though, this foreshadows much of the rest of Garp's life--his and Helen's affairs, the Mustache Kid, and the radical feminist groups whose perverse violence follows the Garps. These scenes are sexual, showing the characters when they are least able to protect or hide themselves, as people do in other social situations. This is a more honest, more vulnerable view of Irving's people, allowing us to know them as they are outside of the control situations governed by society.

When sexual situations go awry, we see, in the reaction of those involved, an even more honest picture. The violence of these sexual adventures is surprising, both for the characters and for the audience, and while the results

are tragic for the characters, for the reader, there is always Irving's undercurrent of hilarity.

Garp's first extra-marital affair is neither violent or comic, though it is pathetic, and serves to connect Garp, in his own mind, with a character and a scene both violent and comic. Garp is first unfaithful to Helen with one of their babysitters, a freshman student whom Helen calls Little Squab Bones. Even Garp thinks of her in belittling terms; she is

a tiny thing, all flutters and twitches and coos--as trusting, as constant, and as stupid as a Steering pigeon...Little Squab Bones, Garp thought, was puppy-brained, and as soft and as easily influenced as a banana. But he wanted her...and he saw her as simply available--like the whores on the Kärntnerstrasse, she would be there when he asked her. And she would cost him only lies (Irving, Garp 140).

In his need to satisfy his lust, Garp does not consider the price exorbitant, but he learns, through another experience, that his seduction of Little Squab Bones must have cost the girl more than lies, and this knowledge costs Garp.

It is the incident in the park with the Mustache Kid that leaves Garp feeling guilty to be a man. The scene is filled with violence, from the little girl who has been raped, to the abduction of the rapist. Irving forces us to see this terrible scene, and causes us to feel Garp's rage

and helplessness, but we cannot help but laugh at the clumsy policeman mistaking Garp for the rapist, and the absurdity of the old man in the woods who must suffer Garp's abuse.

But like much of Irving's humor, we laugh first, and then recoil in anger or shock. Even while laughing at the old man, caught guiltily relieving himself in the woods and then being attacked by a madman, we are filled with sympathy for the child, and anger toward the rapist. But here our anger is tempered by the absence of a character to hate. We never get to know anything of the character of the rapist. In fact, his label--the Mustache Kid--takes him out of the realm of reality and makes him into a parody of a cartoon hero.

Later, the humor is tempered by our last meeting with the Mustache Kid. A few months after the scene in the park, the old man meets Garp in the drugstore buying condoms for his seduction of Little Squab Bones. Thinking all the time that Garp was the molester, the old man is indignant that Garp is not in jail. Garp is angered at the man's self-righteousness, but when he later meets the Mustache Kid at a school basketball game, he understands the old man's frustration, and is sympathetic. The Mustache Kid gloats that his victim had been useless in the case against him, and Garp notes with alarm that the Mustache Kid is growing a new mustache.

It is after his seduction of Little Squab Bones, that

Garp compares the act with the rape of the child in the park. He remembers that the old man, upon seeing that Garp was buying prophylactics, accused him of "looking for innocence to violate and defile" (Irving, Garp 147). Garp knows the old man was right, and feeling guilty about Little Squab Bones, he decides that he does not want to have a daughter, "because of bad men, certainly; but even, he thought, because of men like me" (Irving, Garp 151).

Garp experiences a different, though equally masculine guilt in his confrontations with Florence Cochran Bowsby, known to him only as Mrs. Ralph. The comedy in these two scenes is never violent, though it is often physical. It is bitter, humiliating comedy. Mrs. Ralph, the divorced mother of Duncan's best friend, Ralph, is, in Garp's mind, a madwoman, not fit to look after his child for a night. But when he first meets her he is not even looking for her specifically--he is self-righteously chasing down a speeding driver who turns out to be Mrs. Ralph. Garp is embarrassed because he has obviously caught her on her way home from some lovers' quarrel, and the issue of speeding seems strangely out of place. Mrs. Ralph, from the first time she meets Garp, reads him astutely. She knows that Garp thinks she is a slob and an irresponsible mother, that he thinks (even though he does not usually think this about people), all she needs is "a good lay." To make matters worse, he drops a wooden spoon covered with tomato sauce in her lap and stains her dress. Mrs. Ralph is alternately

vulnerable and sardonic, constantly throwing Garp off balance. She is a woman who "looked to be suffering her approaching middle age like the flu" (Irving, Garp 182). But she occasionally rises to a fight and puts Garp in his place:

'I'll bet you think that all I need is a good lay....And I'll bet you think I'd let you do it,' she said, glaring at him.

Garp in fact, did think so.

'No, I don't think you would,' he said.

'Yes, you think I would love to,' Mrs. Ralph said.

...Well in your case, I just might.' He looked at her and she gave him an evil grin. 'It might make you a little less smug....You think you're so superior.' True, Garp knew; he was superior. He would make a lousy marriage counselor, he now knew (Irving, Garp 184).

In Garp's confrontation with Mrs. Ralph, Irving offers humor as consolation for a kind, intelligent woman who, despite her struggles to improve her life, is miserable. We see her, at first, as Garp does, as a slob and an irresponsible parent, yet when we realize her situation and her inability to deal with it, we have nothing but sympathy and hope for her.

After Garp's first meeting with Mrs. Ralph, he is convinced that Duncan is not safe at Ralph's house, so after making love to Helen and suffering nightmares with

Walt, Garp, dressed only in track shorts and running shoes, goes to rescue Duncan. One of Garp's weaknesses is that he is an over-protective parent. He is obsessed with imagining the accidents waiting for his vulnerable children:

"Being hit by cars? Choking to death on peanuts? Being stolen by strangers?" (Irving, Garp 196). In spite of Garp's concern and preoccupation with his children's safety, Walt will die in a car accident, and Duncan will choke to death, years later, on an olive--a scene fitfully comic, as Duncan, at a "coming out" party for one of his wife's transsexual friends, is laughing at one of his own jokes when he aspirates the olive.

When Garp goes to rescue his son from the "house of Ralph," he first sees the boys asleep in the cancerous glow of the television, "looking as if the television had murdered them" (Irving, Garp 200). Next he wanders around the house to the kitchen window, where he observes a cat sleeping on the stove in the middle of an absolutely filthy kitchen. A mangled pair of hose hangs from a light cord, one greasy foot swinging above a bottle of gin. It is into this scene that Mrs. Ralph makes her startling and graceless entrance:

Just then there is a thunderous approach down the back staircase of a heavy, falling body that bashes open the stairway entrance door to the kitchen, startling the cat into flight, skidding the greasy iron skillet to the floor. Mrs. Ralph

sits bare-assed and wincing on the linoleum, a kimono-style robe wide open and roughly tugged above her thick waist, a miraculously unspilled drink in her hand. She looks at the drink, surprised, and sips it; her large, down-pointing breasts shine--they slouch across her freckled chest as she leans back on her elbows and burps. The cat, in a corner of the kitchen, yowls at her, complaining (Irving, Garp 201).

In spite of the fact that we have already met Mrs. Ralph and, unlike Garp, find her to be a likeable character, at this point she is no more than a drunken caricature. A belch is the oldest, cheapest and most effective laugh. It is the oral equivalent to the fart (also one of Mrs. Ralph's specialties), reminiscent of the memorable last scene in Garp's Second Wind of the Cuckold. Clearly Irving and Garp share a sense of humor.

The rest of the humor in the Mrs. Ralph chapter is kinder, more understanding of Mrs. Ralph. We stop seeing her as a caricature and see, instead, an intelligent, extremely unhappy woman. Garp, too, eventually learns this, but not before she has made him feel embarrassment, shame, and lust. She controls the situation with Garp, and reads him, and his marriage as well as if she had studied them for some time. Her final victory comes when Garp, wanting one last look at her, sneaks back upstairs to her room before taking Duncan home:

He looked straight at her crotch, her strangely twisted navel, her rather small nipples (for such big breasts). He should have looked first at her eyes; then he might have realized she was wide-awake and staring back at him (Irving, Garp 209). She finally wins our affection when she asks Garp not to tell Helen "everything" about her. "Maybe you could draw a picture of me with a little sympathy." Garp responds that he has "pretty good sympathy," but again, the conversation resorts to sarcasm and name calling.

Helen, in spite of her jealousy when she calls Garp at Mrs. Ralph's house, and in spite of her cutting remarks about the woman, later comes to like her, and they correspond. Mrs. Ralph demonstrates her tact and sincerity in her sympathy note to Helen at Garp's death: "His was a seduction...whose non-occurrence I have always regretted but respected" (Irving, Garp 421). Her most endearing quality remains, however, her tough, even bitter sense of humor. She is a well-educated woman, and well aware of professional protocol, yet when she is turned down for a Fields Foundation fellowship she responds with a simple note: "Up yours." "Mrs. Ralph," the narrator tells us, "did not appreciate rejection" (Irving, Garp 421).

Mrs. Ralph is not the only woman Garp misunderstands. His misunderstanding and intolerance of the Ellen Jamesians provides the novel with much of its conflict and violence. The Ellen Jamesians are a society of radical feminists

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Mrs. Ralph is not the only woman Garp misunderstands. His misunderstanding and intolerance of the Ellen Jamesians provides the novel with much of its conflict and violence. The Ellen Jamesians are a society of radical feminists

whose irrational hatred of men is often focused on Garp. Garp is the son of a famous feminist who, though she does not agree with their stern code of hatred and self-destruction, is tolerant and even supportive. That Jenny's son should so vehemently detest them and often antagonize them makes him the target of their hatred.

Garp is right to condemn the Ellen Jamesians--they are as filled with hatred and violence as the men they are protesting, and their hatred of all men, not just rapists, proves their irrationality. Yet it is not difficult to understand why they are filled with such animosity. Women faced with the threat of rape will be filled with rage and frustration. There is absolutely nothing they can do to protect themselves or children like Ellen James, and in their frustration they stop looking for constructive ways to deal with the problem of rape. Their solution is not only powerless, it is also destructive, insane, and representative of the insanity of twentieth-century violence.

While Irving's readers share the Ellen Jamesians' anger at the rape of Ellen James, and share their frustration at a seemingly solutionless problem, we do not have sympathy for the ridiculous, barbaric action they take. It is difficult to imagine that a sane woman would cut out her tongue to protest rape; conversely, it is easy to imagine that the Ellen Jamesians are women whose problems began before they had even heard of Ellen James. We can sympathize with their fears and anger, but we cannot sympathize

with their self-destruction.

Thus, the Ellen Jamesians become a grotesquely comic society, and their insanity is the source of our cruelest laughter. In this instance alone, Irving's humor is not a consolation, but like Heller's humor, the humor of awareness. Just as we now look for, and find, "catch-22s" in our own lives, so we watch for violence and insanity grown from an understandable fear and anger. We recognize Ellen Jamesians in terrorists who highjack airplanes and paramilitary religions who teach combat techniques to their families. There is no consolation in the black humor of the Ellen James Society--they respond to and promote only fear, anger, and violence.

Garp first meets an Ellen Jamesian when his mother brings one with her on one of her visits to Garp's apartment. She is a "large, silent, sullen woman who lurked in the doorway of Garp's apartment," and Garp, ignorant of the group's existence, has to ask his mother to explain.

"People in the Ellen James Society have their tongues cut off. To protest what happened to Ellen James" (Irving, Garp 135). Ellen James is an eleven-year-old girl who was raped.

...they cut her tongue 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 (Irving, Garp 136). Garp, full of sympathy for the young girl herself, has only contempt for the Ellen Jamesians. Jenny urges him to be understanding, to which he replies: "The next time there's a rape, suppose I cut my prick off and wear it around my neck. Would you respect that?...We're talking about stupid gestures" (Irving, Garp 137).

At this point, the audience tends to agree with Garp: the Ellen Jamesians are absurd, ridiculous, and self-destructive, and the tendency, at this point, is to dismiss them as flakes. This is Garp's mistake, though. He continues, throughout the novel, to be confronted and antagonized by the Ellen Jamesians, but in his contempt he underestimates them. An individual capable of such self-destruction and loathing should be recognized as an individual who is capable of turning that destructive force outward onto anyone who threatens her. When such an individual is a member of a supporting group, a society, such force and hatred multiply. Not only does Garp underestimate this force, but by feeling superior to them, and knowing that he can rationally prove them to be crazy, he antagonizes them, constantly telling them that they are wrong. He sets himself up as the prototype of all that they hate: a man who assumes superiority to women. In fact, this is not true. Garp is far from being a male chauvinist. He does not hate the Ellen Jamesians because

they are women, but because they are wrong. The Ellen Jamesians cannot accept this and continue to make him their target in editorials and nasty letters.

Until near the end of the novel, though, the reader never sees the Ellen Jamesians as people to be feared. Instead, we agree with Garp that they are crazy, and laugh at their insanity. Even Jenny, the tolerant, understanding nurse, admits to Garp: "They're making victims of themselves, 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?" (Irving, Garp 358). And when we finally meet Ellen James, the young girl for whom the society was started, one of the first things we learn about her is that she, like Garp, despises the Ellen James Society: "I hate the Ellen Jamesians, I would never do this myself. I want to talk; I want to say everything..." (Irving, Garp 366). To Ellen James, the Ellen Jamesians have made her personal trauma a public issue; they have turned her into "a very public casualty" (Irving, Garp 387).

Finally the Ellen James Society begins to be seen, by Helen and the audience, if not by Garp, as a serious threat. Garp is forced to take them as a potential danger when an Ellen Jamesian attempts to run over him in her Saab, but even this is dismissed by Garp as an isolated incident. He is certainly unprepared for the deceptively harmless figure of a nurse who comes into the Steering wrestling room

while he is coaching the team and Helen is in the corner reading. Garp feels safe in the wrestling room; it is always warm, even womb-like; it is where Garp spent hours as a Steering student learning his only real sport; it is where he first made love to Helen, and where Duncan was conceived. Even when he sees the woman in the nurse's uniform, he is not alarmed; he thinks that she is Dotty, the kind nurse who helped him escape from his mother's funeral, and he is, after all, used to seeing women in nurses' uniforms, having been raised by a nurse. That the woman turns out to be Bainbridge Percy is the source of humor in the tragedy of Garp's death. Irving has combined the most contemptable family in the novel, the Percys, with the most contemptable feminists, the Ellen Jamesians, in the form of Pooh Percy, the most ridiculous of the Percys, and has dressed her in the ridiculous Jenny Fields Original. The violence of Garp's death, graphically described, is set off by the pathetic, laughable, and recently de-tongued Pooh Percy, trapped beneath Garp's second-string heavy-weight, and screaming, "Igs! Ucking igs!" (Irving, Garp 412).

It is the only death Irving can invent for Garp and be in keeping with the life he invented for Garp. Garp is a gentle, loving husband and father. He is passionate, and temperamental, but he is protective and loyal. His world, though, is filled with evil and insanity of every description. "In the world according to Garp, an evening could be hilarious and the next morning could be murderous"

(Irving, Garp 406). It is the world of Marcus Aurelius:

In the life of a man his time is but a moment,
 his being an incessant flux, his sense a dim rush-
 light, his body a prey of worms, his soul an
 unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, his fame doubtful.
 In short, all that is body is as coursing water,
 all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors
 (Irving, Garp 88).

But this death did not come from the world of Marcus Aurelius, from the world of classical literature and philosophy. It is clearly a death from Garp's world:

It was a death, Wolf thought, which in its random, stupid, and unnecessary qualities--comic and ugly and bizarre--underlined everything Garp had ever written about how the world works. It was a death scene, John Wolf told Jillsy Sloper, that only Garp could have written (Irving, Garp 414).

In fact, it is a death scene only Irving could have written. For the world of insanity and evil, a world which is "comic and ugly and bizarre," is ultimately the world Irving sees. In an interview with A.M. Chaplin, Irving comments:

Among all my critics, I have the least tolerance for people who think my violence is excessive. The world's violence is excessive....Writers are often accused of inventing the unsavory. I see the unsavory. I didn't make it up. Thomas Hardy

didn't invent the bleakness; he saw it. Dickens didn't invent exaggeration; he lived it. Daily (6).

Garp himself uses this justification, if he needs it, to write about excessive violence. Like Irving, he does not invent twisted, bizarre, comic violence. He and his family live such violence. Daily. It is for this reason that Garp's fiction reflects such violence. Irving, through Garp and Garp's fiction, is telling his audience that the world is not like classical tragedy, with dignity and a proper reverence for the victim of tragedy. In the real world, the world Irving sees and in which Garp lives, laughable, pathetic characters such as Pooh Percy are found in tragic situations. We mourn for Walt while we laugh at Michael Milton. We laugh at Technical Sergeant Garp while we are angered at the result of war. Garp, as a writer, has no choice, if he is to be honest, but to write about a world in which comedy and tragedy overlap; they are not two distinct literary genres--they are simply the way the world works.

When Garp is a teenager living in Vienna, trying to write a story that is good enough to convince Helen to marry him, he is troubled by his lack of experience. Half-way through "The Pension Grillparzer," he stops, not because his life has not furnished him with details to complete a story, but because, at nineteen he has no personal vision of the world which only experience can give him:

Even Charlotte has a vision, he thought; he certainly knew that his mother had one. Garp had no parallel wisdom for the absolute clarity of the world according to Jenny Fields. But he knew it would take only time to imagine a world of his own--with a little help from the real world. The real world would soon cooperate (Irving, Garp 110-1).

The real world does cooperate with Garp and his need for a vision of the real world. It is easy to see how a combination of Marcus Aurelius, Jenny Fields, Charlotte, and the Percys would inspire Garp to write a story which, in Tinch's words, "is rich with lu-lu-lunacy and sorrow" (Irving, Garp 129).

"The Pension Grillparzer" is the first important work of fiction for Garp. It wins him his wife and begins his career as a "serious" writer. In his later work, though his novels are nothing like his first short story, the real world will continue to cooperate and provide him with a personal vision. Garp's second novel, "a serious comedy about marriage," clearly gets its vision from Garp's life (Irving, Garp 160). He and Helen have just finished their affair with Harrison and Alice Fletcher, and Garp writes a novel about two married couples who have an affair. While the affair with the Fletchers is not a comedy, it does have its comic moments, usually cheap shots taken at poor Alice's speech problem:

The good-byes Garp imagined conducting with Alice were violent scenarios, fraught with Alice's incoherent speech and always ending in desperate lovemaking--another failed resolution, wet with sweat and sweet with the lush stickum of sex, oh yeth (Irving, Garp 157).

But basically this is a serious issue which causes strain both in the marriages and the friendships. Helen, who is the least happy with the situation, finally tells Garp: "This is the last time I try to save anyone's marriage but my own" (Irving, Garp 157).

In contrast, the novel which Garp writes, "swollen... with the energy he had left over from Alice," is a comedy, in spite of, or because of its serious premise (Irving, Garp 159). Added to the complicated plot of two couples having an affair, is the additional complication of the physical handicaps of the couples. First, in the synopsis of the novel these handicaps are explained with sympathy, and we are not inclined to find much humor. The comedy becomes stronger in the following statement in which we no longer see people with handicaps, but rather the people as handicaps: "The farter is married to the stutterer, the blind man is married to the dangerous right arm" (Irving, Garp 161). To complicate the situation further, one of the women is pregnant, but no one is sure of the identity of the natural father. "The couples watch for telltale habits in

the newborn child. Will it stutter, fart, lash out, or be blind?" (Irving, Garp 161).

The last scene in the novel is the funniest, though even here the humor is violent, the closest that either Garp or Irving ever comes to slapstick:

The last scene in the novel is the chance meeting of the two women; they pass on an escalator in a department store at Christmastime, the farter going up, the woman with the dangerous right arm going down. Both are laden with packages. At the moment they pass each other, the woman stricken with uncontrollable flatulence releases a keen treble fart--the spactic stiff-arms an old man on the escalator in front of her, bowling him down the moving staircase, toppling a sea of people (Irving, Garp 161).

No one gets the joke. Readers and reviewers alike are confused by Second Wind of the Cuckold; Helen does not like it, and Alice never mentions it in her letters. Garp's sense of humor is obviously misunderstood by his audience.

Helen is not the only reader of Garp's fiction who is displeased. It is Second Wind of the Cuckold which prompts the letter from Irene Poole, charging Garp with cruelty for laughing at people's problems. Trying to reason with her anger, Garp responds to her letter by trying to explain his vision of the world:

...in regard to what's comic and what's tragic...

the world is all messed up. For this reason I have never understood why 'serious' and 'funny' are thought to be opposites. It is simply a truthful contradiction to me that people's problems are often funny and that people are often and nonetheless sad (Irving, Garp 166).

He explains to her that he believes laughter and sympathy to be related and that laughter is the only consolation he has to offer, but she continues to misunderstand him, and the two antagonize each other until their correspondence is reduced to a comedy of threats and obscenity.

The violence of Garp's second novel, though, is minimal in comparison to the violence which erupts in Garp's life when he discovers Helen's affair with Michael Milton. Easily the most violent scene in any of Irving's novels (to date) is the car accident in which Walt is killed. The wounded list is unbelievable, considering that one car is stationary, and the other is moving at no more than thirty-five miles an hour: Duncan loses an eye; Walt is killed when his neck is broken; Helen breaks her nose, bites (among other things) her tongue, and must wear a neck brace for several weeks; Garp also bites his tongue and breaks his jaw; Michael Milton loses three quarters of his penis in the actual accident, and the remaining quarter in the hospital.

Because of Irving's careful artistry, this, the most devastating scene, is, in its build-up, the most comic. It is as if vicious gods are playing a cruel practical joke,

carefully setting the circumstances and then leading their victims to the scene. Irving meticulously sets the stage before Helen's affair with Michael Milton has even started, beginning with the missing gear shift knob. Before this chapter, the Garps' method of transportation has never been discussed; suddenly the car is the subject of much importance. Helen debates with herself whether the broken knob is Garp's responsibility or hers, and finally concludes, "...it's really nobody's fault. It's just one of those things" (Irving, Garp 227). In retrospect, this is a frighteningly ominous line, but at the time it is thought, Helen has Michael Milton on her mind--not car maintenance.

Michael Milton's car is also a major factor to be considered. Helen instructs him carefully as to what sort of car he should buy: nondescript, dependable, and wide enough that she can stretch out along the front seat. An obedient student, he complies and buys a huge Buick station wagon, "the dull inconspicuous color of clotted blood" which Duncan, on the night of the accident, innocently mistakes for a hearse. (Irving, Garp 244). When Duncan sees the car he simply thinks it is an interesting car, but we know where it is going, and we begin to prepare ourselves for a "scene," though Helen knows she must "avoid any scene, at any cost" (Irving, Garp 262). She has always felt this; Michael has known from the beginning that the instant anyone finds out, the affair is over. Her priorities are husband and sons first, Michael second.

Sadly, Helen does not adhere to this plan strictly enough. She suspects that Margie Tallworth, Michael's old girlfriend, knows about their affair, but she allows herself to be convinced by Michael that the girl knows nothing. Margie Tallworth is much like Little Squab Bones--she aspires to a knowledge of the world that is completely beyond her limited experience. She is correct about only two things: that Helen is sleeping with Michael Milton, and that a sexual relationship is the only kind of relationship one could have with Michael Milton. It is this second bit of knowledge she knows even better, or knows it sooner, than Helen. However, in her idea that she should be the one to tell Garp, and in her idea of how such information should be imparted, she is woefully ignorant.

When Garp finds her on his porch, with the perfumed note clutched in her hand, he first thinks that she is a babysitter. When she cannot say anything more than "Aaahhh!" he assumes, angrily, that she is another creepy Ellen Jamesian. There is almost an "I Love Lucy" quality in this scene, filled with misunderstanding and confusion. Garp is stunned to discover that she has a tongue and Margie is convinced that Garp is insane. She turns to run away, and collides with a soggy mailman, scattering letters and her note all over the rainy front porch. When Garp returns to the porch from the house, with antiseptic for her scraped knee, she is gone, having left her inappropriately perfumed and inappropriately worded note for Garp.

It is with this new knowledge and anger that Garp plays a cruel joke on Helen, letting her think that he has drowned himself. Helen knows that Garp has found out and thinks: "only her husband could have conceived of such a plot to pay her back: drowning himself in front of their children and leaving her to explain to them why he did it" (Irving, Garp 254).

The following scene between Helen and Garp, with the troubled children instinctively coming between their parents, is filled with anger and pain and fear, coming to a climax when young Walt tells his father, "I'm not going to grow up" (Irving, Garp 257). We have already witnessed Walt's frailty; a great deal of attention has been given to Walt's constant cold, and his perfect, delicate body. Special attention has been given to Walt's breathing. Garp frequently stops to listen to Walt breathe, to check on the condition of his cold. Often Garp sleeps with his head on Walt's chest to hear his heart beat and his filled lungs draw air. Even when Walt is a toddler, his breathing is indicative of his frailty. During a rather heated discussion about the Fletcher's and Garp's babysitters, Helen delivers a statement which halts all talk:

There was one of those silences wherein a family can identify its separate, breathing parts in the night. Open doors off an upstairs hall: Duncan breathing lazily, an almost-eight-year-old with lots of time to live; Walt breathing those

tentative two-year-old breaths, short and excited...(Irving, Garp 155).

With Walt's frailty firmly established, there is only one detail left to bring in to set the stage for the accident: the surprising manner in which Garp drives, especially when his children, over whom he worries incessantly, are in the back seat. First, it is surprising that Garp would allow them to ride in the car without seatbelts. Failing to do this, he even allows them to stand in the back seat, in the gap between the two front seats. He tells Duncan that the gearshift is as deadly as a spear, and he tells Duncan to sit down, but does not enforce this command. Duncan and Walt continue to bicker and push and shove. Second, it is surprising that a man who chases speeding cars to tell them to slow down would leave and enter his driveway with the engine and lights off, especially on a wet rainy night when the driveway is slick with mud.

The stage is set. All the props have been explained and are in place. Even so, we never expect a catastrophe of such proportions. And, mercifully, Irving does not force us to live the actual experience. He allows us all some breathing space at peaceful Dog's Head Harbor before we see the accident through the Garp's painful memories. The build-up to the accident was carefully comic. Even the idea, that Helen would emasculate her lover in the middle of a sex act, is comic and we do not waste our sympathy on Michael Milton, whose name and character remind Garp of a

flavor of ice cream. Like Helen, frantic to see to the safety of her family, we completely ignore Michael Milton, who

never once corrected his bent-double position: he lay on his side in the freezing slush as if he were still in the driver's seat, though he bel-
lowed and bled like a steer (Irving, Garp 268).

That is all we see of Michael Milton until years later, after Garp's and Helen's deaths. Michael comes to visit Duncan, ostensibly to gather information for a biography about Garp. But the questions are all about the accident, about which Duncan knows very little, "and the man[goes] away empty-handed--biographically speaking" (Irving, Garp 435).

But Michael Milton is the only comic character here, and once the comedy of the set-up is over, there is no comedy. We feel justified in finding Michael's predicament humorous, but the others, even Helen, are undeserving. We tend to agree with Helen, who later thinks that she has "been made to suffer disproportionately for a trivial indiscretion" (Irving, Garp 270).

The cruelest, cheapest, and certainly the easiest humor surrounding the accident, comes in a touching scene with Alice Fletcher. Garp's jaw is wired shut, but Alice tells him he can talk if he wants to. In the conversation which follows we remember Walt and share Garp's pain, but we also remember with humor, Garp's father and his ruined mind:

'Alish,' Garp said.

'Yeth,' said Alice. 'That'th my name. What'th yours?'

'Arp,' Garp managed to say.

Jenny Fields, passing whitely to another room, shuddered like a ghost and moved on.

'I mish him,' Garp confessed to Alice.

'You mith him, yeth, of course you do,' said Alice, and she held him while he cried (Irving, Garp 281).

To understand how we can find humor in such a situation, we listen again to Garp's letter to Irene Polle: "It is simply a truthful contradiction to me that people's problems are often funny and that the people are often and nonetheless sad" (Irving, Garp 166).

This is, in fact, a truthful contradiction, one which Irving forces us to see in his novels, and eventually, in our own worlds. While Garp is fiction, it draws heavily, truthfully, on Irving's world vision and on the world vision which he gives to the novelist, Garp: "...writers, Garp sadly knew, were just observers--good and ruthless imitators of human behavior" (Irving, Garp 161).

While a world vision is evident in The Hotel New Hampshire, this novel is less a reflection of the world. The world of the Berrys is more created, more imagined, more dreamed than reflected. In this world, "everything is a fairy tale," and like a fairy tale it is filled with

perverse cruelty and violent laughter (Irving, Hotel 400). In this world there are villains, talking animals, dwarves, orphaned children and, of course, heroes. In fairy tale fashion, the humor is not as obvious as it is in Garp; rarely do we find ourselves wanting to laugh and mourn at the same time. It is not situation comedy, as it often is in Garp. Instead, the humor is born out of the responses of the characters to tragic and violent disasters.

The humor in Hotel, sexual and otherwise, is fleeting--difficult to pin down, to analyze: Why is it there? Consolation for whom? Relief/release? Humor in Garp is situation humor, typified by Second Wind of the Cuckold. Hotel is funny because of situations, yes, but more because of the Berrys' response to Sorrow. We find humor in Garp, often at the Garps' expense; in Hotel the Berrys find humor (though they often have to work at it), and we enjoy the humor vicariously. We laugh at the situations the Garps get themselves into, but we laugh at the Berrys' ability to find or create humor in tragedy.

One of the few exceptions to this rule is the prelude to Franny's rape, the scene in which Howard Tuck has a fatal heart attack. The Berrys have just moved into the renovated girls' school and discover that they have no electricity. Franny and John, always the comrades, decide to turn on all the lights and radios, so that when the power is turned on the hotel will "spring to life." Howard Tuck,

a rather lethargic police guard, is just turning the ignition in his patrol car when the hotel lights up, "...as if he'd done it," and he suffers a heart attack and dies (Irving, Hotel 87). Franny and John, feeling sorry if not guilty, volunteer to get the Dairy School ambulance, though it is evident that it is too late for an ambulance to be of any use to the old man. On their way across campus, they encounter frightened trick-or-treaters, whose witless cries of "Spiders!" should warn them of danger, but they hurry on to the path in the woods near the football field and are caught in the spider web of the soccer net and held captive by Chipper Dove and his gang.

While there is no humor in what happens to Franny, until she is raped we cling to the notion that Halloween is a time for harmless practical jokes. However, we can appreciate the humor in the way Junior Jones and the Black Arm of the Law deliver two of the three rapists: Lenny Metz is stripped naked and tied to a lacrosse stick and carried to the Dean of Men. Chester Pulaski has already been chased there, having escaped from what he imagined were cannibals in the jungle.

Throughout the evening of the rape, we are constantly amused and shocked by the understatement made by those involved. Franny, a student of her grandfather's happy fatalism, bravely tells John: "It's just another Halloween, kid," and later, referring to the rape as punishment for having inadvertantly killed Howard Tuck tells him, "Boy,

are you ever made to pay for a little fun" (Irving, Hotel 99, 102). The Dean of Women, the timid wife of the Dean of Men, cheerfully opens her door, expecting trick-or-treaters, and finds "a naked and cringing Chester Pulaski, the blocking back--blazing with boils, smelling of sex" (Irving, Hotel 100). We cannot help but laugh at the ineffectual Dean of Men who asks Chester helplessly, "Why? Only a week before the Exeter game!" (Irving, Hotel 103). The dazed Chester is rambling about the woods being "full of niggers" and advises the Dean and his wife to run for their lives. When the Black Arm of the Law arrives with Lenny strapped to the lacrosse stick the timid woman cries, "You can answer the goddamned door this time!" and locks herself in the bathroom while the hysterical rapist screams, "It's the niggers, don't let them in!" (Irving, Hotel 103).

Franny never admits, never says, that she was raped; in her words, she was "beaten up," but there is never any doubt as to what actually happened. The three rapists are expelled from school, inconveniently, ~~some think,~~ before the big game against Exeter. Franny, always the most resilient of the Berry children, shows her vulnerability only to John when he asks if he can get anything for her. "Just go out and get me yesterday and most of today. I want them back," she tells him (Irving, Hotel 105).

Franny has learned this resiliency from Iowa Bob's philosophy, a dictum which Frank terms "happy fatalism":

The dictum was connected with Iowa Bob's theory that we were all on a big ship--'on a big cruise, across the world,' And in spite of the danger of being swept away, at any time, or perhaps because of the danger, we were not allowed to be depressed or unhappy. The way the world worked was not cause for some sort of blanket cynicism or sophomoric despair; according to my father and Iowa Bob, the way the world worked--which was badly--was just a strong incentive to live purposefully, and to be determined about living well (Irving, Hotel 149).

While there is nothing in Iowa Bob's philosophy to hint at sexual violence or comedy, it is this philosophy, ingrained in the Berry children, which allows them to successfully combat violence and sorrow with humor. He is preparing them for the day when they will experience first hand, as Franny already has, that the world works badly. He cannot warn them of the specific forms of sorrow--he is a philosopher, not a prophet, and even he is surprised by sorrow--but he can warn them away from despair and he can encourage them to have determination about living well.

It is a wise philosophy for the Berrys; it is the only way that makes sense for them, for the world does indeed work badly. Sorrow is their constant companion. They cannot control sorrow, and they cannot predict either its

arrival or its form, so they must be aware of its existence, be ready to accept it, and live well in spite of it.

The old man's death is Sorrow's first frightening appearance in the Berrys' lives, and while there is nothing sexual about Iowa Bob's death, his death is the prelude to the New Year's Eve party, an evening filled with sexual comedy and sorrow. The "usual weave of silliness and sadness" at the party is characteristic of the Berry family--living well, not in spite of sorrow, but with Sorrow as a companion (Irving, *Hotel* 149). The result, at the party and throughout the novel, is an atmosphere of dark humor.

The party begins with John's trepidation at meeting his "date" for the evening. He knows that Junior Jones is bringing a sister to the party for John, but he does not know if she is the same sister. "Was I to have a large, raped girl for a date or a large unraped girl?--for either way, I was sure, she would have to be huge" (Irving, Hotel 143). John's confusion about rape, and about his feelings concerning a girl who had been raped, are understandable--rape is frightening not only to women, who fear that it might happen to them, but also to men, who, as Garp explains, must share in the guilt simply because they are men (Irving, Garp 149). But guilt is not at the heart of John's ambivalence; after all, his own sister was raped, and he was forced to witness it, so to some degree he too feels like a victim.

What he feels is a complete inadequacy, at age fourteen, to deal with the subject of rape at all, let alone spend the evening in the company of a rape victim who is not his sister. When Franny asks John if it matters to him that Junior's sister was raped, he is stymied:

Of course I didn't know what to say: that it did?...That one would look for the lasting scars in the personality, or not look for them? That one would assume lasting scars, and speak to that person as an invalid?...That it didn't matter? But it did....In my inexpert years...I imagined that one would touch a person who'd been raped a little differently, or a little less; or that one would not touch her at all (Irving, Hotel 144).

When John finally meets Sabrina he is more alarmed at her age than that she has been raped, and until he escorts her to her room, she has little to do with him. Once the party gets under way, adolescent sexual tension and jealousy keep the couples on the dance floor alert to the activities of all the other couples. Ronda Ray watches John with Sabrina and with Bitty (Titsie) Tuck. John watches Franny, who watches John, while always in the background, somewhere in the large hotel is Egg, "contemplating the terrible mass of wet black Labrador retriever, which was Sorrow" (Irving, Hotel 144).

When midnight rolls around, John has just returned from his kissing lessons with Sabrina, and Doris Wales is

continuing her awful renditions of Elvis Presley tunes. John tries out his new kiss on Bitty, who immediately takes John to her room where she discovers Sorrow, singed and soggy, in her bathtub; Bitty is in the middle of inserting a diaphragm when she discovers the dog, shrieks and passes out. "Fainted while diaphragming herself!" as Franny would later characterize the scene (Irving, Hotel 164). John, with his new talent, is trying to revive her with a kiss when Sabrina gets to the scene. "'You must have done something I never showed you!'"[she tells him]...She no doubt thought Bitty was the victim of bad kissing" (Irving, Hotel 165).

Again, we as readers find humor in Sorrow's surprise appearances, but John, fresh from finding Sorrow in his grandfather's room, is not prepared to find him again so soon. After the scene in Bitty's room, John returns to the party room, only to be accosted by Doris Wales, whose kisses are nothing like Sabrina's or Bitty's. After a kiss tasting of vomit and beer, Doris grabs John in a hug and he can feel her breasts "sliding between them like two fresh-caught fish in loose bags," a sensation very different from the "two warm kittens" of Bitty Tuck (Irving, Hotel 161). The humor here is lost on John--he is only confused and embarrassed. Earlier in the evening he is meeting Sabrina and introducing her to his family and the "almost live" band, when this embarrassment overtakes him:

...I felt certain that if the world would stop indulging wars and famines and other perils, it would still be possible for human beings to embarrass each other to death. Our self-destruction might take a little longer that way, but I believe it would be no less complete (Irving, Hotel 155).

And it is certainly, from the reader's point of view, more funny. If it is possible, as a timid John believes, to self-destruct because of embarrassment, the consolation of humor becomes even more important. True, the events of the New Year's Eve party are not devastating, like Franny's rape or Coach Bob's death, but Lilly's pathetic size and the obvious failure of Doris Wales are yet another form of sorrow made less intense by humor.

Iowa Bob's dictum seems to serve the Berrys less well when they get to Vienna and take over the second Hotel New Hampshire. For one thing, they have lost Mother and Egg, and the strength required of one who embraces Bob's happy fatalism is not as stable as it once was. Father is living less in the real world than ever, and instead of living well in spite of sorrow, the family, for a time, gives in to sorrow and fails to live well. The children at first want to leave the second hotel, but they give in to their father and learn, instead, to bide their time, watching the radicals, being mothered by Schwanger, and making friends with the whores and with Susie the bear.

Susie is Freud's and the Berrys' second bear, a "good smart bear," Freud calls her, and John later says that everyone needs a good smart bear. When we first meet Susie, we are surprised, as the Berry children are, that she is actually a person in a bear suit, and this appears to be a harmless comic diversion. More than anything, Susie the bear, like State o' Maine, is loyal to what she loves. State o' Maine had his motorcycle, and Susie has Freud and the Berrys.

While at first Susie's bear disguise appears to be a harmless comic antic, we eventually come to see that she uses the bear suit for protection--it is a refuge for an unattractive girl from a world which is unkind to such people. When Franny defiantly says she is not going to change to suit the world, she turns on Susie:

And 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 (Irving, Hotel 233).

Susie replies to Franny's attack with another attack which shows her own vulnerability: "So what if you're beautiful? You're also a bitch" (Irving, Hotel 233).

With a dawning horror we realize why Susie has taken such an extreme action. After all, lots of people are homely who do not resort to living in a bear disguise. And when we realize exactly what has caused this action, we also

understand why a bear suit is the most suitable disguise. Susie was raped, and the men who raped her put a bag over her head, telling her that she was too ugly for them to look at her face. Knowing this, Susie's life as a bear and her temporary conversion to lesbianism is understandable, perhaps even more healthy than Franny's persistence in writing to Chipper Dove. A bear seems, in fact, to be a logical choice for Susie. She becomes, with a bearish determination, a creature at once hostile toward and shy of people.

Susie's life as a bear is not a permanent solution, but rather an effective, although unconventional, therapy, a way of living and dealing with her rape. The bear in Susie is never completely exorcised, but the masterpiece which Lilly writes to repay Chipper Dove is Susie's revenge as well as Franny's. Susie the bear is able to act out her own hostility and finally put the bear costume away. Even when Susie has married John she occasionally feels insecure and figuratively resorts to her former bearishness; when she needs to be reassured she growls "Earl!" and John understands her insecurity. The growl is also an affirmation for Susie. Instead of saying "I do" at her wedding, she growls "Earl!" at the minister.

The comedy of the bear suit is more than Susie's consolation; it is the only way she can live with the trauma of her rape. And by understanding these feelings, finally, she is able to turn her bearishness into the energy and

understanding needed to turn the third Hotel New Hampshire into a rape crisis center. In this way the comedy born out of tragedy is a positive way of helping other women deal with their sorrow.

While Sorrow's shapes are always present in the second Hotel New Hampshire, the comedy that was rampant in the first hotel appears only occasionally in Vienna, as when the New Hampshire family is staying in the hotel and is awakened, along with the Berrys and Freud and Susie, by one of Screaming Annie's famous fake orgasms.

The sheer violence or intensity of Screaming Annie's fake orgasms (though she tells John later that they are not fake: "Why in hell do you think I'm such a wreck?" she asks him.) is enough to make her customer pass out and to bring most of the inhabitants of the hotel on the run to see what happened (Irving, Hotel 305). Even Freud, Susie and the Berrys are there, convinced that this time something is wrong. Also present at this scene are the three timid Americans, sure they have heard the shrieks of a knifing victim. Jolanta, never gentle with her own customers, determines that the customer is not dead by sinking a fist into his groin and watching him double up in pain. The Americans, shocked even further by Freud's impatient explanation, "It was just a fucking orgasm," are more disturbed than they would have been at the scene of a murder (Irving, Hotel 268). Franny later comments on this attitude: "They

would bring their daughter to see a murder, but they wouldn't even let her hear about an orgasm. Americans sure are strange!" (Irving, Hotel 268).

The sordid violence of Screaming Annie's "seven year orgasm" is followed by an even more disturbing image on the fifth floor--the radicals' floor. John and Jolanta go upstairs to investigate a sound, protected, as John later learns, by Jolanta's bottled fetus. As they are leaving the radicals to their work, John sees Schwanger, the gentle, motherly radical, training a gun on the boy she has mothered for seven years. This is the turning point. While the Berrys do not yet understand the threat posed by the radicals, the reader begins to fear them at this point, and we no longer find humor in their ridiculous notions about changing the world. Like the Ellen Jamesians, their ideas and their motivations are absurd, but the Berrys cannot afford to dismiss them as Garp did the Ellen Jamesians, because their plans are not absurd to them and the radicals are a very dangerous threat.

The Berrys do eventually recognize the radicals as a danger, and having disposed of them, they return to America stronger, more able to defend themselves against such threats. Father is a hero again, the seven bad years in Vienna are behind them. With this new strength, Franny and John finally decide to deal with another threat.

When Franny calls John over to the penthouse to make love to her, it is to settle forever something that has

existed in them for years. Even as teenagers Franny tells John that he thinks about her too much. After Franny is raped, John begins weight-lifting and running so that he will never again have to feel "the helplessness of another Halloween" (Irving, Hotel 113). The comedy in this, the most aberrant of all of Irving's sexual situations, is consolation for Franny and John as well as for the reader. Their marathon love-making is meant to cure them of their love for each other, and when it is over, they celebrate with a meal as plentiful as their sex, finally free from the "terrible novel" which Franny wrote. They are frightened, and they purposely hurt each other in their need for each other, knowing that this is the only way to free themselves. When it is over they must laugh, both to dispel any remaining desire and to assure themselves that Franny's novel is indeed over. It is a sort of whistling past the graveyard attitude, and they, or at least John, are never sure. When he leaves Franny he kisses her chastely on the cheek and remarks, "To this day--between Franny and me--no other kind of kiss will do....It may be dull, but it's a way to keep passing the open windows," as if he is afraid that if he looks too closely he will recognize that the old feelings still exist (Irving, Hotel 337).

However, for Franny, there is yet another ghost to be laid to rest. Having dealt with her brother, she must now deal with her rapist. The opera which Lilly writes for Chipper Dove is the blackest humor in any of Irving's

novels. The characters she creates for her family and Susie are intensified versions of their real selves-- Frank is a stereotypical homosexual King of Mice; John is the muscle man bodyguard; Lilly herself is the worrisome nurse; and Susie, of course, is a bear--an angry, man-hating bear. Franny alone is not a more intense version of herself. She has only one line: "Well look who's here" (Irving, Hotel 355). It is the line with which Dove greeted Franny the night he captured her in the soccer net, the line with which he greeted John on the street in New York, and the line which Franny, as an actress, will continue to work into the rest of her scripts.

When Dove gets to the penthouse he is confronted with these characters, Frank jumping wildly on the bed and John lifting weights, and he quickly realized that he is defenseless against whatever they may have in store for him. He bristles momentarily when he is told they plan to rape him, but is quickly and properly terrified when he sees that his rapist is to be a bear--"a bear in heat!" says Frank. (Irving, Hotel 356). The humor here is meant to be satisfying for the Berrys, but is ultimately lost on them because of the painful experience it forces them to relive. To the reader there is comedy here simply because we are removed from the situation and can better enjoy the despicable Dove's predicament. But we also agree with the Berrys that revenge is a bit of a let down: "Whatever we had done,

it would never be as awful as what he had done to Franny-- and if it had been as awful, it would have been too much" (Irving, Hotel 360). As inadequate as it is, though, it is the only way the Berrys can respond to the rape of their sister. To be mirthful in such a situation is not possible, but the grim humor they conjur up is the only consolation they have. Dove can never be made to pay--there is no price high enough--but Franny has the momentary satisfaction of seeing in Dove the fear and helplessness he had once instilled in her.

Finally, though, their ghosts and demons have all been exorcised. Franny has her career and Junior; Frank is the successful agent; Father has his third and final Hotel New Hampshire; and John is the "caretaker of [his] father's illusions" (Irving, Hotel 372). Only Lilly is not strong enough to survive. It is as if the others have the potential for joy to survive their share of sorrow. She takes her art and her responsibilities as an artist too seriously. "'Not enough laughter in her, man' as Junior Jones would say" (Irving, Hotel 379).

When the novel ends, John and his bride, Susie, are waiting for the baby Franny is having for them. There is a cautious optimism in this. They are hopeful for the child, but they recognize that sorrow floats and will no doubt float for a child as faithfully as it has for them. As he often does, Donald Justice has written the poem for the baby:

Late arrival, no
 One would think of blaming you
 For hesitating so.

Who, setting his hand to knock
 At a door so strange as this one,
 Might not draw back? (Irving, Hotel 396)

In the fairy tale the Berrys imagine, Sorrow is not a cold violent evil, but a farting and fetid Labrador retriever. His power is no less tragic, no less devastating, because of his goofy grin, but his devastation is made bearable because of his familiar, comic shape. True, Sorrow has a tendency to change shapes, to appear when least expected, but if the Berrys can laugh at Sorrow it becomes easier to deal with--the laughter is a release, a built-in comfort in the middle of intense pain. In the end, John has returned to Coach Bob's happy fatalism: "...you've got to get obsessed and stay obsessed," with living well and combating sorrow (Irving, Hotel, 401). "You have to keep passing the open windows" (Irving, Hotel 401).

The strength and sympathy of Coach Bob's philosophy are what Irving hopes his audience will learn from his novels. In a recent interview with Constance Casey about his latest novel, The Cider House Rules, Irving comments on the usefulness of his craft: "...if a novel is of any use, it is as a way of giving sympathy to people who've been

abused" (Casey 4C). Sympathy, among his characters and for his readers, is one of Irving's trademarks. He creates sympathy for the benefit of his readers. The laughter in Second Wind of the Cuckold is Garp's sympathy. Mrs. Ralph asks Garp to "paint a picture of [her] with a little sympathy (Irving, Garp 209). Irving is interested in creating people his audience can admire and care about, an interest Irving calls sentimental (Chaplin 3D).

It is curious, then, that Irving would impose such violence and sorrow on characters he wants us to care about. What is to be gained by making his readers like characters, and then force them to watch those likeable characters suffer? But Irving, like Garp, has a world vision, a vision that reflects little sympathy and much violence. There is a question of honesty at stake: if a writer sees violence in his world, is he responsible for showing this violence in his work? Irving believes so.

If you write a novel about contemporary society without as much violence in it as you can imagine, you've done a terrible disservice to the people whose lives have been affected by violence in our culture (Casey 4C).

This, then, is the reason for the hideous car accident, the suicide, the numerous rapes and disfigurements. As much violence as Irving can imagine is a lot of violence. Yet Irving is sure that it is not too much, can never be too much:

...Everytime a writer creates a weeping-and-wailing scene in his fiction, he's competing with extraordinary events in the real world. How the hell can anyone call my fiction excessively violent, or excessive in any way, if they've picked up a newspaper and read about the boat people in Cambodia (McCaffery 13).

How, then, do we reconcile Irving's dedication to creating sympathy with his dedication to a world view of very little sympathy and great violence? This is where Irving creates in his novels the need for laughter, a laughter that must be equal to the force of his violence and sorrow. Irving is dealing with the "fragmentation of the twentieth century" that Greiner spoke of, and to further understand Irving's juxtaposition of laughter and violence we can return to what Greiner sees as the role of the black humorist: "The more important question posed by a black humorist is how to live with one's self and with others in a fractured world" (Greiner xv).

Other writers, as we have seen, have responded to Greiner's challenge in other ways. Certainly Heller created as much violence as he could imagine in Catch-22, yet his humor is not Irving's healing consolation; instead, it is meant to shock the reader into an awareness of the absurdities and horror of the bureaucratic military establishment, and rather than creating an emotional response, the humor deadens our response, as a physical shock deadens nerves.

Instead of Irving's and Heller's violence, Brown and Roth reflect their fractured worlds through the desperate alienation of their characters. While Brown's humor is a consolation, and encourages sympathy for her characters, Roth's humor distances his reader from Portnoy's desperation--we are shocked and amused by Portnoy, but we are not concerned about his problems in the way that we worry about Hortensia when she learns of Hercules' death.

Robbins, too, creates less violence than Irving, and reflects the twentieth century through characters who are made absurd through their reactions to their society. Thus, the cowgirls who stage a coup at a health spa, Julian, the full-blooded Indian who lives in New York City and has severe asthma, and the Countess, dedicated to feminine hygiene. Robbins' humor is the humor of awareness, rather than consolation. The events of the novel are not terribly sorrowful. They are meant, instead, to show us that while his characters may not be realistic, the absurd society which spawned them is.

In Irving's response to Greiner's challenge, we see a new answer, one that is similar to others, but with a different twist. He cannot ignore the violence in his world and still be truthful, yet Catch-22 and other black comedies of the fifties and sixties have already shocked us into awareness. So his response to Greiner's question of how to live in a fractured world is to offer sympathy, to allow his readers and often his characters to laugh at events beyond

their control and to laugh in sympathy with others.

That Irving's humor is found so often in sexual scenes, is an indication of Irving's determination to observe honestly. In sexual situations gone awry the characters are extremely vulnerable, and extremely honest. We have already seen that Irving uses these situations as tests for his characters, but the sexual scenes have a greater importance than that.

When an Ellen James is raped a terror and an anger is stirred in people that is seen in few other circumstances. In time of war soldiers die by the thousands, yet this is not the intimate violence done to a rape victim. Likewise, in all of Irving's scenes where sex and violence overlap, the violence is as devastating as the sex is intimate. The emotional extremes of sexual situations are compounded when those situations become violent. The need, then, for sympathy and consolation is compounded as well. This desperate laughter is the only way Irving sees to "live with one's self and with others in a fractured world."

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