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# *The Cider House Rules*

by

**John Irving**

**1985**



MonkeyNotes by Lisa A. Tallman

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## **KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS**

## SETTING

*The Cider House Rules* takes place in two distinct settings. The majority of the action happens in St. Cloud's, Maine. St. Cloud's began as a logging camp in a low river valley. It was initially called Clouds because in the low valley, there was fog until midmorning and a constant mist from the waterfalls. It became St. Cloud's because of the habit of Catholics of adding the word saint before so many things. Eventually, St. ....

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

### Major Characters

**Homer Wells** - Father of Angel Wells. Homer is an orphaned boy who "belonged" to St. Cloud's. Homer is adopted four times before becoming a permanent member of St. Cloud's. Always of use, Homer becomes Dr. Larch's protégé, learning to perform obstetric procedures including abortions. However, .....

**Dr. Wilbur Larch** - Founder and director of the St. Cloud's orphanage as well as St. Cloud's self-appointed historian. Early in his medical career, Dr. Larch learns unwanted pregnancies know no.....

**Candy Kendall (Worthington)** - Daughter of Ray Kendall, mother of Angel Wells, wife of Wally Worthington, and in love with Homer Wells. Candy is a loyal, strong, and independent woman. She has an.....

**Melony** - An orphan of St. Cloud's. She was abandoned at the age of 4 or 5. She had six foster homes. She searches for a home and a hero. She is strong, tough, and aggressive physically and .....

### Minor Characters

**Wally Worthington** - Son of Olive and Senior Worthington and husband of Candy Kendall. He is handsome, boyish, and playful. His one ambition is to be a pilot. He joins the Air Force and his.....

**Angel Wells** - The son of Homer Wells and Candy Kendall. He believed he was adopted until.....

**Nurses Edna, Angela, and Caroline** - Nurses at St. Cloud's orphanage. They supported and .....

**Olive Worthington** - The mother of Wally and wife of Senior. She grew up poor but taught herself the.....

**Senior Worthington** - The father of Wally and wife to Olive. For years, he.....

**Ray Kendall** - The widowed father of Candy. He was a jack-of-all-trades that worked with.....

**Mr. Rose** - The boss of the picking crew every year. He had his own rules, which he .....

**Rose Rose** - The daughter of Mr. Rose. Angel was in love with her. She was sexually abused by.....

## CONFLICT

The conflict is between the two protagonists of the story, Homer Wells and Dr. Larch. Homer is against abortion, while Larch is not. An orphan, the only thing Homer truly has, the only thing his mother gave him, is life. It is fitting that he would be against ending the life of someone else. Larch, on the.....

**Protagonist/Antagonist** - Both Homer Wells and Dr. Larch could be considered each others' protagonist and antagonist in this novel. Some may argue that Homer is the chief character in the novel. However, a large portion of the early chapters focus on Dr. Larch and how his views are.....

**Climax** - The climax of the book takes place when Homer performs his first abortion on Rose Rose. Homer has just learned that Dr. Larch has .....

**Outcome** - Homer realizes that he is willing to play God and that, as Dr. Larch said, there is no such thing as playing God a little. He could not refuse Rose Rose so how could he refuse others in.....

## **SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

*The Cider House Rules* is the story of Homer Wells, an orphan who fails to be adopted and as a result grows up in the orphanage of St. Cloud's. It is also the story of Dr. Larch and his life at St. Cloud's, his work as an obstetrician and an abortionist, and his love for Homer Wells.

This novel is has 3 main parts. In part one, we experience Homer's childhood, or lack of, as he grows up at the orphanage. We also learn of Dr. Larch's background, his strong convictions regarding abortion, what has shaped his convictions, and his beliefs on what is good for the orphans under his.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of *The Cider House Rules* is that individuals define their own rules by which to act and live despite societal dictates. In the case of this novel, these rules contextualize the difficult issue of abortion.

Several of the characters define their own rules, breaking societal norms and legal regulations. The most obvious of which is Dr. Larch's rules regarding abortion. Larch's rules allow him to determine when to....

### **Minor Theme**

Two minor themes exist in this novel. The first is the theme of choice or lack of choices. Homer has.....

## **MOOD**

Throughout the novel, there is a mood of melancholy isolation and seriousness. The novel opens with a lengthy description of the isolation of St. Cloud's. A town perpetually covered by a gray mist, inundated with..... sawdust with a winter season and a muddy season. This sense of isolation follows Homer when he leaves St.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

John Winslow Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire. He attended the Universities of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), Vienna (Austria), and New Hampshire. He taught at Windham College in Vermont and later became an Assistant Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College. His first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, was published in 1968. He became known with the success of his fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, which was published in 1978 and turned into a motion picture (1982), for which he wrote the screenplay. The success of this novel allowed Irving to leave teaching and become a full-time writer. *The World* .....

## **LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

The central issue in *The Cider House Rules* is that of abortion. Dr. Larch believes that the state should not regulate abortion and that woman should have the right to choose. Homer, on the other hand, believes that abortion is the killing of human life. The abortion debate is too long and complex to discuss here. However, some knowledge of the history of abortion and the social and ethical issues surrounding it in the United States is appropriate.

Abortion is the termination of pregnancy before birth. There are two types of .....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

### CHAPTER 1 - The Boy Who Belonged to St. Cloud's

#### Summary

*The Cider House Rules* opens in the boys division of the St. Cloud's orphanage in Maine in the 1920s. Dr. Wilbur Larch circumcises the male children and Nurses Edna and Angela name them. These given names are only used among those at the orphanage. Once the boys are adopted, those names are forgotten for Dr. Larch believes in a new name for a fresh start. However, Homer Wells, named by Nurse Angela, kept his name for he often came back to the orphanage. After four failed foster homes, Dr. Larch decided Homer belonged to St. Cloud's.

According to self-appointed historian Dr. Larch, in his diary, *A Brief History of St. Cloud's*, the Ramses Paper Company was the enemy of St. Cloud's, killing the land and maiming its people for its insatiable desire for paper. And then, when there were no more trees, the Ramses Paper Company closed down the mill and moved downstream, leaving only aged prostitutes and their orphaned children. A literate prostitute wrote a letter to the state board of Maine asking for a doctor, school, policeman, and lawyer for the helpless women and orphans of St. Cloud's. This letter reached Dr. Larch when he was a young man. He eventually created a state-supported orphanage. He left St. Cloud's only once, during World War I. And by the 1920s, when Homer Wells was born, Nurses Edna and Angela had given him the pet name Saint Larch, and it was Saint Larch that allowed Homer Wells to stay at St. Cloud's as long as he was useful.

Homer was nothing if not useful. Homer's first foster parents returned him because of his unusual ability to be silent and placid. His second foster parents responded to his silence by beating him in order to make him cry. When Homer saw that his foster parents wanted him to cry, that's what he gave them, tears and wailing, wholeheartedly. The news of Homer's crying became legendary in the town of Three Miles Falls. When the news reached St. Cloud's, the nurses were alarmed, knowing it was unusually for Homer. At the nurses' insistence, Dr. Larch retrieved Homer. It took the nurses almost a year before Homer stopped screaming whenever someone approached him. But, the nurses were probably more permanently scarred than Homer, and Dr. Larch, who had placed him with the family, never recovered. Whenever he thought about people's ambiguity in their feelings for children, he remembered the fear in the faces of Homer's foster family when he came to take Homer from them.

Dr. Larch believed in abortion. He believed that no one should ever make a woman have a baby she did not want to have. For those who spoke against abortion, he told of Homer's 6 weeks with the family that made him cry. It was not until Homer was 4 that he no longer awoke screaming in the middle of the night to the nightmares caused by that family.

Homer's third foster family, the Drapers, were just too good, too predictable, too routine, and too able to oversimplify life. Professor Draper, a college teacher, taught a lesson at every turn, and Mom, was more of a Mom than any other woman. At first, Homer loved the routine. Orphans appreciate things that happen daily and on schedule. As Dr. Larch would say, every child understands a promise, and if promises are kept, they looked forward to the next one. By doing so, Dr. Larch slowly built security for the orphans. But at the first Thanksgiving with the Drapers, Homer stopped liking the routine of the Drapers. He no longer felt of use as he had been at the orphanage. At Thanksgiving at the orphanage, Homer had responsibilities, at the Drapers, he had none. The Draper's Thanksgiving ended with Professor Draper and his three married and grown children drunk, and the grandchildren breaking every house rule. To make himself sleep, he forced himself to recall a very sad memory of St. Cloud's. He remembered women waiting for the coach to the train station in the dark from the hospital. They were shy and ashamed. The men and women getting off the coach to work at the hospital seemed arrogant and superior. One of the women made a remark to the leaving women that drove them away from the coach. Even the usually friendly coach driver said nothing to these women. They boarded

silently. Homer remembers seeing some of them with their faces in their hands, while others sat stonily because if they didn't they would lose all control. It was more meaningful that Homer saw them leaving rather than arriving full-bellied and undelivered of their problems. Homer knew that when they left they did not look delivered from their problems.

On this night, remembering these women, Homer boarded the coach and the train with them. He singled out *his* mother and followed her home. It was hard to imagine what she looked like and even harder to imagine his father. Like other orphans, he often imagined his parents, and as a child, and even as an adult, Homer was embarrassed to be caught staring at adults, wondering if they were his parents. On this night, Homer almost found his real parents before falling asleep only to be awakened by one of the grandchildren, an older boy, who he was to share his bed with.

The older boy told him to keep his pecker in his pants and not to try and bugger him, a term for anal intercourse. Homer did not know what buggery was, and the boy then tried to bugger Homer. Homer screamed, as he had in Three Mile Falls, bringing Mom to the door. The older boy told Mom that Homer tried to bugger him and that he let Homer have it. Homer trying to control himself didn't know that grandchildren were believed before orphans. Mom hit Homer as hard as that family from Three Mile Falls had hit him. She banished him to the furnace room and made him kneel down and say that he was vile and abhorred himself. Homer, 10 years old, put on some winter clothing, left, and made his way back to St. Cloud's.

Upon returning, Homer told Dr. Larch that he had felt of no use at the Drapers. He also told him of the drinking and the odd prayers. When the Drapers told Dr. Larch of the buggery incident, Dr. Larch explained what buggery. He then wrote a note to the Drapers telling them to repent and that they should abhor themselves. It took Dr. Larch 3 years to find Homer's fourth foster home.

Dr. Larch wrote in his journal that there was only one problem at St. Cloud's and that problem was not that there were orphans, that their budget was small, that women didn't have the right to abort, or that there were unwanted babies; the problem was that St. Cloud's had become Homer's home. Homer had the run of St. Cloud's and knew all the comings and goings of the people.

Homer's fourth foster family was athletic. They did various outdoor sports from canoeing to sea diving to camping. The Winkles were born rich. Their business of taking people on outdoor adventures didn't make any money, but they didn't need any. This didn't impress Dr. Larch. What did impress him was that they were deliriously happy. The Winkles were to take Homer on a few trips, moose watching and white water rafting. Dr. Larch felt that this would give Homer a chance to see whether the Winkles would bore him to death.

They cramped into the cab of their safari vehicle, Homer sitting on Mrs. Winkle's lap, and began their journey to the mountains. They pitched camp, and the Winkle's told Homer adventure stories, and Homer read to them from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* before falling asleep. The next morning the Winkles arose with tremendous energy. They decided to swim in the raging stream. They erected an elaborate system of safety ropes and survival lines and bounced in the strong rapids. Suddenly, Homer felt the earth shake. Too late, he and the Winkles realized that the Ramses Paper Company's log drive was coming from upstream. Fear etched on their faces, the Winkles struggled to get to safety, and Homer fled to the road. Homer turned in time to see the logs surge by and take the Winkles with them. It took the Ramses Paper Company 3 days to find their bodies.

Homer hitched a ride back to St. Cloud's on a Ramses Paper Company truck. After he told Dr. Larch what happened, Dr. Larch decided that St. Cloud's would become Homer's permanent home. Dr. Larch told Homer that he expected him to be of use, which for Homer Wells was easy.

## Notes

Irving sets a picture of an isolated, abandoned town whose only inhabitants are aged prostitutes and the residents of the orphanage. It is ironic that the enemy of St. Cloud's was named the Ramses Paper Company. Ramses was an Egyptian pharaoh famous for greed, enslavement, and arrogance. The paper company greedily took the land never replanting the trees it took. The company also enslaved its workers and the prostitutes that served them, using them only as long as they served their purpose then closing down the mill. In the present day, Ramses is also a popular brand of condom. Birth control was not readily available to or practiced by the women who came to St. Cloud's.

One important inhabitant of St. Cloud's is the protagonist, Homer Wells. In this chapter, we learn of Homer's life from birth to 12 or 13 years of age. During this period, he had four foster families; a testament to the difficulties in finding children good homes. We also learn of Homer's most dominant quality—his need to be of use. Homer attempts to be of use to each of his foster families. He was such a good, silent baby (something most parents would wish for) that his first family returned him. His second family wanted him to cry, and he accommodated him by becoming the town's most legendary screamer. He tries to be of use to his third family by listening and following their advice but leaves when he realizes that he was not of use to them. And for the one night he is with his fourth family, he reads to them. Finally, Larch decides that St. Cloud's is Homer's home, and Homer does whatever he can to be of use there.

Dr. Larch as founder and director of the orphanage makes all the decisions. The nurses respect and admire him. They also admire the work he does as an obstetrician and as an abortionist. None of them see abortion as the Devil's work. Larch has firm beliefs, and his actions speak louder than his words. Despite abortion being illegal, his belief that women have the right to choose, allowed him to deliver them. He also attempts to provide the orphans in his care with routine, security, and a reason to trust.....

## CHAPTER 2 - The Lord's Work

### Summary

Larch was born to a servant of the mayor of Portland, Maine. The mayor was the so-called father of the law that introduced Prohibition to Maine. His mother worshipped her employer and advocated temperance reform. On the other hand, Larch's father was a drunk. His disappointing parents made Larch a very good student.

Larch attended Harvard Medical School. While there, he discovered he had gonorrhea, contracted from a prostitute his father had bought him as a gift to express his pride for Larch getting into medical school. His father rarely showed any gestures toward his son, and Larch was too embarrassed to refuse and touched that his father had given him anything. After his engagement with the prostitute, Mrs. Eames, Larch awakened to find another woman in the room, whom he later found out was the prostitute's daughter. To relieve himself from the pain caused by the gonorrhea, Larch used ether, which he became addicted to. This single sexual encounter, the resulting gonorrhea, and his parents' loveless marriage convinced Larch that a life of sexual abstinence was medically and philosophically sound.

The same year Larch became a doctor, his mother died. His father sold all her belongings and moved to Montreal, where liquor could be acquired more easily. He died of cirrhosis of the liver.

One night the prostitute, Mrs. Eames, arrived at Boston Lying-In Hospital pregnant. Larch delivered by Caesarean section a stillborn child, and he was forced to remove her uterus. He was baffled by the disintegration of her uterus. Mrs. Eames fared well for 2 days. But on the third day, she filled with blood. Three days later, she died of scurvy according to the pathologist. The next day, Mrs. Eames daughter came to.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Homer Wells** - *The Cider House Rules* details the life of Homer Wells from his birth (1920s) into his 30s. Throughout his life, the rule that Homer lives by is that he should be of use. As a youth, he is constantly of use at the orphanage, taking on greater and greater responsibilities. Finally, he is given the choice to have the ultimate responsibility, giving and taking life, as an obstetrician and an abortionist. This is the .....

**Dr. Larch** - Dr. Larch's actions are driven by the rules he has in regards to abortion and orphans. The loveless marriage between Larch's parents; his first sexual encounter, which resulted in his .....

**Candy Kendall (Worthington)** - Candy is another of Irving's strong female figures. In some ways, Candy is very decisive, but in some circumstances, Candy lives by the "wait and see" rule. It is Candy who convinces Wally that they are not ready to have a child when she becomes pregnant the first time. A child didn't fit into their perfect plans, and Candy decides that having an abortion does. It is also Candy who.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

*The Cider House Rules* has three major parts in which the action of the novel takes place. Part 1, in St. Cloud's, is the narrative frame that provides background details on Homer's childhood and the experiences that shape Dr. Larch's and the rules by which he acts. In part 2, Homer breaks from Dr. Larch and experiences the society that exists outside of the isolation of St. Clouds. In the last part, Homer, an adult in his 30s, comes full circle. Homer is able to decide that he can return to St. Cloud's and continue Dr. Larch's work.

#### Part 1

The first part of this novel paints a picture of Homer's childhood. Homer, having been adopted four times without success, is allowed to stay where he belongs, St. Cloud's. During this time, Homer has.....

### THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

#### Major Theme

The major theme of *The Cider House Rules* is that individuals define their own rules. Society through class, culture, and legislation dictates rules but ultimately each individual defines the rules by which to act and live. In *The Cider House Rules*, rules permeate the novel. These rules can be simply stated, like those .....

#### Minor Theme

Irving talks about choices or lack of choices throughout the novel. Homer has very few choices at St. Cloud's. His choice for friendship is limited to Melony. His choice of occupation is limited to being a doctor. His choice of medicine is limited to obstetrics. On the other hand, Candy and Wally have always had .....

### POINT OF VIEW

*The Cider House Rules* is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. Irving's narrator not only reports the activities of the characters but is able to let the reader into the thoughts of the.....

### IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES

1. "There was the human body, which was so clearly designed to *want* babies—and then there was the human mind, which was so confused about the matter. Sometimes the mind didn't want babies, but sometimes the mind was so perverse that it made other people have babies they knew they didn't want."  
Pg. 23.

Dr. Larch wonders about the ambiguity of human behavior when it comes to children. He thinks these lines when he remembers the fear on the faces of the foster family that made Homer cry when he came to take Homer from them.

2. **“Shit or get off the pot.”** Pg. 59.

Miss Eames to a young Dr. Larch after he hesitated in replying to her request for an abortion.

3. **“How I resent fatherhood! The feelings it gives one: they completely ruin one’s objectivity, they wreck one’s sense of fair play...Damn the confusion of feeling like a father! Loving someone as a parent can produce a cloud that conceals from one’s vision what correct behavior is.”** Pg. 116.

Larch writes in *A Brief History of St. Cloud’s* in regards to Homer’s adult suggestion that he tell the other orphans that Fuzzy Stone had been adopted rather than that he had died. Larch was proud that Homer had made such an adult, protective suggestion, but upset that he was capable of it at such a young age.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS

(Answer Key Below)

1) Homer Wells had how many foster families?

- A. 2
- B. 3
- C. 4
- D. 5

2) Larch believes that abortion:

- A. has no class or social boundaries
- B. should be legalized
- C. is the Lord’s work
- D. all of the above....

## Answer Key

1. c 2. d 3. c 4. d 5. b 6. c 7. a 8. c 9. d 10. b 11. b 12. a 13. d 14. a 15. b

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are Melony and Candy different? How are they the same? Why does Irving portray almost all of the women in this novel as strong, smart, and willful?

2. How does Irving depict the abortion debate? What position do you think Irving takes on the issue?.....

## ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Dr. Larch holds many strong convictions and follows his own set of rules. What are Larch’s beliefs toward abortion? What are his beliefs toward orphans and how they think and act and what they need? How does he justify his convictions?

2. Several characters live and act by their own rules. What is Irving saying about rules? What is the relationship between these sets of individual rules and the rules of society?.....

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