

## CLASSIC FILM REVIEW

### Breaking the rules

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***Cider House Rules*, 1999, directed by Lasse Hollström, 126 minutes.**

Set in the United States in World War II, *Cider House Rules* is an adaptation of John Irving's book of the same title. The story revolves around Dr Wilbur Larch (Michael Caine) and his assistant, Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire). Dr Larch runs an orphanage which is seen as a place where you either got a life (adopted) or left one (delivered a baby or had an abortion). Homer is an orphan who grew up at the orphanage. Though abortions were illegal at the time, Larch performs them because he believes that any woman who comes to his doorstep should be allowed to decide whether to abort or deliver and leave the child at the orphanage.

We see the trauma that children undergo, as they are put up for adoption but never find a home. Homer shares this sense of dejection, though he is closely involved in the activities at the orphanage. Larch is unable to convince Homer to perform abortions which he refers to as a very Christian ideology.

It is in this setting that Candy Kendall (Charlize Theron) comes with her boyfriend Wally Worthington (Paul Rudd) to the orphanage for an abortion. After the abortion, Homer leaves with Candy and Wally in order to explore the world beyond the orphanage and find some other ways of being "of use".

Homer enjoys his work as a picker at Wally's family's apple farm. He meets the other apple pickers at the farm including Arthur Rose (Delroy Lindo) and his daughter Rose Rose (Erykah Badu). When Wally leaves for the war, Candy has an affair with Homer. Back at the orphanage, the Board decides to replace Larch with "new blood" who has new ideas. Fearing that the next director would refuse to perform abortions, thus changing the ethos of the orphanage, Larch wants to bring Homer back as a doctor, for which he fakes his degrees in Homer's name.

In the pickers' outhouse, there are a set of rules put up but they are rarely followed...*"outrageous, them rules. Who live in this cider house? .... Who just plain live here, just breathin' in that vinegar? Well, someone who don't live here made those rules. Those rules ain't for us. We are supposed to make our own rules. And we do. Every single day.*

One day, Homer discovers that Rose is pregnant. After persistent questioning, he finally learns that the father is Arthur. After first confronting Arthur, Homer decides to perform the abortion, with instruments from a doctor's bag that Larch had once

presented to him. Soon after she recovers, Rose runs away, but not before assaulting her father, who eventually dies. Homer finally moves back to the orphanage where he continues the work of Larch.

This film deals with issues of incest, and abortion simultaneously. Any discussion about abortion sets in play two views, one promoting the right of a woman to decide, the other presenting a pro life stance. Homer moves from an anti-abortion view to placing himself in the role of pro choice Larch.

The closing narration that Homer makes from a book, symbolises Homer's change of perspective: *"in a new name and with everything new about me....the remembrance of my old life... it ceased to be and there I leave it."*

The rules at the Cider House were eventually broken by Homer in the attempt to put things straight. However, it leaves much unsaid. After Homer becomes aware of the incestuous relation between Rose and Arthur, he chooses to conduct an abortion, something which he had categorically refused to do when at the orphanage. Is the audience supposed to assume that he no longer holds the strict code of practice that he once held? Has he undergone a change of views? It is hard to believe that he now embraces Larch's philosophy and willingly steps into his role of the director. Larch made it clear that he did not care if abortions were against the law, as the law never cared for anyone. One is left with the thought that Homer would conduct abortions only in cases of abuse; he has not imbibed a pro-choice stand from Larch.

Half a century after the story of Homer and Larch, the controversy over the issue of abortion continues. In June 2009, George Tiller, who performed late abortions, was shot dead in Kansas, USA. In Nicaragua, a new law has been implemented that bans all abortions, regardless of the health risks to a woman. Doctors willing to conducting abortions and women seeking them will be imprisoned. Women's reproductive rights are being challenged by religious and political ideologues.

In reality, the pro-choice and anti-abortion views are so far apart that they cannot be resolved as easily as Homer does in the film