Elements of Postmodernism

In John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Ingrid Øyrehagen

A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
University of Oslo
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the MA Degree

Spring 2013
Supervisor: Erik Kielland-Lund

Elements of Postmodernism In John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

Ingrid Øyrehagen

2013

Elements of Postmodernism in John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*

Ingrid Øyrehagen

http://www.duo.uio.no/

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore two of John Irving's most popular novels, *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, in connection with some of the most established parameters of postmodernism. Irving is usually not considered a typical postmodern writer, for very valid reasons; his novels, though captivating, come across as rather traditional narratives. Still, I believe that there are certain aspects of these works that may be discussed. Through a close-reading of the two novels, subjects like intertextuality, metafictional self-consciousness, and the postmodern parody, will be explored. Furthermore, John Irving's presentation of subjects like feminism, gender roles, and sexuality, will be analyzed in connection with some of Michel Foucault's theories on the discourses of power. In this manner, I will attempt to show that some of Irving's best works are more contemporary relevant than what is usually assumed, while trying to establish a "postmodernist profile" for this author, who is both typical and untypical of what are usually assumed to be the usual postmodernist characteristics.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my parents, Aud Øyrehagen and Bjørn Terje Thoresen, for introducing me to the world of literature.

I am very grateful to my supervisor, Erik Kielland-Lund, for his help and advice in relation to this thesis.

I am also very grateful to Ann-Torill Egge, for her invaluable help in looking after Oda, allowing me to get some work done while waiting for an opening in the kindergarten.

Last, but not least, I am grateful to Nina and Liv Christina, for being both great friends and great proof-readers. Thank you for making the years of literary studies less lonely, and much more fun.

Contents

Introduction

Ever since reading John Irving's novels as a teenager, I have thought of his books as personal favorites. However, during the course of my literary studies at the University of Oslo, I have not encountered either John Irving or any of his works in any syllabus. Consequently I wondered if perhaps Irving was only a success among lay readers, and not critically acclaimed and "relevant". Assuming that this might be the case, I saw an opportunity to explore two of Irving's most successful novels in connection with how they might be more relevant than what is usually presumed. One way of arguing for his relevance, is to discuss how Irving might be said to have been influenced by the dominant literary direction at the time when he wrote some of his most popular and critically acclaimed works, namely postmodernism. I am curious about this because I have tended to connect postmodernism with a different kind of literature than the one Irving writes: I find these two novels very easy to read. It is noteworthy how Irving's name so rarely figures in discussions of postmodern writers.[1] But Irving did publish many of his novels within the postmodern era, and I intend to investigate how one might say that Irving's writing is influenced by its time.

In this thesis, then, I will analyze two of John Irving's novels, *The World According to Garp* (1978) and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) which were published in what is often considered the core years of postmodernism,[2] and discuss these two different literary representations, in connection with whether or not they can be considered postmodern. Through a close reading of the two novels, I will analyze them in terms of certain key features of postmodernism: Together with the increased importance of intertextuality in postmodernism,[3] metafictional self-consciousness or self-reflexivity are central to the discussion of Chapter One. Chapter Two looks at John Irving's intermingling and descriptions of subjects such as feminism, gender roles, and sexuality, in connection with Michel Foucault's theories on the discourses of power. First of all, a short description of what is

[1] It is worth mentioning one academic article which clearly goes against the trend and sees *The World According to Garp* as a postmodern novel.: Raymond J. Wilson III, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*", *Critique*, VOL. XXXIV, NO.1, (Fall, 1992), 49-62. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:rec:mla:R02841998 (accessed 01.09.2012).

[2] The time frame of postmodernism is not clear-cut: Most agree that literary postmodernism in the U.S. started in the mid sixties, and lasted at least until the millennium, the core years being the 1970s-1990s. See for instance Simon Malpas, *The Postmodern* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005)*; The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism,* ed. Stuart Sim (Oxford: Routledge, 2005).

[3] Erik Kielland-Lund, "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism," Handout.

arguably some of the main ideas of postmodernism is necessary, as it may explain some of the origins of the postmodern focus on intertextuality, metafiction and parody, as well as the anti-essentialist view on gender and sexuality.

> Postmodern: A notoriously difficult and contested term that, for its opponents, signals the twentieth century's abandonment of truth and reason in favour of a world that is known only through images, signs or copies. For its defenders the postmodern is a liberating attitude that remains suspicious of any single foundation or ultimate position of truth.[4]

Numerous theorists and textbooks have tried to formulate a definition of postmodernism. Almost all indicate that there is no simple definition,[5] and the concept of postmodernism is subject to much discussion among many acclaimed theorists. Jean Baudrillard's infamous declaration that the Gulf War did not take place,[6] and Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon's debate on whether or not parody can be considered postmodern,[7] are only a couple of examples. Interestingly, the disagreement about what constitutes postmodernism, is quite illustrative of what is arguably its key mantra: "The death of Truth."[8] (However, in true postmodern nature, the interpretation of this mantra is not agreed upon.) When the grand, all-encompassing truths about our existence are removed, like a belief in God and religious dogmas, some people might feel quite lost. Arguably, then, much of the postmodern philosophy emerges as a consequence of this prevailing sense of potential chaos.[9] One of postmodernism's most important goals is to question and destabilize assumed truths, for instance the ones that concern language and literature, as well as sexuality and gender qualities. This impacts the literature of the era: "The new literature reflects a new consciousness that has been 'inspired in part by the breakdown of our culture, its traditions, and its justifications of the American social structure.'"[10]

Intertextuality

The disorientation in terms of both existence and values may have turned some authors to the history of literature, where they at least could situate themselves in a continuum of a long line

---

[4] Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 182.
[5] Malpas, *The Postmodern,* 3-4;
Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 3.
[6] David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds., introduction to "Jean Baudrillard" in *Modern Criticism and Theory,* 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), 422.
[7] Malpas, *The Postmodern,* 25-27.
[8] Erik Kielland-Lund, "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism," Handout.
[9] *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 183-184.
[10] Albert J. La Valley quoted in Wilson, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*," 50.

of writers. One would visit the past with a hope that it could illuminate the present.[11] Some may have felt that this belief in literature or the arts could replace religion to a certain degree, and this is possibly an explanation of the increased importance of intertextuality.[12] To incorporate literary classics self-consciously into one's own writings became fashionable, and a greater focus on intertextuality and metafiction are considered central postmodern characteristics. The increased importance of intertextuality in this era is connected to the manner in which postmodern fiction (or, in the following quote, postmodern architecture) employs intertextuality:

> In contrast to the modern architects of the twenties, postmodern architects publicly acknowledge their own objectives as pluralistic and historicist. The past is neither condemned nor ignored, but warmly embraced as a vital formal and intellectual source. All period styles, whether classical or vernacular, are considered open to imitation or reinterpretation.[13]

Certain other definitions of postmodern intertextuality is more problematic: "Postmodernism embraces an extreme notion of intertextuality, in which the play of meaning is infinite, in which anything goes. The limits of interpretation are set only by the boundaries of the imagination."[14] To make sense as an analysis of actual narratives, I believe that this latter view on intertextuality must be set aside.

John Irving refers to many other works of literature in both *The World According to Garp* and in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*; some of the most obvious ones being the Bible, *The Tin Drum,* and *A Christmas Carol* in *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* In addition to being inspired by the themes and details from these narratives, numerous other novels are mentioned in both *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Through a discussion of both intertextuality, metafiction, and parody, I will try to show that Irving does acknowledge his sources of inspiration, rather than conceal them, and that these works are embraced in reinterpretations, rather than criticized or copied.

In order to understand some of the complexity that is intertextuality, I will present some of the most acknowledged theories, as well as a short summary of the origins of intertextuality. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) both influenced Julia Kristeva (1941-), who was the first to use the term intertextuality

---

[11] Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 11.
[12] It is important to note that the Kristeva's intertextuality is not reducible to allusions, quotations or references. Intertextuality can now mean that "everything" (society, history, culture) is text, and that all texts are connected. However, this will not be the main focus in this thesis.
[13] Mary McLeod quoted in Allen, *Intertextuality,* 180.
[14] *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 244.

(intertextualité).[15] Additionally, Roland Barthes (1915-1980) has made important contributions to the field.[16]

Ferdinand de Saussure's theories are the foundation of structural linguistics.[17] In short, Saussure sees words as dual compositions.[18] One part is a material element (signifier) such as the actual letters on a sheet of paper, while the other is a mental element (signified), which means the image or idea connected with the word in question.[19] Furthermore, Saussure questions the relation between the material and mental element, and concludes that there is no natural reason why precisely that arrangement of letters should be connected to that exact image (except for the onomatopoetic).[20] As a consequence of this arbitrariness of signs, the connection between the two aspects of a word is dependent on its place within the total system of language.[21] These theories concerning the lack of natural connection between word and meaning has been connected to the postmodern deconstruction of language. The actual meaning of words, and language's ability to relate something real is questioned by postmodernists because of its somewhat rickety foundation. When the word only depends on its place within the system of language, some believe that language can only refer to itself, not to the actual world.

Saussure also developed semiology, which is a branch more concerned with the social use of language.[22] He used the terms *parole* and *langue*, which can be translated as utterance or speech and language. The language consists of the rules of a signifying system, like the ones mentioned above, while speech and utterance refer to actual use of language, and how it is dependent on the people who use it. The linguistics of Saussure have further implications for the literary sign; "Authors of literary works do not just select words from a language system, they select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating, even phrases and sentences from previous literary texts and from the literary tradition."[23]

---

[15] Jakob Lothe, Christian Refsum, and Unni Solberg, eds., *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, 2nd ed. (Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget, 2007), s.v. "intertekstualitet".
[16] Though Saussure and Kristeva in particular are not immediately relevant to the Irving novels, I find that a short summary of their theories is vital background information for understanding the concept of both intertextuality, metafiction and parody.
[17] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, s.v. '"semiologi/semiotikk".
[18] Hugh J. Silverman, "Jacques Derrida," in *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, eds. Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 112.
[19] *Postmodernism*,ed. Sim, 303.
[20] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, s.v. "semiologi/semiotikk".
[21] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, s.v. "strukturalisme".
[22] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 10.
[23] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 11.

There are two systems at work in the literary sign: the system of language and the system of literature.

> Such a point reinforces Saussure's stress on the non-referential nature of signs, since in reading literature we become intensely aware that the signs deployed in any particular text have their reference not to objects in the world but to the literary system out of which the text is produced.[24]

This is also connected to the general postmodern problem of representation. Literature and language cannot represent reality, they can only refer to what they are – words and signs. "Like poststructuralism, this postmodernism rejects the empirical idea that language can represent reality."[25] Whether or not Irving deals directly with this postmodern issue is doubtful. However, these theories can for instance be connected to the influence of former works of art, as well as to the dubious and fluid nature of a philosophy like feminism.

Another important theorist who set the scene for intertextuality, is Mikhail Bakhtin. who was perhaps the first to describe more comprehensively the ideas that are at the center of intertextuality. In addition to repositioning the novel from the margins to the core of literature,[26] the Russian philosopher developed several terms that have greatly benefited literary theory. First of all, he described "language in use [a]s essentially 'dialogic', every speech act spring[s] from previous utterances and being structured in expectation of a future response."[27] Language as dialogic can be interpreted as closely related to Saussure's idea of *parole*. Bakhtin's idea of dialogism was introduced in *The Dialogic Imagination*, together with the notion of heteroglossia, which directly translated means 'different tongues'. Both of these terms are connected to his claim that the novel is the most important genre of literature. As opposed to a poem, a novel usually involves a number of voices as exemplified in *The World According to Garp* with its experimentation regarding layers of narration; the historical author's voice is only one among many.[28] The notion of plurality of voices is also a distinct postmodern feature, because it defies the possibility of one overarching and/or suppressive voice that silences the others. Postmodernism is in many ways a plurality of voices, and none of them can hold the Truth, only truths. Bakhtin wrote that "[i]t is impossible to lay out the languages of the novel on a single plane, to stretch them out along a single line. It is a system

---

[24] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 11.
[25] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 6.
[26] Lodge and Wood, introduction to "Mikhail Bakhtin" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 234. Relevant because the novel is the best illustration of heteroglossia, see more further down.
[27] Lodge and Wood, introduction to "Mikhail Bakhtin" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 233.
[28] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, s.v. "heteroglossia", "dialogprinsippet"; Allen, *Intertextuality*, 22-23.

of intersecting planes."[29] Additionally, one might see the polyphony and dialogism of a novel as being related to the voices of all the novels of the past. This brings us to the intertextuality of Julia Kristeva.

From the Saussurean idea of language as a system, and the Bakhtinian notion of all language as dialogue, come Julia Kristeva's formulations on intertextuality: "[A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of other texts."[30] Much in the same way as the word depends on the system of language, literary texts have inherent implications, due to the simple fact that they are texts that stand in relation to other texts: A text can never be read as an isolated unit. The connection to the discussion of Saussure's theories above should be obvious. One must also remember that in Kristeva's theories, both society, culture and history are "texts", because they are all in "dialogue" and they will influence how an actual text is written or read. Roland Barthes follows in some of Kristeva's footsteps; in his renowned essay from 1977, "The Death of the Author", one of his most famous quotes states that: "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."[31] The similarity to Kristeva is striking. Barthes also wrote that "the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings." [32] This implies that no writing is original. Everything is already written, but one can assemble the existing bits and pieces into a new patchwork.

The term intertextuality has spurred a complex web of theories. It “has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva’s original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence."[33] I hope to draw something from a number of these ideas about intertextuality. However, when it comes to intertextuality in the fiction of John Irving, one could argue that for the most part, it is difficult to apply some of the most abstract theories of Kristeva and Barthes. A discussion of Kristeva's intertextuality could easily become more philosophical than literary. It is also quite difficult to analyze and discuss the examples of intertextuality in the texts if "the intertextual dimensions of a text cannot be studied as mere 'sources' or 'influences' stemming from what

[29] Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds. Lodge and Wood, 239.
[30] *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 244.
[31] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds., Lodge and Wood, 315.
[32] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 315.
[33] William Irwin, "Against Intertextuality," in *Philosophy and Literature* , vol. 28, nr. 2 (October 2004), 227-228.
http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/philosophy_and_literature/v028/28.2irwin.pdf (accessed 05.04.2013).

traditionally has been styled 'background' or 'context'."[34] In order to make an analysis of the intertextuality in *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, one must instead look at the particular references and allusions, whilst keeping in mind the ideological discourses that will always be a part of any text, making it a different text for different readers.[35]

In connection with *The World According to Garp,* Josie Campbell defines intertextuality as "the relation between two or more texts. It is used to indicate a more diffuse penetration of the individual text by memories, echoes, transformations, of other texts."[36] This is a more basic definition than Kristeva's, which can still be connected to postmodernism, as argued by for instance Raymond J. Wilson III: "[I]n John Barth's concept of a literature of exhaustion, imitation of earlier modes is a basic strategy of the postmodern novel."[37] With this in mind, it is interesting to consider how all these references influence the reader. As the reader's mind is also drawn to think of the subject of literature instead of simply staying inside the reality of the story, intertextuality may have what is called a metafictional effect.

Metafiction

Critic Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."[38] In other words, metafiction aims to reveal, or put on display the "falseness" or fictive nature of a work of art. The actual term metafiction stems from William H. Gass; the usage, however, is ancient. A classic example is the famous Scheherazade who tells stories to stay alive in *A Thousand and One Nights.* The author is using his own narrative to describe the act of storytelling itself, hence he "display[s] to the readers [the story's] own formal workings." [39] On the other hand, one might also claim that metafiction is an aspect of all novels, because of the novel's previously mentioned dialogic nature. In any case, metafiction is an undeniable feature in both of the Irving novels discussed in this thesis. One of them employs the technique of a story within a

[34] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 35.
[35] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 35.
This is also relevant in connection with chapter two and Foucault's discourses of power.
[36] Josie Campbell, *John Irving: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 82.
[37]Wilson, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*", 49. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:rec:mla:R02841998 (accessed 01.09.2012).
[38] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,* ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1984), 2.
[39] Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73.

story, clearly playing with layers of voices and narrators, while the other has a main character who only speaks in capital letters. The spotlight is definitely on the narratives' fictive status. Hence arises the interesting question of whether it is possible to stay in the fictional world when the reader is made explicitly aware of its "falseness."

The second half of the quote above which reads: "to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality," makes the idea of metafiction somewhat more intricate. Related to the poststructuralist questioning of the relation between signifier and signified, is the uncertainty about how language can portray the world. While modernists largely searched for "timeless representational truth," postmodernists felt a deep disbelief in people's ability to represent the real.[40] A postmodern author who "rejects the empirical idea that language can represent reality, [and] that the world is accessible to us through language,"[41] will find it difficult to write a traditional narrative. One solution to this problem is to write self-consciously, and put the falseness of language and representation on display. This is arguably what Irving does through his use of a story within the story, and with his typographical breaches. Patricia Waugh explains the transition from realism's attempt at merging fiction and reality to postmodernism's display of its condition as fiction as the result of being in a state of neither integration nor opposition, but rather uncertainty and instability.

> What [metafiction] does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. In showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'.[42]

This can be connected to the feeling of being lost, and one effect of this is possibly that postmodernist writers have opted to turn inward, and look at the genre itself, in an attempt to be both inventive and traditional. In terms of being traditional, Irving's novels have often been connected to the writings of his idol Charles Dickens. Though clearly influenced by Dickens' more traditional stories, Irving does bring something new to the table with his twists and turns regarding fictional details and literary tools. Summing up, Irving can be connected to metafiction, and metafiction is connected to postmodernism. Maggie Ann Bowers comments that "[postmodernism] is frequently associated with post-structuralism and self-reflexivity as it is a form of [...] literature that self-consciously exposes its structures."[43] That is to say,

[40] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 11.
[41] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 6.
[42] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 18; If not otherwise stated, the information and ideas in this paragraph are indebted to chapter I in Waugh, *Metafiction*, 1-19.
[43] Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 132.

metafiction and self-conscious/self-reflexive writing can be seen as a postmodern literary strategy.

Linda Hutcheon's main concern is also with the self-consciousness of art. Her notion of "historiographical metafiction" was developed as a reaction to the separation of literature and history into two separate genres. She claims that postmodernism should "be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past."[44] Her descriptions make very clear the connection between postmodernism, metafiction, and intertextuality. Defined somewhat differently from the metafiction described above, Hutcheon labels her theory historiographical metafiction, but like Waugh's definition, it "refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction."[45] History has arguably lost its authority, which is connected to both the death of Truth, and the problem of representation. I will explore how Irving's two novels play with the connections between society, history and text in a way which arguably might exemplify such tendencies.[46] For instance, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* clearly positions itself in history by describing the actual political climate of the U.S. in the middle of the twentieth century, yet the nature of these descriptions is debatable.

Another strategy of metafiction can be to use autobiography. John Irving often uses elements from his own life, and in addition, he uses recurring themes throughout his works (the latter practice can also be connected to intertextuality). However, the subject of autobiography is rather complicated because, as one writer puts it "if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it."[47] Still, I will investigate the possibly metafictional and postmodern effects of the recognition of biographical details. Examples of fictional components that are arguably inspired by Irving's own life, are the location of both stories, the three main characters' (Garp, Owen, and John) enrollment in all-boys boarding schools, the name of one main character, and Garp's work and hobbies (author and wrestler). We may conclude that the lines between fact and fiction are definitely fluid in Irving's books.

---

[44] Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History", in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3. http://hdl.handle.net/1807/10252 (accessed 15.08.2012).
[45] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 1988*),* 93.
[46] Note that this is somewhat different from Kristeva connection between history/society/text; Hutcheon refers to literature that self-consciously describes historical events in order to emphasize the unreliability of historical representations.
[47] Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 1.

Parody

As mentioned above, and as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter One, *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* are rich in examples of intertextuality, and this is interesting in connection with parody because certain uses of intertextuality can also be parodic. Parody has often been connected to ridicule and satire, but Linda Hutcheon's notion of postmodern parody is more connected to intertextuality and metafiction.[48] One of her definitions reads: "Parody is [...] repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."[49] In a parody, the author looks to the history of literature, appropriates certain aspects that he or she finds (Hutcheon refers to this as the parodic code), and presents them in new ways. It is easy to see how parody is a subgenre of intertextuality. Furthermore, "[t]he parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices through the coexistence of the two codes in the same message."[50] This quote also shows us the close connection between metafiction and parody. As parody is most definitely related to both intertextuality and metafiction, the decisive difference between parody and the other two concepts must be made clear. What makes parody stand out as a genre of its own, is the manner in which it repeats its material. Humor and ridicule have often been associated with parody, but in Hutcheon's opinion, they are not necessarily connected. Irony, on the other hand, is a defining part of parody since irony is the element that gives the imitation or repetition its critical difference. "Parody [...] is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion."[51]

A definition of irony is quite simply to say the opposite of what ostensibly seems to be meant.[52] When saying the opposite of what seems to be intended, the speaker is depending on the right context to get his real message across, as well as on the receiver to interpret the message the way it is intended.[53] This means that the entire communicative process is essential:

> Parody involves not just a structural énoncé but the entire énonciation of discourse. This enunciative act includes an addresser of the utterance, a receiver of it, a time and a place, discourses that precede and follow – in short, an entire context. [...] The Russian formalists, in all their emphasis and

[48] It is important to note that there is much disagreement surrounding the definition of "parody."
[49] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 6.
[50] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 41.
[51] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 6. Also, chapter two and three of this book are generally concerned with the role of irony.
[52] Colebrook, *Irony,* 1.
[53] Colebrook, *Irony,* 165.

> insistence on literariness, never forgot that there was an enunciative context that influenced parody, and indeed, all literature.[54]

The Russian formalist Roman Jakobson's model of communication might help to illustrate Hutcheon's insistence on this concept. In addition to the addresser, the message, and the addressee, he includes a context, contact, and code in his model.[55] Each of these aspects are particularly important in an ironically coded message, which is exactly what Hutcheon is emphasizing. A parody is not just an echo of any text from the past, it demands the encoder's intent to parody as well as the decoder's recognition of the parodic codes.[56] Furthermore, in terms of the addressee or the decoder, a parody requires an audience that inhabits a certain cultural sophistication and knowledge about the parody's context, contact and code, in order to interpret the double-voiced message. In the postmodern world, the meaning and importance of irony is quite essential, because the general philosophy seems to be that "nothing really means what it says."[57] Irony is therefore of the essence in the postmodern world, and its possible presence will be investigated in *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany.*

Mikhail Bakhtin traced the parodic genre back to the notion of the carnival.[58] The Medieval and Renaissance carnival was an exception to the sometimes strict and authoritarian rules of society. To ridicule the serious aspects of life was allowed during the carnival. Bakhtin describes it as a meeting between art and life, where the lines of demarcation between them were erased, much like what was discussed in connection with metafiction. According to Bakhtin, the parodic genres are also ancient forms of "representing the word of another."[59] Arguably, such parody has certain similarities to the Middle Ages, when quotation was a different matter, for as Bakhtin states, "the boundary lines between someone else's speech and one's own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused."[60] With this kind of view, it is easy to see how the parodic genres were unproblematic in terms of originality and ownership, and the loss of authority in the postmodern world might have some of the same effect. The purpose of the traditional parody was that "[t]he direct and serious word was revealed, in all its limitations and insuffiency [...] but it was by no means

[54] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 23.
[55] Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds. Lodge and Woods, 144.
[56] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 37.
[57] Colebrook, *Irony,* 1.
[58] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "karnival".
[59] Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", 243.
[60] Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", 253.

discredited in the process."[61] In Hutcheon's opinion, it is an important distinction from other genres, like satire, that it does not discredit the other's word. Instead, one might say that its goal is to create literary awareness, which is, as we have seen, a postmodern tendency.

Hutcheon claims that parody is the most postmodern of genres, [62] because it "restore[s] history" while it simultaneously "question[s] the authority of any act of writing."[63] This is also connected to intertextuality, especially the definitions made by Barthes about the "tissues of quotation." One might say that no writing belongs exclusively to anyone. It is simply the way one pastes these quotations together that can be original. Also, as mentioned earlier, the grand truths are dead in postmodernism, and arguably, the same goes for authority. Parodies are frank about their use of preceding writing, and are therefore in a way questioning copyrights, so to speak. Whereas a plagiarist would attempt to hide the fact that he is copying someone else's work, a parodist makes it clear where his inspiration comes from; that is a decisive part of the parody's definition.

Parody's "range of intent – from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing,"[64] is one reason for its ability to function as both critique and homage. Ridicule, however, is actually a feature of satire, not postmodern parody, according to Hutcheon. A satire is usually mostly concerned with ridiculing its target, in order to change and improve it.[65] Its aim is society, whereas a parody looks to another work of art.[66] In connection with Irving's novels, we will see that this is an important distinction. It is also important to note that satire is not considered typically postmodern, because in its effort to criticize and improve society, it is implying that something is more true than something else. This is, as we have seen, not in accordance with the pervasive relativism of postmodern thinking.[67]

Feminism, Gender Roles, Sexuality

What I find most striking about John Irving's novels is his rich gallery of characters who display a variety of possible gender roles and sexual orientations. It seems that in Irving's

[61] Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", 244.
[62] Lothe, Refsum, and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "parodi".
Note that I have chosen to present Hutcheon's, not Jameson's, points of view regarding parody. Jameson claims that pastiche is the most postmodern genre. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, eds. Lodge and Wood, 545.
[63] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 129.
[64] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 6.
[65] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 43.
[66] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 16; 25.
[67] I will look at definitions and theories that limit this pervasive relativism, but not directly in connection with defining satire as either postmodern or not postmodern.

fictional universe, to be a sexual outsider is more or less the default option. On several occasions, Irving has emphasized his fascination and interest in the topic, as in his comment that "I find sexual outsiders especially engaging. [...] I like these people; they attract me, and I fear for their safety—I worry about who might hate them and wish them harm."[68] Irving has also stated that he hoped and believed that sexual discrimination would be less extensive now that we are well into the twenty-first century. However, as it is still going strong, he continues his battle for greater acceptance by writing his fiction with compelling sexual outsiders cast as the main characters. In order to connect all his different portrayals of gender and sexuality with the thesis at hand, I will return to the central postmodern idea of the death of Truth.

Postmodern Relativism

The conditions for knowledge have changed, according to influential postmodern theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.[69] They argue that human beings have tended to seek total knowledge and information as the solution to all their problems. Lyotard claims that in postmodernism, this search has become a useless process, both because of the problem of the sign's referentiality (as discussed above), and because there is a very complex process involved in the use of signs in society. Without going into this complexity, the relevant gist of this is Lyotard's claim that one of its consequences is that totalitarian and essentialist thinking have been disillusioned.[70] Furthermore, postmodernists often reject the idea of "there being any essence to phenomena such as truth, meaning, self, or identity,"[71] because everything changes. All ideas about for instance norms, rules, and social etiquette are relative; they will not be true for all people, at all times and in all places. Of course, the idea that there are no general and elevated rules of morality is problematic, but there is no doubt that most of the rules of society are in a process of constant change. Jean-Francois Lyotard also wrote that "this 'postmodern condition' is the result of the failure and acute discomfiture of the so-called grand narratives that underpinned and legitimized modernity."[72] The grand narratives were modernism's attempt at showing how our world is founded on essential truths:

---

[68] i.e. http://john-irving.com/john-irving-author-q-a/ (accessed 09.04.2013).
[69] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "postmodernisme".
[70] Butler, *Postmodernism,* 15; Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "postmodernisme"; see also Hans Bertens, "Jean-Francois Lyotard" in Bertens and Natoli, *Postmodernism.* This is also interesting in connection with the postmodern popularity of the parodic genre, which is connected to the challenging of totalitarian thinking.
[71] *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 159.
[72] *Postmodernism,* eds. Bertens and Natoli, xiii.

> These [grand] narratives are contained in, or implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. The two main narratives Lyotard is attacking are those of the progressive emancipation of humanity – from Christian redemption to Marxist Utopia – and that of the triumph of science. [...] "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives". These metanarratives traditionally serve to give cultural practices some form of legitimation or authority.[73]

A positive side effect of the postmodern belief in the death of Truth might be the realization that there can be a plurality of "truths," and that we might be more able to accept each others' truths. With his repeated representations of, for the most part, decent and good main characters who in one way or another find themselves outside the norm, one might say that Irving fights for greater acceptance of differences between people. However, it becomes difficult to argue for the prioritizing of any political standpoint, as the validity of such a view in a postmodernist context is challenged by the prevailing relativism. A novel that fights for greater tolerance of human diversity has a political agenda, which is not acceptable in anti-essentialist postmodernism. This context might point to a reason why John Irving is not usually considered a typical postmodernist. Crucially, however, there are also postmodern theorists who are able to adjust this definition of postmodernism by limiting such a full-scale relativism. For example, Ronald Inglehart claims that "a full-fledged postmodernity [...] will 'emphasize human autonomy and diversity instead of hierarchy and conformity that are central to modernity'" and that postmodernism signals a "development toward [...] greater tolerance and an increased acceptance of difference."[74] Also, more importantly, Michel Foucault has explained more thoroughly how such a view can be defended, mainly by questioning who decides what truth is, and why some truths are considered as given by nature, and thereby indisputable.

Michel Foucault

Though refusing to classify himself as a postmodernist, Foucault has made major contributions to postmodern theories in his challenge of prejudices. His discussions of the relation between power, knowledge and truth have proved particularly rewarding. By

[73] Butler, *Postmodernism,* 13.
"Metanarratives" in the sense of grand narratives, not to be confused with metafiction.
[74] *Postmodernism*, eds. Bertens and Natoli, xiii.

explaining the mechanics of the discourses of power that circulate in every society,[75] Foucault has shown why he believes that truth is relative:

> Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints. ... Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true: the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what is true.[76]

He obviously discusses how societies and institutions choose their truths, and "he is concerned with the mechanics whereby one becomes produced as the dominant discourse."[77] Power, and who is in possession of power, are therefore central to what truth and knowledge entail at any given time. [78] This can be connected to Irving's challenging of established gender roles and heterosexual relationships, as Irving does not seem to accept the idea of any such "natural" or divinely given truth regarding sex. The effect of this relativity of truth is arguably that

> once we become aware that what we are and what we think are aspects of our being that are not dependent on a preordained order of things, once we realize that events, actions, and thoughts are subject to contingency and chance and not to law – either divine or human-made – then we also become aware of the freedom and possibilities inherent in the present moment.[79]

Foucault's definition of power is also interesting; instead of classifying everyone as either victim of power or in possession of power, he sees all individuals as instances in power relations:[80] "[P]ower is dispersed throughout social relations, [...] it produces possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behaviour."[81] In conclusion, truth and knowledge are not transcendental, instead they depend on the discourses of power. Though Foucault believes in the individual's freedom, and that one must question all preconceived notions of truth and knowledge, he does not conclude that the rules of morality have disappeared. "We must refuse to be led," and instead take responsibility for our own personal actions and ask ourselves what

[75] Sara Mills, *Discourses*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004), 15: "discourse [...] as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' [...] a discourse is something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation."
[76] Foucault quoted in Mills, *Discourse*, 16.
[77] Mills, *Discourse*, 17.
[78] Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2011), 153.
[79] Karlis Racevskis, "Michel Foucault", in *Postmodernism*, eds. Bertens and Natoli, 138.
[80] Mills, *Discourse*, 19.
[81] Mills, *Discourse*, 17; Bristow, *Sexuality*, 152.

we believe is right.[82] This is in many ways comforting, as it adjusts what seems to be the absolute relativity of postmodernism, making postmodern theories of anti-essentialism easier to apply when put into practice. It also opens up for the view of John Irving as a postmodern writer; Irving arguably presents very clear ideas concerning what he believes to be the right thing to do, both in *The World According to Garp* and in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. One example of this is his somewhat degrading descriptions of the Ellen Jamesians as feminism gone wrong. He also describes kind-hearted and decent humanbeings who fall outside society's norm because of who they love or how they perform their gender.

Some of the power discourses that have permeated modern society concern gender and sexuality. The norm is/has been to be either male or female, with all its implications, and heterosexuality has been the accepted version of sexual desire. This was based on so-called natural truth, whose insistence Foucault blamed on "the Victorian bourgeoisie:"[83] Because only the combination of a man and a woman can reproduce and secure the continued existence of humanity, their relationship has been considered an absolute truth which need not be questioned. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, this "truth" has been revised, and differences within this totalitarian view on sex has become more and more accepted. Gender qualities have become gender*ed* qualities, and thereby display the fact that they are constructed, not inherent. Michel Foucault questioned the traditional "knowledge" about sex, and claimed that "[t]here is no single, all-encompassing strategy, valid for all of society and uniformly bearing on all the manifestations of sex."[84] It is arguably quite easy to see how this is connected to his discussion of the discourses of power, and the changing postmodern views on truth and knowledge. There are only personal truths when it comes to who you are, including your gender and your sexuality. As will become evident in Chapter Two, the sexual outsiders abound and flourish in Irving's novels with a transsexual like Roberta Muldoon and asexuals like Jenny Fields and Johnny Wheelwright, and I find it apparent that Irving also questions essentialist views on the nature of sex.

Furthermore, in terms of violence, there are numerous sexual assaults in *The World According to Garp,* and Garp himself seems to struggle with the feeling of guilt when it comes to his "male lust," even though all his sexual relations are very much voluntary. Also, as Chapter Two suggests, Irving might utilize, and perhaps ridicule, his legacy of New

[82] Racevskis, "Michel Foucault," 139-140.
[83] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.
[84] Michel Foucault quoted in Bristow, *Sexuality*, 154.

England Puritanism.[85] Marital infidelity is punished with the death of a child, and notably, it is only the woman's affair that is so harshly punished. Clearly, if there is a God in Garp's universe, he punishes the sexual "sin" rigorously, making this an ambivalent comment on the traditional presentations of men, women, and their sexuality.

Judith Butler

In the postmodern era, a common claim is that science or biology does not represent any kind of truth or essence when it comes to gender and sexuality. Rather, postmodernism emphasizes the fact that neither women nor men are homogeneous groups of people. Significantly, Judith Butler argues that "the very category of gender is a 'regulatory fiction' which functions to enforce compulsory heterosexuality (everyone is *either* male or female; opposites complement/attract)."[86] Men and women have been defined as opposites and complementary, and are therefore an interdependent binarism. For instance, the argument goes that the man is the stronger sex because the woman is the weaker sex, so to speak. Butler is clearly criticizing the binary and totalitarian definitions of gender, her argument being that the variety of humans cannot be put in simple categories. Also, this idea that "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender,"[87] reinforces the notion of heterosexuality as the natural sexuality: "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire."[88] In *The World According to Garp*, there are many examples of the failure of the definition of feminine/masculine as an interdisciplinary binarism: Jenny Fields does not depend on anyone, and she is a delightful mixture of what has traditionally been considered feminine and masculine qualities. Hester from *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is also an example of a woman who defies the traditional notion of femininity.

Furthermore, Butler believes that gender roles are the results of imitation, and that there is no essentialist original for what men and women are imitating.[89]Arguably, what we usually consider feminine and masculine qualities, are really just fabrications, which we can

[85] BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).
[86] Sue Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, 28.
[87] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York/London: Routledge, 1990), 22.
[88] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22-23
[89] Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 28.

no longer recognize; society has persistently accumulated these fabricated ideas as truths for so long that we believe that there is such a thing as *natural* femininity and masculinity. Instead, Butler claims, we perform our gender as either feminine or masculine depending on our female or male body. This can be connected to Baudrillard's idea of simulacra, as the notion of "imitation without an original" seems to be an accurate description for our performative genders. In Baudrillard's opinion, the postmodern world has transformed the real "into the 'hyperreal', which bears no resemblance to any reality whatsoever, it has disappeared entirely into the process of simulation."[90] Simulacra also stem from the referential problem of the sign, but can still easily be seen as related to Butler's views on gender as an imitation without an original. Arguably, John Irving also challenges the assumed truths regarding femininity and masculinity. His characters range from more stereotypical men and women, to transsexuals and homosexuals. In his novels the potential diversity of gender is often put on display. Irving has also included what are arguably satirical presentations of feminist ideas, where the ideal was for women to be more similar, and thereby equal, to men (e.g., the Dowlings in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, 244-245).

As mentioned initially, there are many different definitions of and ideas about postmodernism, but their common feature is often their claim that the grand or absolute truths have lost their legitimacy and thereby their influence and importance. This postmodern philosophy of anti-essentialism has multiple implications. Whereas a postmodern view on sexuality will entail a questioning of established ideas about sexual identity and gender roles,[91] postmodern feminism entails an oxymoron: There is a problem with combining feminism and postmodernism, because feminism is based on an opposition to patriarchal suppression, but this will be considered an essentialist way of thinking in the eyes of a postmodernist.[92] Thus, postmodern feminism could perhaps be called a "Catch-22":

> Feminism [...] is itself a 'narrative of emancipation', and its political claims are made on behalf of a social group, women, who are seen to have an underlying community of interest, and of an embodied female subject whose identity and experiences [...] are necessarily different from those of men. [...] if [...] we remove gender (or sexual difference) as a central organizing principle – how can a feminist political practice be any longer possible?[93]

[90] *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 305.
[91] Though, as mentioned above, Irving arguably writes about these themes with a political agenda, which also makes these subjects problematic if one sees postmodernism as utterly relative.
[92] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Routledge, 1989), 148-149.
[93] Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 27.

As a response to this problem of definition, Hutcheon claims that the two can be combined if postmodernism is understood as a direction which allows for politically charged critique of power structures: "While the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action,* it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique."[94] If we turn to Foucault's insights, I believe that in his encouragement to ask oneself what is right, lies an opportunity for certain kinds of feminism to be a part of postmodernism.

In *The World According to Garp,* one of the main characters is the remarkable Jenny Fields, who is perhaps especially interesting when it comes to feminism, though her lack of sexual desire is also very much relevant in this chapter. In addition, Irving's portrayal of the Ellen Jamesians is undoubtedly also a comment on feminism. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* the subject of feminism is perhaps less prominent, but one may discuss the fact that the main characters John and Owen are mostly raised in a matrilineal home. Furthermore, John's mother Tabitha could be described as a feminist because of her ability to make controversial decisions on her own.

Chapter Outline

The remainder of this thesis, then, consists of two chapters ("Intertextuality, Metafiction, Parody", and "Gender Roles, Sexuality, Feminism"), each dealing with *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in the context of the important aspects of postmodernism that have been briefly presented in this introduction. Chapter One opens with a discussion of how Irving's references to his own literature can be seen as connected to Bakhtin's notion of the addressivity of language, and also to how all language can be seen as dialogic. The notion of postmodern relativity and the instability of language is discussed in connection with these theories. Furthermore, Bakthin's heteroglossia is shown to be relevant to a discussion of the narrative layers in *The World According to Garp.* Both primary sources' reinterpretation of the traditional Bildungsroman is looked at in connection with the postmodern problem of originality. I will also consider how *A Prayer for Owen Meany* might be read in light of the Bible, and its possibly postmodern presentation of religion. The arguably self-conscious treatment of reading, writing, and speech, as well as literature and language, will also be investigated as examples of metafiction. Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographical metafiction and the postmodern idea of history's loss of authority, together

[94] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism,* 3.

with how the autobiographical details can affect the reader, will hopefully shed further light on the topic of self-reflexive literature. The final part of Chapter One analyses the two novels in connection with the genre of parody, especially in relation to Bakhtin's writing on the carnival, but also how parody has come to represent a postmodern genre. Chapter Two investigates the subjects of sexuality, gender, and feminism, in order to explore how the novels' discussion of these themes might be considered postmodern. Foucault's discourses of power and Butler's notion of gender as a performance will hopefully shed light on Irving's representation of characters like Garp, Jenny, Roberta, John, and Hester. The ambivalent presentation of Jenny Fields and the Ellen James Society brings additional aspects of both feminism and postmodernism to the discussion, and questions why they might be considered compatible or incompatible. *The World According to Garp* presents and discusses the subjects of sex and feminism in greater detail than *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* and I have therefore allowed the first novel more space in this chapter. The Conclusion presents some final remarks concerning how and why these two Irving's novels may be considered postmodern in light of the subjects discussed in Chapter One and Two, in addition to a short presentation of certain postmodern parameters that the novels may not be seen to fulfill.

1 Intertextuality, Metafiction, Parody

1.1 Intertextuality

The World According to Garp is the novel which gave John Irving his breakthrough. The book was published to both excellent reviews and high sales figures. Interestingly, it reiterates many themes from the three novels he had published prior to his success, both quite general ones, such as love, death, sex, violence, and family, as well as more specific ones, like wrestling, New England, Vienna, bears, art, boarding schools. Also remarkable is the way in which Irving seems to make a connection with his future novels, with one of Garp's short-stories, "Pension Grillparzer." John Irving's next novel was called *Hotel New Hampshire,* and it shares some significant similarities with Garp's story. *The World According to Garp* was published in 1978, and Irving has published numerous novels since then, where many of the themes listed above resurface repeatedly. When considering Kristeva's and Barthes' notion of how everything is always already said, Irving's recycling of his own ideas becomes somewhat humorous. It almost seems as if he is having fun with the idea that it is impossible to write an original work of art. Irving is playing with certain fictional details in a rather postmodern fashion; he is very consciously pointing to other works of art (his own, that is). This is also connected to metafiction; by pointing to his previous works, as well as to those that are yet to come, Irving is stressing his novels' fictive state of being, and the topic of metafiction will be returned to further down.

Readers are often faithful to authors they like, meaning that many will probably choose to read several, or even all of their favorite author's novels. Arguably, this makes the thematic in-jokes mentioned in the paragraph above, good examples of the "addressivity" of language. Bakhtin argues that words are relational: "All utterances are responses to previous utterances and are addressed to specific addresses,"[95] and here it seems as if Irving has his most dedicated readers in mind when he writes. One might also say that there seems to be a kind of dialogue between all of his novels, almost as if all of Irving's characters live in the same world, where bears and boarding schools are very prominent features. This could be seen as related to Bakhtin's idea of how the social aspect of language is most important. The relations between Irving's novels and his reiteration of ideas can be interpreted as an

[95] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 19.

illustration of how all use of language is related; any use of language will necessarily be a response to an earlier use of language, and your utterance will inspire future utterances or responses.[96] Bakthin's notion of the "addressivity" of language can be connected to postmodernism: "Meaning, [...]is unique, to the extent that it belongs to the linguistic interaction of specific individuals or groups within specific social contexts."[97] There is no grand and stable meaning, which, of course, is related to the idea that Truth is dead. Arguably, Irving's in-jokes can be seen as relative because they require a specific audience to interpret them. Their meanings are not carved in stone. This notion of the word as equally dependent on "whose word it is and for whom it is meant"[98] and "its social situatedness"[99] in general, is also very relevant in connection with the use of irony, which will be further discussed in connection with parody, later in this chapter.

Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia is highly relevant to a discussion of *The World According to Garp.* In the words of Graham Allen and Bakhtin himself:

> In the polyphonic novel, for example, the speech of individual characters is always heteroglot, double-voiced, in that, as Bakhtin puts it: "it serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author."[100]

In *The World According to Garp* there are clearly several voices speaking at the same time, communicating different views of the world. This becomes especially clear because of the inclusion of Garp's own writing, and because the story is partly written as a biography. The narrator is intended to be Garp's official biographer, though he is not consistent in this role. The biographer slides in and out of character, writing both as fiction and as biography, for instance when he conveys Garp's thoughts as he dies:[101] "If he could have talked, he would have told Helen not to be frightened of the Under Toad anymore" (474). A real biographer could not have known these things, unless biographer and subject were of different worlds, like John Irving and Garp, which, of course, would make the biographer a fictional writer instead. Anyhow, these multiple layers of narration make *The World According to Garp* a double-voiced discourse. Furthermore, these different narrative voices exemplify the postmodern plurality of truths.

---

[96] Allen, *Intertextuality,*18.
[97] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 17.
[98] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 19.
[99] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 19.
[100] Allen, *Intertextuality,* 28-29.
[101] Campbell, *John Irving,* 87.

Unlike in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, actual literary works (other than Irving's own novels) are perhaps not as obviously influential in *The World According to Garp*, though there are quite a few references to literature here too: "Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations,* Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* Randall Jarrell's 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,' Franz Grillparzer's *The Poor Fiddler,* Dostoyevsky's *The Eternal Husband* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*"[102] We learn that Garp is not a great reader, but he has certain favorites, namely Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and D. H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands*: "He was no reader – no match for Helen, or Jenny, for example. Garp's way with a story was to find one he liked and read it again and again; it would spoil him for reading any other story for a long while" (90). One possible postmodern interpretation of this, is to see Garp as the ideal reader of poststructuralism; Every single reader reads in his/her own way and thereby creates an individual meaning of the text.[103] Garp becomes so invested in his favorite novels, and arguably takes such great part in the creation of their meaning, that he could be seen as a co-writer.

The meaning of all the references above is debatable, and I will look more closely at one of them, namely Ovid's *Metamorphoses:* Philomela is raped by her sister's husband, and he cuts her tongue off to prevent her from telling anyone. Instead she is able to weave the story of the crime, and she shows this to her sister Procne, who has been told by her husband that Philomela is dead. Procne's retaliation entails killing their son and serving him to her husband for dinner. When she tells him what she has done, he tries to kill both sisters, but before he can do so, they are all transformed into birds.[104] A story of rape and severed tongues is also an essential story-line in *The World According to Garp.* There are actually several rapes in the novel, occurring both in Irving's and in Garp's narratives.[105] But the central story of sexual abuse is the one concerning Ellen James, a young girl who has had her tongue cut off so that she would not be able to expose her offender. She inspires an entire society of

---

[102] Campbell, *John Irving*, 82.
However, what seems most important in *Garp*, in addition to Garp and Jenny's designated books, are reading and books in a more general sense, which is a subject I will return to in "Metafiction."
Also, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) can arguably be called a "postmodern" metabiographical novel. Ref. Paul Goring, *Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008), 106. The fact that this novel is simply mentioned is interesting in connection with the previous paragraph; the interpretation of *The World According to Garp* as metafiction is possibly reinforced by the simple mention of *Tristram Shandy.*
[103] Ref. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 313-316.
[104] Campbell, *John Irving*, 85.
[105] A subject I will return to in chapter 2.

women (the Ellen Jamesians) who cut off their tongues to sympathize with her. Garp feels great contempt for these women (157), which in the end is part of what leads to his death. The real Ellen James, on the other hand, is taken into his home and becomes part of Garp's family (419). I find that the story of Philomela and Procne strengthens the legitimacy of Garp's disdain for the Ellen Jamesians. Procne kills her innocent son, supposedly as a punishment on behalf of her sister, but even though the act hurts the culprit, the murder of an innocent makes no sense. Thus the Ellen Jamesians' act of sympathy and mutilation, which does not even hurt the culprit, is connected to a needless act from the literary past. Furthermore, Garp's story *The World According to Bensenhaver* also includes a rape, but in this narrative, the victim kills the perpetrator (351-356).

> Then she scissored his pale ass. He could not stop pumping down there, though his brain must have known there was suddenly another priority. "My knife?" he said. And she reached over his shoulder and (faster than she herself could see it happen) she slid the slim-edged side of the blade across his throat (351).

In this horrid story within the story it seems that the vengeance is finally aimed at the right person, which is perhaps Garp's way of trying to show the Ellen Jamesians his opinion that their act of support/vengeance is misguided.

The World According to Garp is intertextual in yet another way; it is a coming-of-age story, inspired by examples of the nineteenth-century classic Bildungsroman, such as *Great Expectations* and *Middlemarch*. The reader follows Garp from his conception to his death, as he develops and changes throughout the book. I would claim that John Irving is indeed a story-teller in the tradition of Dickens and the nineteenth century, as his main focus is a good storyline and a fascinating gallery of characters. Like Dickens' works, Irving's novels are usually long and filled with details, and both authors choose to include comments on social challenges and wrongdoings in their stories. In this manner, postmodernism's "increased importance of intertextuality"[106] can be seen to be present. But Irving writes his Bildungsroman with some twists, for instance in that it includes parts of the lives of Garp's family prior to his birth, and after his death. This novel might be interpreted as even more postmodern because it challenges the traditional coming-of-age story, and thereby questions one of the established "truths" regarding literary genres. Though comparing Irving's use of the Bildungsroman with modernism, Raymond J. Wilson III makes a similar point in his discussion of the novel:

[106] Erik Kielland-Lund, "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism," Handout.

> *The World According to Garp* plays with the modernist forms of the artist's bildingsroman and the mid-century American comedy of manners and necessarily makes an implicit comment upon them [...] *Garp,* by its reuse of modernist forms, stands in the same territory as these works [referring to *Lost in the Funhouse, The Sot-Weed Factor, Letters, Gerald's Party*] by Barth and Coover. By reusing existing forms this new fiction opens for itself doors to endless opportunities for freshness.[107]

A Prayer for Owen Meany is also a coming-of-age story. In a Bildungsroman, the reader expects the main character(s) to develop and grow, which is a goal that is fulfilled in *The World According to Garp.*[108] However, Johnny Wheelwright in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* becomes a bitter man who is unable to live his life fully after Owen Meany's death, which is not the self-fulfillment one expects to find in a Bildungsroman. Owen moves from the working class to the representatives of the upper class of Gravesend, the Wheelwrights, as he becomes close with John and his family. "Let me say at the outset that I was a Wheelwright – that was the family name that counted in our town: the Wheelwrights" (8), says John on one of the first pages of the book. Owen's is not the traditional class rise through marriage, although he could have married John's cousin Hester, as they are in a relationship. One might also say that he chooses to descend in terms of class when he decides to join the army instead of completing a college education.

Furthermore, the novel is framed by the story of the death of Johnny's mother and the death of Owen Meany, and Johnny's life remains centered around these two characters, especially the latter. The novel ends with the story of Owen's death, which in many ways symbolizes the end of Johnny's life as well, whereas in *The World According to Garp,* life is shown to continue even after Garp's death. In contrast to *The World According to Garp,* which is filled with Dickensian humor in all kinds of situations, the character of Johnny Wheelwright seems somewhat more discouraged. Finally, these new versions of the Bildungsroman are the first illustrations of how the meaning of a text is "mediated through 'codes' imparted to the writer and reader by other texts."[109] The reader knows the code of a Bildungsroman, and when he recognizes the signs of such a story, he will expect certain features to be present. I find that the reader's expectations are often disappointed in the reading of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and this has the same effect as in *The World According to Garp*; the rules of an established genre are challenged and possibly altered. Irving builds on

[107] Wilson, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*," 51.
The authors and their works that are mentioned in this quote, are usually considered typically postmodern.
[108] I see both John and Owen as main characters, even though John is obviously the narrator.
[109] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 28.

the history of literature, but he makes significant changes along the way. Irving's reinterpretations of the Bildungsroman can arguably be called postmodern.

A Prayer for Owen Meany is somewhat less typically *Irvingesque* than *The World According to Garp,* as it does not include some of his most well-worn and whimsical topics. Though it is a story of love and death set in New England (partly in a boarding school, and partly with an unknown parent), some of Irving's more quirky and specific details (for instance: Vienna, bears, wrestling) are not included. Instead the focus is on faith, religion, and destiny, which I find very different from most of Irving's other novels.[110] *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is about a world in which a new and quite different kind of savior-figure is born. In terms of intertextuality, one can easily see how this story gains additional meaning from its references to the Bible. From the very beginning, we learn that Owen Meany sees himself as an instrument of God, due to the fact that he kills John's mother by accident. (Note that Owen Meany does not see it as an accident, he only becomes convinced of his role as God's tool.) During a performance of *A Christmas Carol,* Owen Meany has a vision of the time of his own death, and later we learn that he is told by his parents that he is the result of a virgin birth (545). Furthermore, Owen Meany lands the role of Baby Jesus in the Episcopalian Christmas pageant.

> "I KNOW SOMEONE WHO CAN FIT IN THE CRIB," Owen said. "SOMEONE SMALL ENOUGH TO *LOOK* LIKE A BABY, he said. "SOMEONE OLD ENOUGH NOT TO CRY." Mary Beth Baird could not contain herself! "*Owen* can be the Baby Jesus!" she yelled. Owen Meany smiled and shrugged. " I *CAN* FIT IN THE CRIB," he said modestly (168).

Throughout the novel, everything Owen says or writes is written in capital letters, which can be seen as a parallel to Jesus' words, which are printed in red in certain editions of the Bible.[111] The dialogue between *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and the Bible is obvious, and it further indicates the importance of intertextuality. It is also a clear challenge to the traditional tenets of Christianity. With Owen Meany, Irving has created a new savior, and this will necessarily shake the foundations of Christianity, because the New Testament clearly states that Jesus is God's only son, and humanity's only savior.

The relationship between postmodernism and religion is one of oppositions. Pamela Sue Anderson suggests that "[w]hereas postmodernism undermines biological, cognitive and

[110] Some examples: *The World According to Garp; The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981); *A Widow for One Year* (1998); *The Fourth Hand* (2001)*; Until I Find You* (2005).
[111] John Irving, "My Favorite First Sentence," in John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York: William Morrow, 1989*)*, 6. Article from 2002.

moral certainties, religions rest on them."[112] In Christianity, God presents the one and only Truth, which is, as we have seen, very different from postmodern philosophy. It is interesting how Irving has chosen a theme that is connected to faith and religion in what can arguably be seen as a postmodern novel. However, the presentation of Christianity is in no way traditional; a fundamentalist would probably find the story blasphemous, as it tells a fictional and quite humorous story of a new Jesus-figure. In this way, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* may be regarded as postmodern, both in its use of intertextuality[113] and because religion as a theme is inverted.

In addition to engaging in a dialogue with the Bible, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* refers to *A Christmas Carol*, a story written by one of Irving's idols, Charles Dickens. Johnny's stepfather Dan Needham engages the small town of Gravesend in an amateur production of *A Christmas Carol*, with Owen Meany as "The Ghost of Christmases Yet to Come". It is in the middle of this play that Owen has a vision of his own tombstone. Furthermore, Owen's physically small stature resembles the character of Tiny Tim, but their destinies are very different. This is perhaps underlined by the fact that Owen does not play Tiny Tim in Dan's production. Owen and John comment on other literary works as well, especially *The Great Gatsby* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The references to Fitzgerald's novel are perhaps not so easy to interpret, but one suggestion is that the relationship between John and Owen resembles the one between Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby: an observer who tells the story of his idol. Thomas Hardy's novel is a story of destiny and determinism, which could reinforce the idea of Owen's death as predetermined.[114] Any minor details can work as a reference to another work of literature, yet, these references are not necessarily postmodern. Irving might refer to these other works of literature, but the connection between *The Great Gatsby* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* cannot be interpreted as unambiguously postmodern: I do not find it apparent that *A Prayer for Owen Meany* seeks to imitate or reinterpret these two novels, and

[112] Pamela Sue Anderson, "Postmodernism and Religion," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Sim, 45.
[113] However, it is important to note that intertextuality is not an unambiguous postmodern literary tool or phenomenon. Whether Irving's use of intertextuality is an "increased importance of intertextuality" in postmodern nature, or just plain intertextuality, is difficult to conclude on.
[114] On *The Great Gatsby* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, see Philip Page, "Hero Worship and Hermeneutical Dialectics: John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany,"* in *Mosaic : a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 28, nr. 3, (September 1995), 137. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:mla:R02964957:0 (accessed 17.10.2012).
For more about the connections between *A Christmas Carol* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, see Campbell, *John Irving*, 137-141.

even though the novels are mentioned by the characters, one might question if they are "warmly embraced as a vital formal and intellectual source."[115]

The somewhat more covert references to Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* are numerous.[116] *The Tin Drum* is the story of Oskar Matzerath, who is a physically small man with a high-pitched voice. He works with tombstones, and he possesses certain "supernatural" powers. He is presented as a wise child, and he is able to save people from execution by an act which he has trained for all his life. All of these descriptions could very well be about Owen Meany, and in addition, their initials match. However, some might claim that Oskar Matzerath is split into the characters of both Owen and John, for instance because Oskar's finger belongs to John in *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* As Owen writes in his diary: "THE HARDEST THING I EVER HAD TO DO WAS TO CUT OFF MY BEST FRIEND'S FINGER!" (567). Also, Oskar and John spend much or all of their lives not knowing who their fathers are. I find that this reference differs from the ones mentioned above. The story of Oskar floats somewhere in the background of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, more as a source of inspiration than a direct reference. This particular use of literature from the past can be interpreted as a display of how Irving acknowledges that one can never narrate a completely original story. Irving makes it very clear that he has been inspired by Grass, and one might say that Irving has reinterpreted *The Tin Drum*, and heartily embraced it as an inspirational source. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* may clearly be seen as an homage to Gunter Grass.[117]

As the reader discovers that John's mother used to travel to the big city to sing in a club, wearing the red dress that she supposedly purchased by mistake, one might connect this lady in red to another lady who was forced to wear this color in the form of a red letter fastened on her dress. Like John's mother, Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* gives birth to a child conceived in an affair with a man of faith.[118] Both Hester's Pearl and Tabitha's Johnny are born out of wedlock. Tabitha's good looks and her "tranquil, modest nature" (15) are reinforced by the memory of the beauty and dignity of Hester Prynne. Furthermore, the descriptions of Dimmesdale, the sinful man of faith in *The Scarlet Letter*, gives the reader some ideas as to what Johnny may expect of his unknown father. As we have now seen, "the

[115] Mary McLeaod quoted in Allen, *Intertextuality*, 180.
[116] Gunter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959). Transl. by Breon Mitchell (2009).
[117] "Homage" will be further discussed in connection with "1.3 Parody vs. Satire."
[118] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance* in *The Scarlet Letter: and Other Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). Ed. by Leland S. Person. 4-166.

word is always already permeated with traces of other words, other uses."[119] A good example that illustrates the importance of how words are connected to certain ideas, is when you want to find a name for your child. When naming your child, you choose a name partly based on what you connect with that name. If you have known a kind and beautiful person with the name in question, you are probably more positive towards choosing it. I believe that this is similar to the effect the word "red" has in the two stories mentioned above. When we learn that Tabitha has worn the color red on her trips out of town, where she also conceived Johnny out of wedlock, this is enough to draw our attention back to Hawthorne's novel, and the positive qualities we associate with Hester Prynne.

These paragraphs on intertextuality have tried to show how a number of textual references can influence a reading of Irving's novels. There are examples of dialogues between texts, polyphony within the text, and also how texts and words have traces of other uses, and the point is made that they may need codes for interpretation because they are never original. Irving has been inspired by several other works of art, and, as discussed, his utilization of these inspirational sources can in several of the examples above be considered postmodern. *The World According to Garp* is especially interesting in connection with Irving's other works, whereas *A Prayer for Owen Meany* can be considered a reinterpretation of both the New Testament and *The Tin Drum.* It is also clear that Irving does not try to hide his sources of information. Either they are mentioned directly, or the similarities in the themes or the details will be so apparent that they cannot be overlooked.

1.2 Metafiction

Metafiction is very often connected with postmodern literature: "What we tend to call postmodernism in literature today is usually characterized by intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality. In fiction this means that it is usually metafiction that is equated with the postmodern."[120] This connection also has to do with how all inspirational sources should be laid bare in postmodern literature. Even though one cannot "Make It New," the goal is obviously not to plagiarize. Instead it should be obvious how any work of art is an eclectic mix of elements from the past.[121] It has proven difficult to separate completely between intertextuality and metafiction, as they have so many aspects in common, and an example of intertextuality can easily have a metafictional effect. Many of the same examples

[119] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 28.
[120] Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction," 3.
[121] Ref. Mary McLeod quoted in Allen, *Intertextuality*, 180.

are appropriate for both topics, but they shall be studied from somewhat different angles. Typical traits of metafiction include intense literary self-consciousness and self-examination, thus showcasing a marked, yet problematic line between life and the literary work. Patricia Waugh writes that metafiction is "[a]ny text that draws the reader's attention to its process of construction by frustrating his or her conventional expectations."[122]

Reading, writing, books, authors, and teaching literature are important topics in *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* For instance, in the infirmary of Steering where Jenny works and lives, she keeps an entire library of books which she has bought and read, and which are now available to anyone who wants to borrow them: "What a wet dream for the lovers of literature, to lie sick at Steering!" (31). Garp's wife-to-be is also an avid reader: "'she reads a lot,' Jenny said approvingly" (69). The reading habits of other characters are also commented upon, such as Helen's father Ernie, who apparently is "a bad reader" (64). Furthermore, when Garp and Helen engage in a "swingers-arrangement," it is with a couple consisting of a teacher and a writer, mirroring the professions of Garp and Helen themselves. In the end, as *The World According to Garp* is the story of a boy who grows up and fulfills his lifelong dream of becoming a writer, literature in general will of course play an essential role in his story. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen teaches Johnny, a dyslectic, how to read and write properly, and this eventually becomes Johnny's livelihood, as a teacher of English literature. Johnny's stepfather is a teacher too. He teaches drama, which is also closely connected with literature. These frequent reminders of the subject of literature can be called metafiction at the most basic level: "The lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction."[123] To write stories about authors and literature is arguably to make a statement regarding "the creation of fiction." However, Waugh also claims that metafictional novels are dependent on a creation of fiction *and* "the laying bare of that illusion,"[124] and that for a novel to be called metafictional, this must be its dominant function.[125] Even though *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* emphasize the subjects of literature and writing, one might question if this can be called a dominant function which exposes the illusion.

[122] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 22.
[123] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 6.
[124] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 6.
[125] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 15.

At a somewhat deeper level of metafiction is the use of the technique of a story within the story. John Irving frequently employs this technique in *The World According to Garp*. Both Garp and his mother Jenny are authors, and their writings and stories are included either partly or completely within *The World According to Garp* (see for instance "The Pension Grillparzer" on page 113.) These brief stories and quotes are the most obvious examples of metafiction, as they are a creation of literature within literature. Compared to the examples in the previous paragraph, this is certainly a more powerful exposition of the fictional illusion. The reader reads a story about a character who creates a fictional story, and this will point directly to how the story came to be, and expose the initial story as fictive. When we read Garp's narratives, he takes the place of Irving as the author, and consequently Garp leaves the fictional world for a short time. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, there is a kind of story within the story too. As John tells us the story of his life, the story of Owen's life is embedded in everything he tells us. John gives us many details about his life and family, but in the end, the story of Owen's life is the one that matters.

The narrator of *The World According to Garp* includes many comments on the quality and/or popularity of the Garp's and Jenny's stories, such as in this letter from Helen to Garp:

> Dear Garp,
> This story shows promise, although I do think, at this point, you are more of a wrestler than a writer. There is care taken with the language, and a feeling for people, but the situation seems rather contrived and the ending of the story is pretty juvenile. I do appreciate you showing it to me, though.
> Yours, Helen (75).

To include literary criticism within the story itself is no doubt a way of commenting on the creation of fiction. There are also several comments on Jenny's novel, *A Sexual Suspect.* Both Garp and Helen agree that this autobiography is no "literary jewel" (138), even though it manages to capture a nation of women in search of a voice, and Jenny is idolized (e.g., 152-153). In addition, it is worth mentioning the fact that the characters in *The World According to Garp* comment on the newfangled technique of literature about literature:

> Garp was puzzled and he showed the rejection to Tinch. Tinch was also puzzled. "I guess they're interested in n-n-*newer* fiction," Tinch said. "What's that?" Garp asked. Tinch admitted he didn't really know. "The new fiction is interested in language and in f-f-form, I guess," Tinch said. "But I don't understand what it's really about. Sometimes it's about it-it-itself, I think, " Tinch said. "About itself?" Garp said. "It's sort of fiction about fi-fi-fiction," Tinch told him (149).

The humor and the postmodern playfulness of this passage may even be called meta-metafictional. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, there are certain details, for instance Owen's favorite sentence from C. S. Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms*, that seem to function as comments on how Irving might feel about writing this particular story of faith and destiny: "I write for the unlearned about things in which I am unlearned myself" (567). It could of course also be Owen's feelings towards his role as God's instrument, and the difficulties he has with explaining this to his fellow human beings. Anyhow, it can be read as another comment on the process of writing.

In the end, Jenny's status is also why a scorned husband kills her (438). The impact of her writing is clear; she is able to change the world with her writing. Irving seems to be stressing the idea that writing is important, and that it can make a difference. Furthermore, Helen claims that she will only marry a writer (72). Garp wants to marry Helen, and works hard to become a good writer, in order to win her over. In this intricate manner, Garp's decision to write, and his talent for writing, shape the story about Garp and Helen's relationship and family.

However, Raymond J. Wilson III argues that none of these examples are necessarily defined as metafiction; it could simply be Irving's "wry humor of self parody."[126] It is one of John Wolf's comments on the death of Garp ("It was a death scene, John Wolf told Jillsy Sloper, that only Garp could have written" (476), that convinces Wilson that *The World According to Garp* may be considered a metafictional novel: "When a character in a novel says that a death scene in that novel occurred in a way which 'only' the dying character could have written, we are involved with metafiction." Furthermore, Wilson claims that the other obviously metafictional example in this novel is when the narrator states that "[Garp] would have liked the idea of an epilogue, too – so here it is: an epilogue 'warning us about the future,' as T.S. Garp might have imagined it" (476). The fact that the author is writing an epilogue as "the character would himself have imagined it," is arguably so explicit that it must be metafiction, according to Wilson.

The repeated topic of speech impediments is another aspect of *The World According to Garp* which may be interpreted as metafiction. "'Why is my life so full of people with impaired speech?' he wrote once. 'Or is it only because I'm a writer that I notice all the damaged voices around me?'" (417). As mentioned above, Ellen James and the Ellen

[126] Wilson, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*," 59. Unless otherwise stated, this paragraph is indebted to pages 59-60 of this article.

Jamesians play important parts in the story. But there are several other examples of impaired voices; Garp's teacher Tinch stutters, as we saw in one example above, and Alice Fletcher, the other woman in the previously mentioned swingers-arrangement, lisps (176-178). After meeting her, Garp writes a story about two couples where one of the characters has a terrible stutter (185). In the fatal car accident where Walt is killed, Garp's jaw is broken, and afterwards he suffers from a speech defect as well, and is forced to write down what he wants to communicate, which in a funny twist is exactly what the Ellen Jamesians do (308). Garp, however, continues to be disgusted with them as they have voluntarily deprived themselves of words.[127] This focus on words is, if not metafictional, at least metalingual. Issues of voice and voicelessness are commented upon frequently, and obviously, literature is words.

A Prayer for Owen Meany is perhaps less explicitly metafictional than *The World According to Garp,* though there are a number of examples in this novel as well. To begin with, there are several examples of other genres being written into the story. For instance, there are extracts from Owen's journal and letters included in the novel, in addition to short abstracts from *The Grave,* the school newspaper of Gravesend Academy (299). The impact of these incorporations of different genres is explained by Patricia Waugh:

> There is no one privileged language of fiction. There are the languages of memoirs, journals, diaries, histories, conversational registers, legal records, journalism, documentary. These languages compete for privilege. They question and relativize each other to such an extent that the language of fiction is always, if often covertly, self-conscious.[128]

This is also related to Bakhtin's theories about the novelistic genre, and his term heteroglossia. By including different genres such as journal and newspaper extracts, the many voices of the novel clearly stand out. Bakhtin writes that "[t]he language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other," and "[d]ifferent linguistic and stylistic forms may be said to belong to different systems of languages in the novel."[129] This is a postmodern feature in that it goes against the authority that a singular voice would present, and it is in some ways exemplified in *A Prayer for Owen Meany.*

The notion of polyphony which was discussed in connection with intertextuality may also shed light on the topic of metafiction. Arguably, *The World According to Garp* can be said to function as a double-voiced, or even triple-voiced discourse, as it serves historical author, implied author/biographer, as well as Garp and the other characters who at times can

[127] Campbell, *John Irving,* 84-85.
[128] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 5.
[129] Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," 239.

function as narrators.[130] The levels of narration are clearly somewhat complicated: For instance, Jenny, Garp, and Helen are in some ways narrators who participate in the plot, and their personal thoughts are communicated throughout the novel. One example concerning Garp's thoughts reads: "Smart kid, Garp thought. He was trapped. Short of blurting out that he was terrified Mrs. Ralph would kill them all by burning them up in the night when her cigarette, with which she slept, set fire to her hair, Garp had nothing more he *could* say" (199). Yet, at times, it is the implied author/biographer who is the real narrator of the story. One might conclude that the narrative perspective is somewhat divided and difficult to pin down. The effect of this polyphonic novel is arguably metafictional, due to its focus on how the text was constructed: Is it a true story?; Who is the biographer? The questions regarding who relates the story and how all the characters' personal thoughts are rendered, lead the reader to question how the story came to be.

Furthermore, as one will immediately notice in the quotes of Owen's speech or writing, it is written in capital letters. This is an effective instrument in drawing attention to the text as constructed artifact. The reader is accustomed to literature being presented in certain standardized ways (in terms of letters, punctuation, etc.), and when this standard is broken with something so conspicuous as capital letters, one cannot help but consider how these words are written. The capital letters are perhaps supposed to symbolize Owen's shrieking voice, but could also be a sign of how he feels that people should listen to him; he *matters* even though he is physically small. In the end, Johnny believes that this special voice is why the Vietnamese children listened to Owen when he yelled to them:

> "*DOONG SA*," Owen Meany told them. "DON'T BE AFRAID," Owen told the children. "*DOONG SA, DOONG SA*," he said. It was not only because he spoke their language; it was his *voice* that compelled the children to listen to him–it was a voice like *their* voices. That was why they trusted him, why they listened. "*DOONG SA*," he said, and they stopped crying (622).

The way John Wheelwright presents his story is not chronological.[131] The story of Owen Meany is a story from his past, but John skips back and forth in it, making the reader aware of how the story is one man's view and perspective on what happened. It is not happening right before our eyes, so to speak. In a way, this adds to our knowledge of how the

[130]"Historical author: the man or woman who writes a narrative text."
"Implied author: a set of implicit norms, an image of the author in the text."
"Narrator: the agent which engages in activity serving the needs of narration [...] The narrator is an instrument the historical author uses to present and develop the text."
From Jakob Lothe, "ENG2321/ENG4361 Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Narrative", Lecture handout.
[131] More on temporal disorder, see Barry Lewis, "Postmodernism and Fiction," in *Postmodernism,* ed. Sim, 113.

story is different and removed from our own reality, because it is so obvious that it could not really have happened in the way it is related to us. It also serves as a questioning of the narrator Johnny, because the reader knows that the story is colored by his opinions and views. At several points in the novel, it is obvious to the reader that Johnny is not completely reliable, and that he lacks a great deal when it comes to introspection. In addition to being stuck in the past, he is very preoccupied with American politics, and keeps trying to quit his addiction to American newspapers. He is also completely convinced of Owen's supernatural abilities, which can make him seem somewhat deluded. One can question whether or not the unbelievable story itself makes Johnny an unreliable narrator. As Irving says in an interview that is included in certain editions of the novel: "[John] is more than a little crazy – as I expect most witnesses to so-called miracles are."[132] A questionable narrator is one way of commenting on the unreliability of received versions of history.

Another means of metafiction is when John addresses the reader by asking "remember that?" and "as you shall see," which in a way draws the reader into the story, as if reader and character were part of the same world.[133] When the narrator's voice is addressing the reader, this results in a questioning of the relationship between reality and fiction, and there is "a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse."[134] Furthermore, Waugh has stated that "[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion."[135] Some of the examples mentioned above do lay bare the illusion of literature, but I do not think that they shatter this illusion. In the words of Waugh: "Of course, we know that what we are reading is not real, but we suppress the knowledge in order to increase our enjoyment."[136] Instead, all of these examples make the reader feel as if s/he is a part of the story, as if the border between the real and the fictional world has become blurred. For instance, by addressing the reader, the narrator is inviting the reader to take part in his/her world. I believe in the world of Garp, and most of the time I believe in the world of John and Owen, even if Owen Meany's knowledge of his own destiny is more magical than anything I can relate too.

Patricia Waugh claims that "[c]ontemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional:

[132] Irving, "My Favorite First Sentence," 6.
[133] Page, "Hero Worship and Hermeneutical Dialectics," 138.
[134] Lewis, "Postmodernism and Fiction," 113.
[135] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 6.
[136] Waugh, *Metafiction*, 33.

no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures."[137] There are obviously many social codes and aspects of society that are constructed, such as how boys should not wear pink, when in fact pink was the color of masculinity until the First World War. Moral codes have also changed throughout the world's history, and are obviously still not the same in all parts of the world today. Several religions are based on stories that were handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years, not divinely given as most people used to believe. There is no doubt that there are many aspects of society that have been constructed. But Waugh's statement that "[i]n showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written,'"[138] is more difficult to swallow. To a certain degree, perhaps, our lives are constructed, in the way we present our experiences to others, giving them a subjective perspective on something that has many different sides to it. Of course, "a 'story' cannot exist without a teller."[139] Perhaps one might say that because each and every one of us has to live his life on his/her own, the way we experience life is colored or constructed by our subjectivity.[140] Arguably, this is what Johnny's subjective presentation indicates. This is supposedly related to the postmodern text's concern with how it is itself linguistically constructed. [141]

> Postmodernism gives up on language's representational function and follows poststructuralism in the idea that language constitutes, rather than reflects, the world, and that knowledge is therefore always distorted by language, that is, by the historical circumstances and the specific environment in which it arises.[142]

As these different examples have shown, I have found that Irving's novels are concerned with their own construction, and I believe that they can be called metafictional. Irving's Dickensian social commentary can also be seen as comments on how different aspects of society are constructed, for instance his concerns with discrimination in relation to gender and sexuality, which will be further discussed in Chapter Two. However, I do not think that these novels are metafictional to the degree that they make the reader question whether or not her/his own perception of the world is constructed as well. Irving's writing is in many ways more traditional than experimental, and it does not erase the lines between our world and the world of literature. On the other hand, Waugh claims that metafictional novels

[137] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 7.
[138] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 18.
[139] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 27.
[140] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 26.
[141] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 26.
[142] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern,* 6.

can " still maintain[...] a strong story line" because "this alerts the reader to the condition of the text just as much as any more obviously postmodern writer."[143] I would suggest that John Irving's main concern is with keeping a strong story line, and by combining this believable fictional world with examples in which the distinction between reality and fiction is lost, one might argue that the metafictional aspect becomes even more striking.

1.2.1 Historiographical Metafiction

As touched upon above, a postmodernist use of an unreliable and highly subjective narrator may also destabilize our conceptions of history. Linda Hutcheon has suggested that in addition to textual self-reflexivity and metafictional use of intertextuality, postmodernity in literature also entails what she calls "an equally self-conscious dimension of history."[144] The nature of postmodernism is to question all kinds of grand truths, including the authority of history, or, more specifically, historians: "the past once existed, but [...] our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted."[145] As I have already pointed out, both history and fiction rely on subjective interpretations to a certain degree.[146] The similarities between the two genres, and their inherent subjectivity, are also emphasized by the words themselves: history / his story.[147] Yet, as Hutcheon claims, "history's referents are presumed to be real; fiction's are not."[148] The consequence of this problematizing of historical "facts," is the realization that fiction and history can neither be kept completely separated nor joined together.[149] Hutcheon's term historiographical metafiction is used to describe fiction that acknowledges and plays with the fact that "representations of the past are selected to signify whatever the historian intends."[150] Representations can never be called facts.

> In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such subterfuge, and poses that ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past?[151]

[143] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 54.
[144] Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction," 3.
[145] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 122.
[146] Note that this is also connected to the discussion above, regarding the construction of fiction and reality.
[147] This also rings the bell of feminism, of course.
[148] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 119.
[149] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 111.
[150] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 122.
[151] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 114-115.

Most of us agree that "history's problem is verification, while fiction's is veracity,"[152] but the technique of historiographic metafiction challenges some of our set ideas about the "facts" of history, by self-consciously mixing historical elements with fiction. It is important to note that there are important differences between historical novels and historiographical metafiction. The blurring of the line between fiction and history is at least as old as the Bible, but the difference between the two lies in the intense self-consciousness of historiographical metafiction.[153] Historiographical metafiction is *not* a means of merging the world of Garp/Johnny with the world of reader/author, by simply including historical events from the world of the reader/author in the lives of the characters in the book.[154] It is about showing how historical events can so easily be misrepresented, because any rendition of the past will necessarily be subjective.

In *The World According to Garp,* the incorporation of historical events is not at all a striking feature, though there are a couple of references to the Second World War, especially in connection with Garp's father. Also, when Jenny and Garp travel to Vienna, there are comments made on how the city has been afflicted by the war. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* on the other hand, fiction and history go hand in hand. The story of Johnny and Owen is very much influenced by actual historical and political events, especially by the Vietnam War. The question thus becomes: Is *A Prayer for Owen Meany* a historical novel, or historiographical metafiction?

At the beginning of the story about Johnny Wheelwright and Owen Meany, Johnny presents his family history: "I am descended from John Adams on my grandmother's side (her maiden name was Bates, and her family came to America on the Mayflower)" (8). John Adams and the Mayflower are names that the reader can recognize as historical details from his/her own world. Johnny also introduces the story of the fictitious town of Gravesend, New Hampshire, and tells us how Johnny himself is named after its founder John Wheelwright. The original John Wheelwright (c. 1592-1679), was the founder of Exeter, New Hampshire, which happens to be John Irving's hometown. The author is making the fictional protagonist of the story into a descendant of two real people from the reader's world, and consequently John Irving in many ways erases the distinction between the two worlds, as well as misrepresenting historical facts.

[152] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 112.
[153] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 113.
[154] Waugh, *Metafiction,* 38.

President Kennedy is an important figure in Owen Meany's life: "There he sat with a campaign button as big as a baseball on the lapel of his sport jacket: 'ALL THE WAY WITH J F K'" (338-339). When one of his classmates tells him that the president is "diddling" Marilyn Monroe, Owen Meany is deeply offended (374-376). Whereas Johnny is not bothered by the president's sexual morality, Owen is furious: "IF KENNEDY CAN RATIONALIZE ADULTERY, WHAT ELSE CAN HE RATIONALIZE?" (376). Later on they learn that Marilyn Monroe has died of an overdose, and this also hits Owen hard:

> "IT HAS TO DO WITH ALL OF US," said Owen Meany, when I called him that night. "SHE WAS JUST LIKE OUR WHOLE COUNTRY– NOT QUITE YOUNG ANYMORE, BUT NOT OLD EITHER; A LITTLE BREATHLESS, VERY BEAUTIFUL, MAYBE A LITTLE STUPID, MAYBE A LOT SMARTER THAN SHE SEEMED. [...] AND THOSE MEN, [...] THEY WERE JUST USING HER [...] THAT'S WHAT POWERFUL MEN DO TO THIS COUNTRY. [...] THEY SAY THINGS TO MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR GOOD–THEY MAKE THEMSELVES APPEAR *MORAL*. THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT KENNEDY WAS: A MORALIST. [...] BUT HE WAS JUST BEING A GOOD SEDUCER. I THOUGHT HE WAS A SAVIOR" (436-437).

It is clear that the implied author (or Irving himself, if one wants to go down that road) is commenting on the political state of the U.S. through these characters. There are numerous examples of both Owen's and Johnny's opinions on the state of the nation. For instance, as a grown-up Johnny lives in Toronto, but is addicted to American newspapers, and he constantly criticizes the different American wars and Ronald Reagan in particular:

> What do Americans know about morality? They don't want their presidents to have penises but they don't mind if their presidents covertly arrange to support the Nicaraguan rebel forces after Congress has restricted such aid; they don't want their presidents to deceive their wives but they don't mind if the presidents deceive Congress – lie to the people and violate the *people's* constitution! (304-305).

However, all these renditions of America's political history are not necessarily self-consciously pointing to how history can be falsified, though all the references are presented in singularly subjective fashion. This is somewhat similar to the non-fiction novel of the 1960's, which was a "documentary narrative which deliberately used techniques of fiction in an overt manner and which usually made no pretence to objectivity of representation."[155] These documentary narratives are considered to be a consequence of how the Vietnam War created a

[155] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 115.

general state of "distrust of official 'facts'"[156] in the USA. This is played upon in *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* as the Vietnam War is a great source of dismay in the characters' lives. Johnny moves to Canada because of this war, and he refuses to move back to the States. Furthermore, Johnny Wheelwright is in my opinion an unreliable narrator because he is unable to see other sides of any case. An example of this is when an American family asks for directions to Bishop Strachan. Johnny has commented on how Americans are usually unwilling to give directions, but fails to see how he himself is an arch-American when he refuses to give the family directions because of their mispronunciation of the destination (369). Johnny's blinkers make him unable to live his life fully, because all he can see is the incompetence of the Americans, and its connection with the death of Owen Meany.

I find that all these subjective, and sometimes unreliable, references to political history constitute examples displaying a postmodernist view on the multiplicity of truths, and that truths are "relative to the specificity of place and culture."[157] However, I am not sure that Irving is consistently self-conscious about his use of history. Instead, the references to politics seem to be more a critique of American society as the implied author/Irving sees it:

> I believe that President Reagan can say these things only because he knows that the American people will never hold him accountable for what he says; it is history that holds you accountable, and I've already expressed my opinion that Americans are not big on history. How many of them remember their own, recent history? (92).

Irving's underlining of the unreliability of history/historians is here put on display, and this together with the innumerable presentations of political "facts" throughout the story, might dispose one to call this novel historiographical metafiction. Since I find myself believing that much of Owen's and John's critique of the United States, in terms of war and presidents, are opinions supported by John Irving himself, Irving's narratives manage to convey the important question of "whose truth gets told,"[158] in true postmodernist style.

1.2.2 Autobiography

One would have no difficulties locating elements in Irving's novels that have parallels in the author's life. On the other hand, it is easy to agree that "while pursuit of biographical details in Irving's work may be fascinating, it does little to illuminate the text; other aspects of his

[156] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 115.
[157] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 108.
[158] Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* 123.

novels ultimately prove more worthy of discovery."[159] It is interesting, however, to observe how the biographical aspects of these novels may function as metafiction.

Unless one has been completely convinced by the ideas of formalism,[160] one may be quite likely to consider, however lightly, whether certain details of a fictional narrative have been taken from, or inspired by, the author's life. This is especially the case for readers who already have some knowledge of the author's life. Both critics and lay readers have enjoyed this kind of speculation in connection with John Irving's stories, because there are certain concrete parallels with his life that are very easy to spot. Irving's novels are usually set in New England; the protagonist usually has an unknown parent and is at some point enrolled in a boarding school; wrestling is a sport that recurs rather often; journeys to Vienna are frequent; and these particulars (which can also be found in Irving's life) are combined with a striking concentration on sex and violence. I have no trouble understanding why people are more than usually interested in investigating the autobiographical features of Irving's writing. Irving deals with these speculations with much humor and what we might call meta-autobiography, which we can see from this quote from *The World According to Garp*:

> One course taught Jenny's autobiography together with Garp's three novels and Stewart Percy's *A History of Everett Steering's Academy.* The purpose of that course, apparently, was to figure out everything about Garp's *life* by hunting through the books for those things that appeared to be *true* (404).

In many ways, the incorporation of autobiographical details can be compared to historiographical metafiction, because the author's life is a part of history as well. Whereas *A Prayer for Owen Meany* was most obviously related to great historical events, *The World According to Garp* is most interesting when it comes to features of individual history: Garp is an author with an unknown father who fought in World War Two; he has gone to boarding school; he enjoys wrestling; he travels to Vienna as a young writer; and finally, Garp worries a great deal about his children, which are all events and qualities that Irving admits to share with his character. It is quite easy to see the metafictional aspect when it comes to these autobiographical details, because Irving uses Garp's development as an author to show how it is a "struggle to find a subject and a style without succumbing to autobiography or losing

[159] Campbell, *John Irving*, 71.
[160] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon*, s.v. "formalisme": "collective term for directions in literary theory that emphasizes the formal aspects of literature. It is typical of formalism to study the literary text as a structure and as a sum of the elements of form, regardless of the author's biography and the text's socio-cultural context and historical location" (my translation).

vividness by relying too heavily on imagined life."[161] Several of Garp's narratives are criticized for being too personal. For instance, after engaging in a swingers-arrangement with another couple, Garp writes a story about two "swinging" couples, and embodies them with different handicaps, with a clear parallel to Alice Fletcher's lisp.

In illuminating this permeating theme of subjectivity, it is useful to revisit Bakthin's notion of the addressivity of all statements, which is supported by this quote from Hans Bertens:

> If representations do not and cannot represent the world, then inevitably all representations are political, in that they cannot help reflecting the ideological frameworks within which they arise. The end of representation thus leads us back to the question of authorship, to such political questions as "Whose history gets told? In whose name? For what purpose?" In the absence of transcendent truth, it matters more than ever, who is speaking, and why, and to whom.[162]

With these kinds of questions, it seems that Irving's obvious personal imprints are actually of a very postmodern nature. He is making it clear who stands behind the writing, and with the recurring details and in-jokes mentioned earlier, he writes for his faithful audience. Irving does not let any pretentions of objectivity confuse the issues. There are constant reminders within the fictional story that this is John Irving's work. Personal stories, like all stories, are also claimed to be always already written, according to Kristeva's broad sense of intertextuality, but I would claim that the personal parallels do not function this way. Instead, by including certain parallels to his own life, Irving manages to claim a stronger ownership of his writing, and, more importantly, he does not attempt to hide whose truth is getting told. In connection with Bertens' quote above, then, Irving's handling of the question of authorship can be interpreted as another way of being postmodern.

Furthermore, Irving is debating the use of these parallels through some of his treatment of Garp and Helen. For instance, Helen criticizes Garp when he becomes too personal in his writing: "You have your own terms for what's fiction, and what's fact, [...] 'It's all your *experience*– somehow, however much you make up, even if it's only an imagined experience" (186-187). This clearly shows the connection to metafiction, as it is an obvious and self-conscious comment on the creative process, as well as on the idea that there can only be personal truths.

---

[161] Kim McKay, "Double Discourse in John Irving's *The World According to Garp,"* in *The Critical Response to John Irving*, eds. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), 86.
[162] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 7; Marshall quoted in Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 7

1.3 Parody vs. Satire: Imitation/Admiration/Mockery

Like intertextuality in general, parody is much used in postmodern literature as it seeks to "establish a dialogue with the past,"[163] using a former work of art as a platform for creating something new. The history of literature is brought into new creations, and as an example of intertextuality, the parody has an inherent ability to show the continuity in change.[164] As mentioned in the introduction, a parody works as a link between at least two works of art,[165] and according to Linda Hutcheon, the author of *A Theory of Parody*, a parody is a form of repetition with critical and ironic difference.[166] There are several examples of intertextuality in *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, which may very well be interpreted as parodic. For instance, whether or not *A Prayer for Owen Meany*'s dialogue with the Bible, *The Tin Drum* and *A Christmas Carol* is ironic and parodic, is open for discussion.

As mentioned earlier, there is much disagreement concerning the topic of parody. A literary lexicon provides this definition:

> Parody, which often operates ironically, exploits the characteristic style and the topic choice of the literature it is supposed to imitate, by twisting and exaggerating linguistic style and thematic contents of the art it imitates. Therefore there will always be some form of caricature in parody. Parody is characterized by a double-coded form of discourse, where another esthetic object is taken into the parody with a comic and ironic distance.[167]

Though Hutcheon probably agrees with the final sentence of this definition, she does not include any kind of technical definition in her book because of her claim that the techniques of parody are not constant.[168] A parody today is not the same as it was in the eighteenth century. However, though these technical points are not required of Hutcheon's parody, they are often present there anyway, and so this additional definition might prove helpful after all.

1.3.1 The World According to Garp

A certain level of similarity as well as an ironic inversion is, as we have seen, required in order for an intertextual link to be classified as parodic. In my opinion, this novel as a whole does not read as a parody. The storyline does not resemble any other work of art that comes to mind. However, there are episodes in the story that might be deemed parodic. The similarity

[163] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 111.
[164] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 4.
[165] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 25.
[166] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 6.
[167] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "parodi" (my translation/paraphrasing).
[168] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 24.

between the story of Philomela and the destiny of the Ellen Jamesians, together with the inversion of the former may very well display the story of the Ellen Jamesians as an episode of parody. As discussed in connection with "Intertextuality," Irving has made a new story about women without tongues, but he has changed their destiny as well as the moral of the story. In Garp's story within the story, the victimized woman kills the man that rapes her, unlike Philomela's sister who kills his innocent son.

As discussed above, *The World According to Garp* may be read as a modern version of a Bildungsroman. This could possibly qualify as a parody of the nineteenth century genre. However, according to a literary lexicon, to use a former work of art in the creation of a new work of art, could be more in the line of a pastiche, and the difference between these two genres must be made clear: "A literary pastiche copies a former direction of style: a literary period or the style and motif of a genre."[169] Importantly, though, in Linda Hutcheon's opinion, pastiche is imitative, whereas parody is transformational,[170] and therefore it is only parody that is typically postmodern. Fredric Jameson disagrees with Hutcheon's view on the parody and the pastiche. He claims that the pastiche is a postmodern genre – a blank parody which have lost its sense of humor.[171] It is difficult to see how *The World According to Garp* can be said to have lost its sense of humor due to its similarity to the classic Bildungsroman. In his use of this old literary style, Irving does transform it, as discussed in connection with intertextuality. He does not copy the traditional Bildungsroman. Thus, the novel is neither a pastiche in the lexicon's description, nor in Jameson's negatively charged definition. Instead, it might very well be read as a parody of the Bildungsroman.

In *The World According to Garp,* Irving defends the sexual outsider, but certain types of feminism is arguably criticized and even ridiculed. Linda Hutcheon emphasizes the difference between parody and satire, when she claims that satire is defined by ridicule and social criticism, whereas parody may include these features, but they are not required.[172] In *The World According to Garp*, gender roles, sexual outsiders, and feminism are some of the most prominent topics. For instance, the writer Garp is a stay-at-home dad who enjoys cooking for his family, whereas Jenny's autobiography leads to a feminist movement that takes up a lot of space in Garp's life. Garp is especially concerned by the Ellen Jamesians. As already mentioned, they have cut out their own tongue in support of a girl who was molested.

[169] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "pastisj" (my translation).
[170] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 38.
[171] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 545.
[172] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 16.

The portrayal of this group of women suggests that they are clearly being ridiculed. It becomes quite obvious that depriving oneself of words will not help anyone. The fact that Ellen James also feels this way supports Garp's judgment of the Ellen Jamesians. Furthermore, instead of calling herself a feminist, Jenny repeatedly states that she only wants to do the right thing. It seems that the moral message is that one should not get carried away by -isms, which is very much postmodern in nature: The grand truth of feminism is dead, and *The World According to Garp* satirizes this. However, it should not be forgotten that satire in itself is not considered postmodern. Its goal is to change society by ridiculing certain aspects of it, and arguably this would require some sort of non-relative moral truth. Finally, it must also be noted that I would not characterize the novel as a whole as a satire; it is simply possible to read some of the plot lines as satirical.[173]

As discussed in the introduction, "[Bakhtin] traced the polyphonic character of the novel back to its historical roots in popular carnival practices and the various verbal genres associated with carnival."[174] The way the novel is able to incorporate other genres, such as letters and stories within the story, is another heritage from the double-voiced carnival.[175] Furthermore, including "representations of circuses, fairs, sideshows" is another link from postmodernism to the carnivalesque, as they are versions of actual carnivals.[176] Irving has written several books about both circuses and sideshows, for instance *Hotel New Hampshire* and *Son of the Circus.* The story of "Pension Grillparzer" in *The World According to Garp* is another example. One might also consider how the somewhat absurd humor, and the multiplied forms of reality in *The World According to Garp* can function as a reduced form of carnival. Everything in the world of Garp could absolutely happen in real life, but the impression the novel leaves is not quite realistic. For instance, two of the main characters are assassinated, and the way Walt dies, with the preposterous mutilation of Helen's student lover and Duncan's loss of an eye, is definitely something else. This carnivalesque representation of the world works to further break the fictional illusion, as it puts the focus on how the story is a product of the imagination.[177]

[173] I include this analysis so as not to mistake Irving's representation of the Ellen James Society as a parody.
[174] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* 172.
[175] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* 172.
[176] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* 174.
[177] For more on how *The World According to Garp* can be read as "anti-realist absurdism", see Wilson, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp,*" 55-56.

1.3.2 A Prayer for Owen Meany

The intertextual echo of the New Testament is loud in *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* Not only do the protagonists partake in a nativity play where Owen Meany plays the role of Baby Jesus, but Owen is often referred to in terms such as "a little fiery god" and "lord savior." From a young age, Owen knows that he will die to save someone, and that his parents believe that he is the result of a virgin birth. The similarities to the story of Jesus are definitely there. The thematic contents of the Bible are modified, and the linguistic style is arguably played upon, with Owen's speech in capital letters. The novel was published during an era influenced by the destabilizing questioning of religious dogma, so it is easy to just conclude that the story simply satirizes this religion.[178] However, that would be too simple. The fictional John becomes a Christian as a result of Owen Meany's destiny, and the story seems to illustrate what the difference between believing and knowing entails. On the one hand, Owen Meany is strong and resourceful, largely as a result of his firm belief that he is the hand of God. The adult John Wheelwright, on the other hand, seems to be a little strange, and he has definitely grown bitter and discouraged. He does not function as a disciple who is able to convert others. In Irving's own opinion, Johnny Wheelwright has gone slightly mad, much like anyone who witnesses a miracle does: "Both Johnny Wheelwright's anger and his craziness are inseparable from what he saw."[179] Thus, the freedom of choice that God leaves us with is in a way defended in Irving's novel.

Arguably, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*'s use of the New Testament qualifies as a parody in Hutcheon's definition. The most important plotlines resemble each other, even if Irving has clearly inverted the more specific contents. Parodists will often look to the history of literature to find works of art that they admire, and then adapt them to suit the needs of the present.[180] *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is definitely adapted to suit the present. It is a story of a savior who is born in the twentieth century, and his appearance is in many ways quite comic, but not at all ridiculed. Owen is a small boy with translucent skin, and a voice that can break glass, but as a reader one would probably not consider these aspects a criticism of Jesus. There is much humor in the descriptions of Owen Meany as the "the little lord Jesus" (e.g., 169), but in the end he is a very likable and strong character.

[178] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "satire": "critical and ridiculing poetry/fiction of a mocking character, in all genres" (my translation).
[179] Irving, "My Favorite First Sentence," 6.
[180] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* 4.

However, there are also elements of satire in connection with religion in this novel. Though Irving does not ridicule the Bible or Jesus, the modern practices of religion, as well as the deficient morality of ministers, are mocked. At the beginning of the novel, Owen is very upset with the Catholics, and we later learn that this is a consequence of the Catholics not believing his parents' story of Owen being the result of a virgin birth. The reader may or may not believe it either, but the question is: How can anyone believe in the story of Jesus if they dismiss any other story that resembles it? Of course, a belief in certain miracles is required in order for the stories to be equally believable, but Owen's insight in many ways proves miraculous as the story goes on. When you have the chance to be an eye-witness to the life of one of God's helpers on earth, it is strange that the people of faith are so quick to dismiss him. On the other hand, it is exactly what most people would do, as most would think that he or his parents were crazy. I find this to be a satirical comment on how modern Christianity is hypocritical. Towards the very end of the novel, John in a way makes the point of how they all failed to believe:

> When we held Owen Meany above our heads, when we passed him back and forth – so effortlessly – we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were the forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in – and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands (627).

The fact that the ministers in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* are mostly described in unflattering ways, enforces the impression that the modern practice of religion is satirized; John's biological father is the most prominent example, as he has had an extramarital affair, and has neither taken care of the child that this resulted in, nor let his child know who he was. "How it must have disappointed Owen ... to discover that my father was such an insipid soup of a man" (580). Furthermore, Rector Wiggin, an ex-pilot and the boys' other childhood preacher, is described in less than flattering terms:

> [W]hatever the Rev. Dudley Wiggin had seen to make him believe in God, he had seen absolutely – possibly by flying an airplane too close to the sun. The rector was *not* gifted with language, and he was blind to doubt or worry in any form; perhaps the problem with his "eyesight" that had forced his early retirement from the airlines was really a euphemism for the blinding power of his total religious conversion – because Mr. Wiggin was fearless to an extent that would have made him an unsafe pilot, and to an extent that made him a madman as a preacher (114).

It is thus possible to see *A Prayer for Owen Meany* as a parody of the Bible as well as a satire on society's practice of religion.

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is, as we have also seen, often mentioned in *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* In Dan Needham's production of the classic, Owen plays The Ghost of Christmases Yet To Come, and he has a vision of his own tombstone in the middle of the show. The similarity to the episode in the original story is obvious, but the difference between Ebenezer Scrooge and Owen Meany is also significant. Unlike what we know of Scrooge's life and purpose before his vision, Owen is a good boy who believes that he will die a hero and a savior. When it comes to physicality, Tiny Tim and Owen are of the same petite size. Personality-wise they are very different, however. Tiny Tim is weakened by the life of poverty he is forced to lead, but he is eventually rescued by Scrooge's new insights. Owen has reacted to his physical hardships with much strength, and is his own savior. But then again, they are both fond of referring to God: "God bless Us, Every One!" is Tiny Tim's signature phrase.[181] Other than such minor similarities between certain characters, the storylines do not really resemble each other. *A Christmas Carol* is basically a story that conveys a strong sense of morality; one should treat each other with kindness. It is also quite short, and it is chronologically written, which makes it an easier read than *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* Though Irving has been inspired by Dickens's way of writing, I find the two stories to be very different in terms of storylines. Both authors may fill their writing with charming characters and numerous details, but these two stories still lack the level of similarity which is required in order for *A Prayer for Owen Meany* to be called a parody of *A Christmas Carol*.

The similarities between *The Tin Drum* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* have also been pointed out, and it is easy to see that Irving has been inspired by Gunter Grass' novel. However, it is not evident that Irving has used irony to invert the story of Oskar Matzerath. Arguably, one difference between the two novels is that Oskar Matzerath's is able to change his destiny, whereas Owen is trapped in his, and this could be a kind of ironic inversion. This case of possible parody is not clear-cut. It is possible to argue either side, but in the end, I think it is more appropriate to call it an homage, which is a way of honoring another artist by referring to their work, either overtly or covertly.

As mentioned in the introduction, the issue of copyright is problematized by parodies. However, a parodist would not try to conceal his sources, in the manner of a forgery. If the

[181] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* in *The Christmas Books: A Christmas Carol, The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth* (London: Penguin, 1994), 76.

parodic references' traceability were removed, then the parody would no longer be a parody. In order for something to qualify as a parody, it needs to follow or fulfill certain codes, and one of those codes is that it builds on another work of art. These genre codes need to be implemented by the writer as well as interpreted by the reader. When publishing a parody, one is therefore dependent on a culturally sophisticated and knowledgeable audience.[182] They also need to know what a parody actually is.[183] In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, it is clear that Irving is in no way trying to pretend that the story of a virgin birth and a savior is his original work. Christianity and the Bible are major topics in the novel. When it comes to *The Tin Drum*, the references are much less obvious; subtle details like the matching initials of Owen Meany and Oskar Matzerath signal that Irving wants the reader to acknowledge his homage.

Contemporary society abounds with technology and information, and the interpretation of textual codes and references is no longer very difficult. All readers have the ability to share their knowledge online, and information is easy to find for anyone who looks. Unlike a search in a book, which can only have so many writers and thereby limited knowledge of all the possible intertexual links, the Internet is an unlimited pool of knowledge. In some ways, Roland Barthes' idea of the perfect reader who posits all the knowledge necessary to see every aspect of intertextuality can perhaps be the reader of this online world.

> The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost [...] the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.[184]

Easy access to technology and information can also make it easier to reveal plagiarism, as someone will always have read the original.[185]

[182] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 19, 22.
[183] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 27.
[184] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 316.
[185] Ref. Allen, *Intertextuality*, 193-202.

2 Gender Roles, Sexuality, Feminism

While Chapter One discussed how John Irving might be said to employ some of postmodernism's most featured and most characteristic literary techniques, Chapter Two will turn to some of the most prominent themes in *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. I will discuss Irving's representations of gender roles, sexuality, and feminism, and how these subjects may work as comments on, or critique of, society. I will also discuss whether these approaches might be considered postmodern.

A postmodern view on these subjects will necessarily have to be anti-essentialist. As seen in the introduction, Truth is dead and the conditions for knowledge have changed: "Truth, therefore, is something which societies have to work to produce, rather than something which appears in a transcendental way."[186] Michel Foucault is the principal theorist in this connection; his discussions of the connection between power, knowledge and truth show why "we can assume that there is a set of discourses of femininity and masculinity, because women and men behave within a certain range of parameters when defining themselves as gendered subjects."[187] An essentialist view on sexuality can be defined as "the belief that sexual identities and behaviours are timeless or transhistorical because they possess innate and unchanging characteristics or properties that are rooted in biology and heredity."[188] This view is undoubtedly opposed by Foucault, by postmodernism in general, and arguably also in Irving's literature. Interestingly, Irving's focus on sexual outsiders is in many ways similar to Foucault's explanations of the discourses of power. That is, they both lead to an epistemological questioning of how and why the norm became, and continues to be, the norm. In Linda Hutcheon's words: "It is not hard to see why suddenly the politics of representation becomes an issue: what systems of power authorize some representations while suppressing others?"[189]

However, though an anti-essentialist view on sex must entail an implosion of the traditional categories, this would at the same time entail an essentialist dimension, making it

[186] Mills, *Discourse*, 16.
[187] Mills, *Discourse*, 15-16.
Foucault's discussion of these themes include numerous different angles concerning for instance the dispersion of power, the repressive hypothesis, how we "repeat, renew and replace" truths. However, it is mainly his discussion of the connection between power, knowledge and truth that is relevant to this chapter, as well as some points from another work of his; *The History of Sexuality* (1978).
[188] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 225.
[189] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 139.

similar to the paradox found in feminism; those in favor of opening up the defining categories of identity, desire a fundamental change, which is a form of essentialism. Therefore it is important to remember what was stated in the Introduction, namely Foucault's belief in how one must continue to consider questions of morality, and Linda Hutcheon's claim that one can interpret postmodernism as a direction which allows for political standpoints. The postmodernism in this thesis is not defined in the sense that absolutely anything goes. A revised or controlled version of postmodern anti-essentialism is the template against which these novels will be measured. Also, in order to underline the political aspects and implications of some of Irving's representations, I will try to draw lines between his fiction and a couple of examples from the world today.

In the novels of John Irving, one will always find a rich gallery of characters that usually present a multiplicity of versions of both gender and sexuality. With characters like Garp and Roberta Muldoon, there is no doubt that *The World According to Garp* is an intricate web of different representations of gender roles and sexual outsiders. Significantly, the villains of the novel seem to be those who cannot accept the individual's freedom to choose, such as those who criticize Jenny and/or Garp for how they choose to live their lives (e.g., Pooh Percy). *A Prayer for Owen Meany* also questions the standard assumptions of gender, but in more subtle ways. What is perhaps more noticeable in this novel, is how the main character John Wheelwright never engages in any sexual activity, which is also considered suspicious, and as being on the outside of the norm. Moreover, in addition to featuring numerous sexual outcasts depicted in mostly positive terms, the novels contain several dramatic rapes, accidents and deaths. The somewhat absurd chain of events sometimes works to link these violent episodes to different incidents of sex or sexual behavior. some of which are connected to sexuality in the strangest ways. When it comes to both traditional feminism and postmodern feminism, their representations in these two Irving novels are much more ambivalent. One might ask whether Irving reinforces the view of women as inferior to men, especially with *The World According to Garp*.[190] I will take a closer look at the Ellen James Society and the character of Jenny Fields, in particular, in order to discuss how Irving's representations of women may be interpreted. In addition, the portrayal of the characters of Tabitha Wheelwright and Hester "the Molester" from *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, may also be

[190] Marilyn French, "The Garp Phenomenon," in *The Critical Response to John Irving*, eds. Davis and Womack, 74-78.

relevant in a discussion of feminism, as they are both women who have made a decision to not follow the norm.

Finally, as these novels contain so many points of intersection between the subjects of sexuality, gender roles and feminism, it is difficult to divide the examples into simple categories of either/or. Therefore the headings in this chapter will instead indicate topics under which both sexuality, gender roles and feminism may play their part. The exceptions to this are the final two paragraphs which will discuss feminism in connection with the Ellen James Society, and whether or not Jenny Fields could be called a feminist/postmodern feminist.

2.1 Background

Initially, one of the reasons why sexual intercourse was deemed sinful is its connection with the body, which, in a hierarchical binary system, has been devalued in its opposition to the idealized notion of reason, the intellectual faculties of the brain. Sexual desire is not usually initiated with control or by logic, and has therefore often been the subject of repression. As Michel Foucault states in his *A History of Sexuality*: "A twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil."[191] Notably, this is also connected to feminism since the female and the feminine have traditionally been associated with the body, whereas males and the masculine have represented the brain and reason. In other words, the dichotomy which favors the intellect over the body also operates in such a way as to associate the devalued qualities in binary oppositions with the female. In connection with the notion of sex as "bad," I believe that a short introduction to some parts of general feminism as well as some Biblical history is necessary.

Certain translations of The Old Testament emphasize that the first woman, Eve, was created from the man's rib (alternatively, his ‘side’), both because the man needed a companion, and for reproductive purposes. Whereas man was created by God to rule over the animals and plants, woman was created from the body of the man, simply to accompany him and to be a mother. This has been interpreted as the first clue to why women are connected with the body, as well as being seen as inferior to man. In addition, Eve has generally been blamed for the eviction from the Garden of Eden, but this also depends on the politics of Biblical translation. Furthermore, the equation of woman as body has been explained by way

[191] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 19.

of biology: women bear children. Also, the elevation of the mind versus the denigration of the body is connected to the notion of salvation, to how it is often believed that only the soul will enter Paradise.

In addition, some feminists have claimed that men have projected their lust onto the female body as a solution to lust's denotation of guilt and their reluctance to accept it. This connection between lust and guilt can also be traced back to the Book of Genesis where Adam and Eve's lust for the apple made God throw them out. With second-wave feminism came theories on how the male projection of lust turned women into objects, this being one of many arguments why men are regarded as subjects in their own life, and women are regarded as passive objects. In conclusion, one might say that all of this has contributed to the impression of men as superior subjects, whereas females tend to be seen as inferior objects. Some of these views also found support in biology, where men are physically strong, and women supposedly weaker. These different theories constitute some of the foundation of why sexual activities have been connected with guilt and negativity.

2.2 "Good" and "Bad" Sex

It has been claimed that in the Victorian age, sex was more clearly divided into acceptable and unacceptable versions.[192] Michel Foucault's influential theories concerning how the dispersion of power regulates and dictates what is considered knowledge/truth at any given time, are perhaps particularly pertinent when it comes to our perceptions of "correct" sexuality. Foucault claims that for the last centuries, the heterosexual marriage with a sex-life safely contained within the four walls of the bedroom, and preferably for the cause of reproduction, has been considered the only safe and normal form of sexual relations.[193] "Facts" on what sex and gender roles should entail have been established, which in more recent times have been challenged by for instance Judith Butler: "One of Butler's principal aims in *Gender Trouble* is to explore how a restrictive binary logic has trapped critical understandings of sex and gender."[194] Joseph Bristow goes on to render in more detail what some of these assumed truths about sexual activities comprise:

> Rubin presents two diagrams that identify degrees of social acceptability and unacceptability among a range of sexual institutions and practices. Under the heading of 'good' or 'normal, natural, healthy, holy' sex, Rubin claims that

[192] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*,3.
[193] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3.
[194] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 189.

> heterosexual, married, monogamous, reproductive relations that occur 'at home' are regarded as the very 'best'. By contrast, under the heading 'bad' or 'abnormal, unnatural, sick, sinful [...]' sex, Rubin catalogues the ensuing group of deviants: transvestites, transsexuals, fetishists, sadomasochists, those engaging in cross-generational sex, as well as those who do it for money.[195]

In *The World According to Garp,* Garp falls in love with Helen at fifteen, and they marry shortly after having finished high school. So far, Garp and Helen fall neatly into the category of a monogamous and heterosexual marriage. However, there are more than a few dents in this surface.

Garp's first sexual experiences are with the girl next door, Cushie Percy. Both Cushie and Garp know that he is in love with Helen, and that their relation is purely sexual. The attitudes and judgments towards girls like Cushie are not surprising: "Many of the Steering boys were willing to handle Cushie when they were alone with her, but most of them did not like to be *seen* demonstrating any affection for her. Garp, Cushie noticed, did not care" (79). However, by describing it from this angle, Irving manages to emphasize the hypocrisy among these young boys. If the reader passes judgment on Cushie, Irving makes sure that the boys are looked down on as well. Garp seems to be praised for not judging Cushie. Then again, Garp does distinguish between what he reckons are bad feelings of lust for Cushie, and the "higher" feelings he nurtures for Helen: "He wrote Helen a long confessional letter about his 'lust,' as he called it – and how it did not compare to his higher feelings for her, as he referred to them" (86). The fact that he decides to tell Helen about Cushie makes the entire situation rather comic, and it might actually work as criticism of the traditional ideas concerning "good" and "bad" sex.

The next excerpt shows Jenny's thoughts regarding Cushie versus Helen as possible love interests for Garp:

> The girl [Helen] *is* pretty, she thought – though not in an obvious way; and don't young boys like only *obvious* girls? And would I prefer it if Garp were interested in one of those? As for *those* kinds of girls, Jenny had her eye on Cushie Percy – a little too saucy with her mouth, a little too slack about her appearance; and should a fifteen-year-old of Cushman Percy's breeding be so *developed* already? (70).

Jenny's thoughts are also an example of how the "truths" regarding good sexuality need to be questioned. Garp's mother has to ask herself if one is worse than the other, basically indicating that she seems to be equally concerned about a girl like Helen and a girl like Cushie. Clearly, Jenny is less colored by the usual prejudices than most people. Another

[195] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 180.

example supports this view of Jenny: "Garp confessed his lust for Cushie Percy and rendered a suitably tame version of the consummation scene. Jenny did not like it. 'And Helen?' Jenny asked. 'Do you feel that for Helen?' Garp admitted he did. 'How terrible,' Jenny said" (104). She is simply not fond of lust; the object of that lust is therefore neither interesting nor important.

Together with his mother, Garp travels to Vienna after high school, where he leads what would by many be defined as a promiscuous life. The negative connotations of promiscuity is another example of how some forms of sexual behavior are rejected as bad. In Vienna, Garp has sex with different prostitutes in addition to a couple of other girls. Also, it seems that society has tended to accept a certain frivolity in young men before they settle down. Even if it was not openly accepted that men explored this way before they settled down, it was not frowned upon either. Apparently, men are polygamous and have an inherent sex drive, which can be defended by the biological imperative.[196] Furthermore, there is no doubt that prostitution has been/is regarded as "bad" sex. When Jenny and Garp run into some prostitutes in the streets of Vienna, Jenny decides to hire one to talk to: "'I want to know if it degrades her to *feel* wanted in that way – and then to be *had* in that way, I suppose – or whether she thinks it only degrades the men?'" The prostitute answers that she does not know. The scenario ends with Jenny buying her services for Garp:

> "Do you want her?" Jenny asked him, so suddenly that he couldn't lie. "I mean, after all this – and looking at her, and talking with her – do you really want to have sex with her, too?" "Of course, Mom," Garp said, miserably. Jenny looked no closer to understanding lust than she was before dinner. She looked puzzled and surprised at her son. "All right," she said (110).

For some reason, Garp and Jenny do not separate between "good" and "bad" sex in the customary ways. "Everything" seems to be good sex for Garp,[197] whereas nothing is good sex for Jenny.

However, it is important to note that his sexual relations with both Cushie and the women in Vienna take place before Helen and Garp have decided to be in a monogamous relationship. What seems most compromising, and what is clearly a violation of the institution of marriage, is Garp's and Helen's infidelity after they have married. Not only does Garp cheat on Helen with the babysitter, at one point Helen and Garp engage in an odd sexual quadrangle with another married couple in order to solve the other couple's marital problems. This seems

[196] Jan Marsh, "Sex and Sexuality in the 19th Century." http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/sex-and-sexuality-19th-century/ (accessed 21.04.2013).
[197] As long as is it voluntary.

even more at odds with the traditional, monogamous marriage; they arrange their infidelity instead of at least keeping it below the radar. On the other hand, if they ask themselves what is "right", it is more likely that they find the quadrangle to be right, than Garp's secret adultery. Whether this somewhat open marriage is an acceptable arrangement may be debatable, but it seems to work, at least for a while, for those who participate in it. Arguably, then, this might also function as a comment on the separation between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior. But while the relationship between Garp and Helen does not fulfill the image of the ideal marriage that the discourses of power have enforced over the last centuries, this does not mean that they are portrayed as bad people.

2.2.1 Reinforcing the notion of "Bad" Sex?

So far, *The World According to Garp* seems to criticize the idea that there is something like good and bad sex. However, Garp's adultery with the babysitter brings another variant of power relations into the picture. Usually a couple consisting of an older man and a younger woman has tended to be perceived as inappropriate, especially when the man is married, of course. When the man is significantly older than the woman in question, it is as if he possesses twice the power, on account of both his gender and his age. There are definitely some elements of possible power abuse here, as the babysitter in question is a fan of the author Garp (162). Then again, a relationship between an older man and a younger woman is still more accepted than the other way around. This is possibly because an older woman with a younger man would upset the ideas of how power should be distributed in a relationship, according to the old patriarchal "truths" about gender. In any case, this rather seedy affair of Garp's could be interpreted as a reinforcement of the notion of cross-generational sex as bad.

Furthermore, in Garp's world, some of the breaches in the traditional sexual morality have serious consequences that are completely out of proportion. John Irving states that his heritage of New England Puritanism is rearing its ugly head when it comes to these terrible punishments.[198] A completely human error is in this case punished with the death of a child, and the maiming of another. The fact is, however, that Irving finds the idea of punishment and justice based on sexual behavior to be absurd; in addition to having said so in interviews, this is clearly stated in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* as well, when John Wheelwright rants on about JFK vs. Richard Nixon, and how sexual deviance is considered less acceptable in the U.S.

[198] BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).

than crimes against the democracy.[199] However, when reading the story of how Helen's final act of infidelity indirectly results in the death of Walt, the reader can very well choose to read it as a comment on how sex outside its accepted framework is dangerous and wrong. Then again, the level of absurdity in this chain of events might as well point sarcastically to how that square framework should be changed: "[W]e need to denaturalize the essentialist presumptions about desire that have governed modern approaches to erotic identities and practices."[200]

Another point of discussion is why Helen's infidelity is so harshly punished compared to Garp's. As mentioned above, male promiscuity has traditionally been judged less severely, and the scene in which Helen's debauch is absurdly tied in with her son's death is arguably another presentation of this "socially ingrained bias".[201] Irving claims that the idea of men's infidelity as more acceptable, is extremely condescending to both men and women, because it indicates that men are powerless and just cannot help themselves.[202] I find that this scene is easily interpreted as being in conflict with his personal view, because Garp's repeated infidelity is never punished, whereas Helen's one blunder can be interpreted as the reason for why disaster strikes their family. In Garp's world, it seems that at times, some of the most insistent discourses on gender and sexuality actually persist; adultery is dangerous, even deadly, especially when carried out by a woman.

Cushie Percy presents another example of how a woman may be punished for indulging in various sexual activities with a number of different men. She presented Garp with his first sexual experience, and she was also known to sleep around. Years later, Cushie dies in childbirth. As giving birth is one possible consequence of having sex, this is perhaps the most obvious connection between promiscuity and capital punishment, even though Cushie does die a married woman. It is also interesting that Cushie's sister, Pooh, eventually kills Garp because she genuinely believes that Garp killed her sister by having sex with her. Pooh is thereby the embodiment of a feministic moral law enforcement. She makes sure that male promiscuity is punished just like female promiscuity is punished: By death.

John Wheelwright is the son of an unmarried woman, who decided to have a child on her own, and who was not known to feel any shame about it. Tabitha Wheelwright is a

[199] BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).
[200] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 10.
[201] BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).
[202] BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).

woman ahead of her time, and she is able to overlook the discourses that tell her how inappropriate it is to have a child out of wedlock: "My mother was so calm, so unrattled by either criticism or slander, that she was quite comfortable with her sister Martha's use of the word 'fling' – in truth, I heard Mother use the word fondly" (16-17). In this connection, it is also worth remembering that Tabitha suffers a tragic and untimely death. She has just married Dan Needham when a baseball hits her in the head, with fatal consequences. Her death is perhaps not as absurd as Walt's, but it is definitely out of the ordinary. There are really no indications that her affair and her death are connected, except that the minister was watching her and wishing her dead in the exact moment of impact. However, reading *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in connection with *The World According to Garp,* gives this incident further implications. There are so many examples of how characters who engage in different sexual activities suffer from accidents or tragic deaths at some point. Therefore, having read *The World According to Garp,* an imprint is left on *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* and the interpretation of it.

There are several other episodes that support the claim of the danger of "bad" sex in *The World According to Garp.* First of all, after having had sex with a couple of girls Garp meets in Vienna, he realizes that he has contracted a venereal disease. This is the novel's first example of how promiscuity is punished, and this punishment is obviously in more appropriate proportion to the original "sin". Notably, it is not the repeated sexual affairs with prostitutes that make him sick, and this is perhaps a subtle comment on some of the prejudices against prostitutes, as well as a possible argument for how prostitution works better out in the open, in controlled forms. This idea is supported by Jenny:

> In the taxi (that Garp agreed to take home) Garp explained to his mother the Viennese system of prostitution. Jenny was not surprised to hear that prostitution was legal; she was surprised to learn that it was *illegal* in so many other places. "Why shouldn't it be legal?" she asked. "Why can't a woman use her body the way she wants to? If someone wants to pay for it, it's just one more crummy deal" (110-111).

Jenny's point of view is supported by what has been dubbed "Stiletto feminism,"[203] in which pornography and stripping (and perhaps prostitution?) are seen as empowering to women. Yet, this view is the subject of great discussion and disagreement within feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s: "Radical feminists (stressing a woman-centred analysis of culture) and socialist feminists (emphasizing women's struggles as an oppressed class) have often

[203] The term "stiletto feminism" is used in for instance Jenn Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006).

differed in their understandings of pornography."[204] Those who support pornography say that those who criticize it "extend [...] the age-old prejudice that people practicing forms of perverse sexuality [are] largely responsible for committing sex crimes."[205] Though the disagreement concerns pornography and not prostitution, the two are comparable in certain ways; both see the woman as nothing more than a sexual object. However, perhaps Irving's presentation of prostitution can be considered as an opposition to the prejudiced notions of "good" and "bad" sex. On the other hand, one of the prostitutes in the novel, Garp's friend Charlotte, dies fairly young. Once again, one might say that a "bad" version of sex leads to death, however indirectly, showing that the case of prostitution is not clear-cut. One might say that merging such fatal consequences with acts of prostitution and sexual liberty strengthens the restrictive discourse of "good" sexuality.

The sexually transmitted disease HIV/aids has become the classic example of this phenomenon; the lethal consequences of homosexuality and promiscuity.[206] But Irving steers clear of any such direct punishment. The links between promiscuity and the alleged sanctions are not straight-forward; they are all really absurd coincidences (with the exception of the relatively harmless venereal disease, of course). It is also worth mentioning that in *The World According to Garp*, there are so many tragedies that the reader has reason to doubt whether sexual deviance and penance have any real linkage.

Finally, in his latest novel, *In One Person*, Irving writes the story of a bisexual man living in New York in the 1980's, who is affected by the explosion of HIV in the gay community. Clearly, Irving is still concerned with many of the same topics. Though he has stated that he thought there would be less sexual discrimination today, there are numerous examples to the contrary. A recent article in the *New York Times* described how "[t]he national board of the Boy Scouts of America discussed changing its national ban on gay leaders and scouts, and allowing local scout units to decide for themselves."[207] Also, it is still the case that the only sexual activity that is allowed in all states of the US, is "the placement of the penis in the vagina."[208]

[204] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 134.
[205] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 182-183.
[206] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 183.
[207] Eckholm, Espen, "Boy Scouts Move to Lift Ban on Gay Youth Members," 19.04.2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/boy-scouts-move-to-lift-ban-on-gay-members.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 21.04.2013).
[208] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 182.

2.2.2 Lust, Guilt, Rape

In *The World According to Garp*, it becomes increasingly apparent that to Garp, sexual lust is inextricably linked to rape. "In Garp's own case, he likened his guilt for the seduction of Little Squab Bones [the babysitter] to a rapelike situation. But it was hardly a rape. It was deliberate, though" (172). In Garp's mind, sex is linked to guilt. One might say that Garp seems to believe that men's lust is something that they impose on the more or less innocent women, who are much less bothered with such feelings of sexual desire. This feeling of guilt, may perhaps be seen as a natural consequence of the Original Sin, and the standard guilt that has been tied to desire for a long time. However, Garp's mother Jenny might amplify his troublesome notion of guilt, as she is incapable of understanding lust and desire. She expresses her views on several occasions: "'Lust makes the best of men behave out of character,' wrote Jenny Fields – a line that particularly infuriated Garp" (152), and the even more obvious comment that: "'You [Garp] know all about it!' she said. Then she said she was sorry – she had never struck him before, she just didn't understand this fucking lust, lust, lust! at all" (111). Another example of Garp's troublesome connection between sex and sin, is his concerns in connection with the birth of a possible daughter: "Garp didn't want a daughter because of *men.* Because of *bad* men, certainly; but even, he thought, because of men like *me*" (174). Garp seems heavily influenced by the essentialist presumptions of sex as sinful.

Out on a run in the park, Garp comes across a little girl who has been raped (162), which is probably fuel for his preoccupation with rape. Garp runs like a madman around the park, looking for the molester, and actually manages to find him. Another example of Garp's preoccupation with lust and rape, is that he narrates a horrible story of rape, mutilation and murder in *The World According to Bensenhaver* (the first chapter of which is rendered on pages 328-361) as an outlet for his grief after Walt's death. Furthermore, when he first meets Ellen James, a rape victim, she tells him that *The World According to Bensenhaver* is: "*The best rape story I have ever read"* (418). Of course, Ellen James is the most important and the most discussed rape case in the novel, and she eventually becomes part of Garp's family. It is obvious that Garp is very much concerned with sexual violence, and he is also an avid worrier when it comes to his own children:

> Roberta promised to take Duncan to an Eagles game, but Garp was anxious about that. Roberta was a target figure; she had made some people very angry. Garp imagined various assaults and bomb threats on Roberta – and Duncan disappearing in the vast and roaring football stadium in Philadelphia, where he would be defiled by a child molester (188).

Rape is very much a sin, and is connected with violence, not sex. However, it is easy to connect Garp's preoccupation with sexual violence to his concerns regarding voluntary sex. Notably, though, he does not seem to feel guilty when it comes to sex with his wife Helen, which could be interpreted as a consequence of what Foucault calls the discourse of power concerning acceptable sexual behavior.

2.3 Gender Identity

Judith Butler has developed Foucault's theories into a discussion of the performance of gender. A definition of the idea of gender as a performance is given by Joseph Bristow:

> Gender performance: [...] this influential term articulates the idea that all manifestations of gender [...] involve the subject's continual efforts to present styles of masculinity or femininity to the world. The concept of gender performance reveals that masculinity and femininity need not be based on a male or female body, respectively.[209]

In both *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, there are several characters who visibly fail to perform the standard gendered qualities. What we take to be pre-discursive signs of femininity and masculinity are now considered constructions which we no longer recognize as performances.[210] In connection with this topic, the transsexual Roberta Muldoon and the so-called "masculine" Hester are particularly interesting.

First of all, Jenny's asexuality is interesting in several ways. Although she is loved in her community of women, there are many who hate her, which is evidenced by the fact that she is shot while giving a speech. In history, there are many examples of how "sexual suspects" have been hated and punished for their failure to conform. A few decades ago, so-called deviants were even institutionalized in order to fit into "the order of things":

> If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere: to a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit. The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance.[211]

Today, there is greater acceptance for differences in sexuality, but some people are still scared by those who defy labels. It seems that without a label to define your sexuality and your gender, those who do not know you will be deterred; if you cannot be placed in these

[209] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 226.
[210] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7.
[211] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 4.

categories of identity, you come across as insurmountably strange and perhaps even scary. People are confused, and are not certain how to react or treat you, if you lack the most common identity markers. Often they seem to react with fear and/or mockery. The need to put people into categories is a natural urge in humans, in order to find the people you "belong" with. However, the often violent discrimination against "wrong" displays of gender or sex is unnecessary, of course. Foucault claims that the essentialist ideas about "good" and "bad" sexual behaviors, are "the means through which institutions produce strategic methods of control to induce docility in the social body."[212] This makes sense when you consider how some people seem to be offended by those who do not "follow" their gender.

For instance, in a German article published last year, a father tells the story of how his son wanted to wear dresses but was bullied in his kindergarten. The father decided to wear a skirt in support of his son. In connection with a Norwegian rendition of this article, the comments on this father's act of support were mixed. Most women supported him. Yet, most of the men seemed offended by this man's decision to support his son in his harmless wish to wear a garment that is reckoned uncommon for men in our time, in our part of the world. Several of them thought that men like him should not be allowed to have children, and that his sexuality was definitely questionable.[213] The commentators send the message that you must follow your sex/gender, and not be yourself. I find this to be a contemporary example of what John Irving is addressing in his novels, and what Foucault questions in his theories on the discourses of power concerning sexuality. The judgment passed on a man's decision to wear a dress is utterly contingent on time and place, proving that at least one of the identity markers which we so fondly emphasize, is without meaning. Of course, a little boy is not wearing a dress because he is gay, he just likes them, and he has not yet been colored by social biases. In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler emphasizes how genders are socially induced performances: "Gender is always a doing [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result."[214]

> Jenny's newest colleague was a six-foot-four transsexual named Roberta Muldoon. Formerly Robert Muldoon, a standout tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Roberta's weight had dropped from 235 to 180 since her successful sex-change operation. The doses of estrogen had cut into her once–massive strength and some of her endurance (187).

[212] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 152.
[213] Susanne Kaluza, "Oppskjørta: Når pappa er superhelt i kjole", published 28.01.2013, http://www.susannekaluza.com/?p=3115 (accessed 18.04.2013).
[214] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

Roberta's decision to change gender has whipped up a storm. She receives hate mail where people write that they are ashamed of her, that they have stopped cheering for the team she used to play for, and worse: "Roberta had perverted the entire Eagles offensive line with his pansy ways" (188). Roberta Muldoon embodies the anti-essentialist ideas concerning the "truth" of science and biology. Instead, as argued by Foucault, so-called knowledge and truth are seen as connected to, and derived from power. Roberta forces us to rethink the implications of genes; not everyone is born with the right sex/gender.

> "You don't understand," Roberta said. "I don't *feel* like beating the shit out of anyone, anymore. I'm a *woman!*" "Don't women ever feel like beating the shit out of someone?" Garp asked. [...] "I don't know *what* women feel like," Roberta wailed. "I don't know what they're *supposed* to feel like, anyway. I just know what *I* feel like" (249).

This quote also makes it clear that people do not inherently feel like a woman or like a man. The notion of what you are *supposed* to feel, may clash with what you actually feel, and what you actually feel might not be consistent with the assumed truths of gender. In another example, Roberta attacks a man who behaves like a chauvinist. Afterwards, she feels as if she has failed her gender: "Roberta, punishing herself for her momentarily lapsed femininity, went to find Duncan and mother him" (322).

I think that by including characters such as Roberta, Irving is commenting on some of the most discriminatory discourses of power that many of us have yet to overcome. The marginalized group of transsexuals/transgenders have been shamed and silenced for centuries, on account of their being "not normal". Foucault has also written theories on how power's strategy is to silence and repress, because this leads to the feeling of shame: "Repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know."[215] Interestingly, though, Roberta displays signs of discrimination towards homosexuals: "There was more than a hint of distaste in Roberta's reference to homosexuals, and Garp thought it strange that people in the process of making a decision that will plant them firmly in a minority, forever, are possibly less tolerant of other minorities than we might imagine" (312). Obviously, no one is beyond the capacity for prejudices. Even the great Roberta Muldoon is human.

Another point in connection with typical gender roles, is how Garp and Helen arrange their family with much less traditional roles: Garp is a stay-at-home dad who loves to cook

[215] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 4.
Note that Foucault also formulates the repressive hypothesis, which basically indicates that what is repressed will be even more talked about. See chapter 1 in *The History of Sexuality.*

and take care of the children, whereas Helen is an academic and a career-woman. Garp is tired of people's reactions to this:

> When the interviewer discovered Garp's chosen life, his "house-wife's role," as she gleefully called it, Garp blew up at her. "I'm doing what I want to do," he said. "Don't call it by any other name. I'm just doing what I want to do – and that's all my mother ever did too. Just what *she* wanted to do" (155).

It seems that Irving is also commenting on some of the most passionate causes of second-wave feminism as well:

> [Betty] Friedan set out to transform the attitudes of women. Arguing that "the personal is political," feminists urged women to challenge the assumption, at work and at home, that women should always be the ones who make the coffee, watch over the children, pick up after men and serve the meals.[216]

In addition to making a comment on traditional gender roles, the interviewer from *The World According to Garp* clearly displays her hypocrisy: Why is it still more okay for a woman to make "masculine" choices, than for a man to make "feminine" ones? Jenny is admired by a large movement of women for making the choices she wanted to make, whereas Garp is criticized for enjoying cooking and care-taking. Women may wear pants, but men can not wear dresses. Apparently, it is understandable that women want to do and be the same as men, but there seems to be no valid reason for a man to want those things which are connected to women. Thus it seems that male qualities or behavior are still valued higher than female ones.

Compared to *The World According to Garp, A Prayer for Owen Meany* makes for a much shorter discussion when it comes to the subjects of gender roles, sexuality and feminism. Still, the relationship between Hester and Owen in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* serves as another example of how the masculine/feminine norms are invalidated. Hester is described as a big and strong girl: "She had a large athletic body, and as a teenager she would have to struggle with her weight" (68). Owen, on the other hand, is described as small and delicate on several occasions. For some reason, the norm or the ideal in a love relationship between a man and a woman, is for the man to be big and strong, and preferably taller than the woman. There are not really any valid explanations for this, other than the biological "truths" that were discussed at the beginning of this chapter (man is strong, woman is weak). One might say that it is the idea of a norm that produces the "not normal". As a consequence, what is considered normal is also produced, even though it has been passed off as natural.[217]

[216] Stephanie Coontz, "Why Gender Equality Stalled," 16.02.2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/why-gender-equality-stalled.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 19.04.2013).
[217] Rebecca Scherr, lectures in "Race, Gender, Performativity," spring 2011.

We need to consider why there is such a divide between what is seen as natural or unnatural. For instance, the representation of the relationship between the physically small Owen and the "big girl" Hester, can work as an objection to the supposition that men are bigger and stronger than women.

The role of Hester, and the descriptions of her, are interesting in several ways. She shows how gender can be performed differently. The portrayal of her also shows that what is considered a feminine look is not naturally inherent in all women:

> But the broad shoulders, the big bones, and the heavy jaw – these were less attractive on Hester, who did not receive either my aunt's blondness or her aristocracy. Hester was as dark and hairy as Uncle Alfred – even including his bushy eyebrows, which were actually one solid eyebrow without a gap above the bridge of the nose – and she had Uncle Alfred's big hands. Hester's hands looked like paws (68).

In a way, Irving also defends her by stating that she had sex appeal, and that in those days, tough girls could also be sexy. However, what is most notable is how Hester possesses so-called masculine qualities. Interestingly, John and his two male cousins engage in a de Beauvoir-like discussion of whether Hester was born masculine, or whether she became it:

> To this day, I still engage in debate with Noah and Simon regarding whether Hester was "created" by her environment, which was almost entirely created by Noah and Simon – which is *my* opinion – or whether she was born with an overdose of sexual aggression and family animosity – which is what Noah and Simon say (57-58).

The environment created by her brothers Noah and Simon, is definitely brutal, as they have had physical contests, fights, and general bullying as their daily activities. '"Whoa!' Noah yelled. 'Look at this hanky-panky going on here!' 'There's no hanky-panky going on!' Hester said angrily. 'Whoa!' Simon yelled. 'Watch out for *Hester the Molester*!'" (60)

It is also interesting to remember Butler's notion of gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[218] Even though we think of gender roles as natural, characters like Hester show that you are not necessarily born feminine, even though you are born a woman.[219] She shows that it is possible to perform the

[218] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.
[219] I realize that also the idea of bodies as either man or woman is contested. However, in Hester's case, I believe that she can easily be called a woman even though she possesses certain looks and manners that are most often connected with men.

role of "woman" differently. We have come to recognize certain things as male or female, but it is evident that these definitions do not hold up.[220]

The two protagonists of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John and Owen, are mostly raised in a matrilineal environment. For the first years of his life, John lives with his mother, his grandmother and their maid, and it seems that Owen stays at John's house most of the time. This can easily be compared to *The World According to Garp* where Jenny is a matriarch with a capital M. She has designed her life that way, having a child with a man she knew could not be present in the child's life, unlike Tabitha who was in love with a man. Later on John's mother marries Dan Needham, and a male role model becomes a part of his family as well. One might argue, however, that these presentations of matrilineal alternatives to the patriarchal family that has traditionally been the norm, serve as further arguments to how man is not born to dominate the woman.

In a final example from *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* it is clear that Irving also might ridicule the feminist insistence on gender as a performance:

> As for the Dowlings' participation in The Gravesend Players: they took turns. Their campaign was relentless, but minor; *she* tried out for parts conventionally bestowed upon men; *he* went after the lesser women's roles – preferably nonspeaking. She was more ambitious than he was, befitting a woman determined to reverse sexual stereotypes; she thought that speaking parts for males were perfect for her (245).

They are later described as "tedious" and "eccentric". Amanda Dowling is also against books in which boys are boys and girls are girls (245). It is obvious through this exaggerated version of gender stereotype struggle, that in addition to his never-wavering fight for sexual outsiders, Irving finds some of the gender battle entertaining as well.

To sum up, in Irving's novels, different sexualities and genders are celebrated, with characters such as Jenny Fields and Roberta Muldoon. Irving in many ways manages to present the complexity of human beings, and is clearly of an anti-essentialist/postmodern opinion in this regard.

2.4 Feminism

Just as there are many ideas regarding the definition of postmodernism, there are many different kinds of feminism,[221] which has also been touched upon in the previous paragraphs.

[220] The theory of this paragraph is indebted to Rebecca Scherr's course "Race, Gender, Performativity," Spring 2011.

Some would claim that feminism means that a woman can do everything a man can, others would say that feminism means cultivating your femininity, in the traditional sense. A postmodern feminist would probably not agree with either. In assuming that all females possess certain features and abilities, one would be no better than those who discriminate against them. We "must embrace differences between women."[222]

> Both feminism and postmodernism argue that the "grand" or "master" narratives of the Enlightenment have lost their legitimating power. Not only, they would both suggest, have claims put forward as universally applicable in fact proved to be valid only for men of a particular culture, class and race; the ideals which have underpinned these claims – of "objectivity", "reason" and the autonomous self – have been equally partial and contingent. Both argue that Western representations [...] are the product of access not to Truth but to power.[223]

Thus, the key problem of postmodern feminism is: "How, then, can feminist theory both hold on to a belief in 'woman' *and* respect cultural diversity and difference?"[224] Through a discussion of the Ellen James Society, and a more thorough look at the character of Jenny Fields, I will explore Irving's presentation of this problem.

2.4.1 The Ellen James Society

Since its publication, the reactions to *The World According to Garp* have been mostly positive, yet, in the words of Marilyn French, some feminists have argued that the vision of the novel is somewhat discriminatory towards women and/or the feminist movement.[225] Clearly, John Irving's portrayal of the Ellen Jamesians is one of the main reasons for this. Many feel that the Ellen James society are portrayed as the villains in the story, [226] which in many ways is correct.

Marilyn French's response to their portrayal is less than laudatory:

> As symbol, Irving's Ellen Jamesians suggests that feminism is self-mutilation because it is rooted in hatred of men. This is a double whammy: for feminism is rooted in hatred of oppression and exploitation, and love of more felicitous ways of being: turning away from men is often the only sane course; and many feminists do not turn away from men, but sadly give up on them. As symbol, Ellen Jamesianism, like so much else in our culture, blames the victim. *If* the

---

[221] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism,* 137.
[222] Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 26.
[223] Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 26.
[224] Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," 31.
[225] French, "The Garp Phenomenon," 74.
[226] French, "The Garp Phenomenon," 76.

> world were Garp's idyll, *if* our common morality taught us fellow-feeling and were an equalizer, *then* feminism would be an aberration.[227]

The last part of the quote shows why French finds the portrayal of the feminist group particularly improper: The world of Garp is different from our world, because there is no need for feminism in Garp's world. Therefore, Irving's representation "show feminism (as he conceives of it) to be an aberration, the insane revenge of unsexual people against sexual ones, a self-destructive cult of hatred against [...] men simply because they are men."[228] Because of this, French regards the novel as anti-feminist.

It is not difficult to understand the point that the Ellen Jamesians are trying to make in support of the actual Ellen James, who was raped and mutilated at a young age; their symbolic act of mutilation shows how they share her feeling of victimization, and they create a unity of women in Ellen James' honor. It is also quite easy to understand the symbolic connection between mutilation of the body and rape:

> Rape is an act against the integrity of the body of another; it is an act of cutting or penetrating the flesh, of destroying its wholeness. It separates or alienates the victim from herself. [...] The disruption between the body and its ability to speak takes place because of the rape, with its cutting, penetrating, dividing.[229]

If Ellen James feels alienated from her body and from men after having been assaulted, she is not alone, is the message of the Ellen James Society. However, it is also easy to see how the execution of their act of support is misguided, and I believe that this comes across very clearly in Irving's descriptions of them, many of whom are seen through the eyes of Garp.

Garp's initial reaction to the Ellen Jamesians is one of disgust (157). His mother tries to explain to him that the reason for their chosen path is that these women have suffered, and that "[r]ape is every woman's problem" (158). This upsets Garp who responds that rape is every man's problem too, because all men are associated with rapists simply because they are men. Obviously, Irving is criticizing the kind of feminism that turns discrimination upside down. Later on, Jenny admits that she disapproves of these women's self-mutilation, because they are victimizing themselves, and "that's the same thing they're angry at men for doing to them" (410). For most of the novel, Jenny Fields works as a moral compass, as it is repeatedly stated that she only wants to do what is right (e.g., 421). Therefore, her judgment of the Ellen Jamesians has a powerful effect.

---

[227] French, "The Garp Phenomenon," 77.
[228] French, "The Garp Phenomenon," 76.
[229] Campbell, *John Irving*, 83.

One of the clearest examples of criticism occurs when Garp learns that Ellen James herself finds the feminist movement to be a burden: "*I* hate *the Ellen Jamesians,* [...] *I would* never *do this to myself.* [...] *I* want *to talk; I want to say* everything" (420). Furthermore, Ellen James publishes an essay titled "Why I'm Not an Ellen Jamesian" (455). Of course, the wrath of the Ellen James Society is inevitable, and their counter-arguments consist of what the readers of *The World According to Garp* know to be counter-factual:

> Ellen James, poor child, had been brainwashed into her antifeminist stance by the male villain, Garp. The betrayer of his mother! The smirking capitalizer on women's-movement politics! In the various letters, Garp's relationship with Ellen James was referred to as 'seductive,' 'slimy,' and 'underhanded' (455).

Ellen's essay turns into a full-fledged war between Garp and the Ellen Jamesians. After Ellen explains to Garp that she hates the so-called feminist society because "[*t]hey force you to be like them – or else you're their enemy*" (456), Garp publishes a response: "Ellen James is not a symbol [...] She is a rape victim who was raped and dismembered before she was old enough to make up her own mind about sex and men" (456). He also refers to the Ellen Jamesians as "these grown-up crazies, these devout fanatics who – even when their chosen symbol rejected them – insisted they knew more about Ellen James than Ellen James knew about herself" (456). The discussion of how the Ellen James Society should be interpreted, is dealt with by Garp himself: "He spoke with eloquence for those serious women who suffered, by association, 'the radical self-damage' of the Ellen Jamesians – 'the kind of shit that gives feminism a bad name'" (457). Clearly, Irving is presenting the view on the Ellen Jamesians with distinct guidelines. Also, what seems like the inevitable failure of the Ellen James Society, is reinforced by the vision into the future, where most Ellen Jamesians have put the feminist society behind them, and prefer not to share why they have no tongue.

These guidelines for interpretation are further strengthened by the two attempts on Garp's life, one of which attains its goal. The first time around, an Ellen Jamesian tries to kill him with her car: "He knew she was an Ellen Jamesian because he looked in her mouth" (461). The second, and successful, attempt at killing him, is by Pooh Percy. As evidence of her madness, she believes that Garp killed her sister by sleeping with her (when she actually died in childbirth years later). After she has shot Garp, everyone witnesses "Bainbridge Percy's recent madness – to become an Ellen Jamesian" (474). Apparently, a movement like the Ellen James Society is particularly appealing to people who have come unhinged. Furthermore, the official reaction from the Ellen Jamesians after the first attempt on Garp's life is an even more obvious illustration of how they are committing the crime of

discrimination towards men: "A spokesperson for the Ellen Jamesians remarked that this was an isolated act of violence, not sanctioned by the society of Ellen Jamesians but obviously provoked by the 'typically male, aggressive, rapist personality of T.S. Garp' (462)."

The impression of the Ellen Jamesians as implementers of an essentialist philosophy that discriminates against men, becomes even more apparent in an episode that occurs right after Jenny Fields' passing. Her followers arrange a memorial service in which no men are allowed. Garp does not accept this, and receives Roberta's help to dress like a woman in order to sneak in. As already discussed, Garp's world is a world where feminism in the traditional sense is mostly unnecessary, which is why it becomes even more absurd that Garp is denied access to his mother's memorial service. By creating such an excluding event, the possible discrimination of more traditional feminism becomes apparent; all men are thought to possess certain features that make them undesirable at an event that is arranged in honor of a woman like Jenny Fields. Even though most of his mother's followers are particularly dissatisfied with Garp on account of his alleged misogynistic writings, they exclude all men from the service just because they are men:

> "I'm not *allowed?*" Garp said. "It's a funeral for *women,*" Roberta said. "*Women* loved her, women will mourn her. That's how we wanted it." Garp glared at Roberta Muldoon. "*I* loved her," he said. "I'm her only child. Do you mean I can't go to this wingding because I'm a *man?*" [...] "Do you mean no men are allowed at my mother's funeral?" Garp asked Roberta (403-404).

This kind of practice is in direct opposition to the anti-essentialist ways of postmodernism. Irving's representation of the Ellen Jamesians therefore criticizes the totalitarian philosophy of certain types of feminism; instead of fighting for equality between men and women, the Ellen Jamesians fight the battle of the sexes, in which all women are victims (even if they have to victimize themselves to make it happen), and all men are innately evil perpetrators. It seems that Irving's critical view of the Ellen Jamesians is in keeping with the philosophy of postmodern feminism. Postmodern feminists acknowledge and emphasize that all women are different, [230] just as all men are different, and that any attempt to categorize them into either/or is doomed to fail.

I find that in spite of Irving's presentation of the Ellen James society as a harebrained group of women who have just responded to a misplaced and vindictive discourse of power without thinking for themselves, we will see that there are many arguments in favor of *The World According to Garp* as a novel in strong favor of feminism. For instance, the situation

[230] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism,* 137.

that occurs after Jenny's memorial service is a demonstration of how Jenny's son is a feminist at heart:

> "She looked like a real idiot to me," the cabby said. "She couldn't be no governor if she couldn't control herself no better than that." And Garp saw the pattern of the woman's loss emerging. Perhaps the foul incumbent governor had remarked that Ms. Devlin's inability to control her emotions was "just like a woman." Disgraced by her demonstration of her feelings for Jenny Fields, Sally Devlin was judged not competent enough for whatever dubious work being a governor entailed. Garp felt ashamed. He felt ashamed of other people. "In my opinion," the cabby said, "it took something like that shooting to show the people that the woman couldn't handle the job, you know?" "Shut up and drive," Garp said. [...] "and if you don't drive me to the airport with your mouth shut, I'll tell a cop you tried to paw me all over." [...] "Fucking *women*," the cabby said. "Fucking *men*," said Garp, feeling – with mixed feelings – that he had done his duty to ensure that the sex war went on (415).

With help from this typically prejudiced cab driver, I believe that Garp realizes why some women feel the need to fight a sex war. He understands that discrimination towards women on account of their gender is still common.

2.4.2 Jenny Fields

The life of Jenny Fields is in many ways the story of a feminist: "I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to have to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too" (15). Irving begins the story of Jenny by telling a story of what happened when a soldier made an inappropriate pass at her in a movie theater in 1942; she sliced his arm open with a scalpel, and cut off a piece of his lip (9). There is no doubt that Jenny does not feel inferior to men, and she definitely knows how to take care of herself, though her retribution may be considered somewhat too violent. On the other hand, the soldier clearly would not take no for an answer, he did not respect Jenny's choice to sit alone, and he kept violating the integrity of her body by trying to touch her. This scene is an example of a classic feminist problem of how men, as the subject, objectify women, and believe that it is their right to do with them as they please. However, it is not particularly postmodern.

In *The World According to Garp*, Jenny Fields becomes a feminist icon. Her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*, is an international bestseller, and she becomes a celebrity and an idol for millions of women in search of a voice. "She was the decision maker who'd made the hard choices in her own life and therefore she could be counted on to be on the right side of a woman's problem" (155). In her own opinion, however, she does not want to be a

feminist; she only wants to do the right thing. She rejects traditional feminism, and instead claims the right to do what she wants to do, and what she wants to do is the right thing, according to her. Jenny takes her individual desires seriously, and does not care about the expectations of others. Earlier conceptions of what a female should be or do, and the more recent feminist ideas on how that should change, is not a concern of Jenny's. She disregards the discourses of gender conventions. Jenny opposes the assumption that, in Judith Butler's words, "*women* denotes a common identity."[231]

> "Did you ever see that thing she wrote about being called a feminist?" Roberta and John Wolf looked at each other; they looked stricken and gray. "She said, 'I hate being called one, because it's a label I didn't choose to describe my feelings about men or the way I write.'" "I don't want to argue with you, Garp," Roberta said. "Not now. You know perfectly well she said other things, too. She *was* a feminist, whether she liked the label or not. She was simply one for pointing out all the injustices to women; she was simply for allowing women to live their own lives and make their own choices" (402).

This can also be read as an example how the notion of feminism has for some become distorted and thereby alienating. Jenny is reluctant to call herself a feminist because of the qualities she connects with the term. Remembering Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, one might see this is an example of the unstable nature of language; the signified of feminism as the basic idea of men and women as equal, seems to have been replaced by more negative connotations. Jenny is obviously not the only strong and independent woman who hesitates when it comes to defining oneself as a feminist. As seen in the interpretations of the descriptions of the Ellen Jamesians, one might also say that Irving connects certain negative ideas to the notion of feminism. Arguably, then, one might say that Jenny's refusal of feminism may be interpreted as a meta-comment on the volatility of language.

When Jenny inherits her parents' house, it is made into a retreat for women in need of her support, financial and/or psychological: "[I]t was at the Dog's Head Harbor mansion that Jenny first began her role as counselor to the women who sought some comfort from her no-nonsense ability to make decisions." (153) At the beginning of the novel, we learn how Jenny is baffled at her sister-in-law who does not know if it is okay to stop mourning her late husband, and start dating someone new. Jenny finds it remarkable that this woman has to be told how to feel (12). Arguably, decision-making has traditionally been a man's job, and this is perhaps an example of how some women find it hard to commence being a decision-maker

[231] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3.

themselves. Jenny, in characteristic fashion, does not. "As for Jenny, she felt only that women – just like men – should at least be able to make conscious decisions about the course of their lives; if that made her a feminist, she said, then she guessed she *was* one" (153). Furthermore, she completely disregards the customary etiquette when it comes to mourning; once again, she focuses on what feels right, instead of what people might think. Foucault's discourses of power have little impact on the ways of Jenny Fields. When it comes to her son Garp, he is not swept away by his mother's somewhat carefree stride through life. Instead he feels that his mother is being exploited by all these women in need. He was not a fan of the book she published, nor is he a fan of her status. On the other hand, Garp recognizes that her newfound role is very much in the spirit of the nurse she always was:

> In Garp's opinion, his mother never stopped being a nurse. She had nursed him through the Steering School; she had been a plodding midwife to her own strange life story; finally, she became a kind of nurse to women with problems. She became a figure of famous strength; women sought her advice. With the sudden success of *A Sexual Suspect*, Jenny Fields uncovered a nation of women who faced making choices about how to live; these women felt encouraged by Jenny's own example of making unpopular decisions (153).

Garp's concerns regarding his mother's fame are illustrated by some of the hate-mail she receives. A number of people have naturally been offended by an idolized woman who has made men redundant in her life. Jenny is probably particularly scary to men, seeing that she is a woman who does not "need" men. She does not want them for sexual purposes, and she is very capable of taking care of herself. She escapes the sexual power discourse, and "discourse is [...] the grounds on which social relations are organized."[232]

> They wrote Jenny that they wished she had cancer. They wrote Roberta Muldoon that they hoped his or her parents were no longer living. One couple wrote Jenny Fields that they would like to artificially inseminate her with elephant sperm – and blow her up from the inside. That note was signed: "A Legitimate Couple" (188).

The signature of this letter is interesting; "a legitimate couple" – is that a social construct? The traditional "legitimate couple" consisting of a married man and woman is in my opinion very much a constructed discourse. However, most do agree that a legitimate couple should consist of two consenting parties. Gay and lesbian couples are of course "legitimate couples," and choosing not to be a part of a couple is just as legitimate. But Jenny's solution of having a child "without a man," includes exploiting a defenseless man. Is Jenny morally blameworthy, then, or did she take the technical sergeant's wishes into consideration? There are descriptions

[232] Mills, *Discourse*, 82.

of how she touched him and that he liked it (24-25), and Jenny's own defense is that it was the best for both of them:

> "Of course I *felt* something when he died," Jenny Fields wrote in her famous autobiography. "But the best of him was inside me. That was the best thing for both of us, the only way he could go on living, the only way I wanted to have a child. That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn't respect the rights of an individual" (26).

Yet again, is the fact that she fulfilled some sort of basic biological instinct a valid defense? If it had been the other way around, one would instantly judge the woman to have been sexually victimized, and the man to be a perpetrator. The sergeant was able to procreate, and his bloodline will go on, but obviously, not everyone wants children. Jenny could not have known the dying man's wishes. She obviously did what was right for her, but in my opinion, she crossed a few lines in the process. There are other ways of going about having a child, and there were several men who willingly offered to do Jenny the service of impregnating her.

Jenny herself does not fit into any standard category of sexuality, as she is completely devoid of sexual desire. Her kind of sexuality is rarely talked about, and Foucault asks "how and why desire has been damagingly constrained by the ways in which we have come to talk and think about a late nineteenth-century word, sexuality, particularly in its limited dualistic 'homo-' and 'hetero-' forms."[233] Paradoxically, it is interesting that Jenny actually does fit into the Victorian ideal when it comes to desire as perverse, and that sex needs only be practiced in controlled forms, and only for reproductive reasons (on the other hand, she obviously completely fails the Victorian ideals of marriage and family). Yet, even though Jenny slaps her son on account of his being too familiar with prostitutes, she usually accepts other people's sexual desires, even if she does not understand them.

Jenny's choice of profession is rooted in a traditional issue for women:

> In fact, she had dropped out of college when she suspected that the chief purpose of her parents' sending her to Wellesley had been to have her dated by and eventually mated to some well-bred man. The recommendation of Wellesley had come from her older brothers, who had assured her parents that Wellesley women were not thought of loosely and were considered high in marriage potential. Jenny felt that her education was merely a polite way to bide time, as if she were really a cow, being prepared only for the insertion of the device for artificial insemination (3-4).

And so she becomes a nurse. I believe that this can be interpreted as a postmodern move by Irving. One of the traditional views on women is that they have an inherent desire to nurture.

[233] Bristow, *Sexuality*, 153.

In *The World According to Garp*, Irving presents a woman who in no way is a stereotypical nurse. Further on, we learn that she wants to have a child, but she does not want a boyfriend or a husband in her life (8). Jenny is clearly a woman of contradictions; she leaves her college education to become a nurse, and she wants a child, but not a man. In terms of putting women into categories, as either career-oriented or family-oriented, Jenny implodes these categorical expectations. Also, the definition of women as either loose in sexual morals or high in marriage-potential is an example of the traditional dualistic view of women as either Madonnas or whores. Jenny's criticism and rejection of this works as another argument for both feminism and postmodernism, as it opposes such an essentialist and discriminatory point of view:

> In this dirty-minded world, she thought, you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore – or fast on your way to becoming one or the other. If you don't fit either category, then everyone tries to make you think there is something wrong with you. But, she thought, there is nothing wrong with me (13).

As shown in this quote, Jenny Fields stands in strong opposition to this dichotomy of either holy mother or sinful seductress. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* revealed the traditional representation of women in literature as "either threatening and destructive, or as goddesses of motherhood, justice, and salvation."[234]

In this connection it is also worth looking at Jenny's son Garp, who is undoubtedly a many-faceted character. For instance, he is a family man who loves his wife, yet he cheats on her several times. In addition to his infidelity in his marriage, Garp frequently availed himself of prostitutes during his stay in Vienna. Furthermore, the prostitutes of Vienna seem perfectly content with their profession, as long as they can remain in the first district where only the most attractive girls work (113). However, when Garp visits his friend Charlotte at the hospital, it becomes clear that she feels judged by the staff there, on account of her profession

> The young nurse's aide whom Garp had embarrassed by asking about Charlotte's "purse" was increasingly snotty to him. One day when he arrived early, before visitors were permitted, she asked him a little too aggressively what he was to Charlotte, anyway. A member of the family? She had seen Charlotte's other visitors – her gaudy colleagues – and she assumed Garp was just an old hooker's customer. [...] "What did you tell them?" Charlotte whispered to him, a few days later. "They think you're my *son.*" He confessed his lie; Charlotte confessed she had done nothing to correct it. "Thank you," she whispered. "It's nice to trick the swine. They think they're so superior" (134).

[234] Lothe, Refsum and Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "feministisk litteraturteori" (my translation).

Garp, on the other hand, never expresses any judgment concerning prostitutes. Instead he is frustrated by those who do. When one of the nurses tells him that Charlotte is dead, and he thinks he hears "a little triumph in her voice", his reaction is characteristic: "'One day *meine Frau,'* he said to her, 'you will be dead, too'" (135). His view on women and sex does not follow the traditional path of the Madonna/whore complex. In a letter to Helen, whom he truly wants to marry, he states that they should marry so he did not have to plan when to have sex (137). Obviously, Garp sees Helen both as his future wife and the mother of his children, and as a desirable sexual partner.[235] "During the nineteenth century, European and American cultures at times insisted on dividing femininity into angelic and demonic, virtuous and vicious types – implying that these apparently opposite poles of good and bad women were in some respect interdependent."[236] In *The World According to Garp* there is a complete break with the view on women as either holy mothers or sinful, erotic beings. Human diversity is celebrated in the presentation of feminism as well as in the presentation of sexuality and gender roles.

2.5 Ideologies and Speech Acts

Jenny's autobiography is interesting in several ways when it comes to both feminism and Foucault's discourses of power. Related to Foucault's theories are Louis Althusser's discussion of ideologies.[237] Because no one can escape being a part of different power relations, Althusser argues that the subject is always already within ideology. Althusser defines ideology as "a representation of the relationship between individuals and their existential conditions."[238] Furthermore, ideology can be used in connection with literary texts: "i.e. the norms, priorities, values which any literary text presents, reflects, and eventually problematizes."[239]

With her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect,* Jenny Fields is without a doubt presenting her "norms, priorities [and] values." Jenny presents her life choices and her individual view on reality. Her writing inspires a large movement of women, who apparently are so heavily influenced by what they have read that many decide to make radical changes in the way they live their lives. The power of literature as an ideology is quite evident here. Jenny's

[235] In this relation, note also the presentation of Cushie Percy that was discussed above.
[236] Bristow, *Sexuality,* 39.
[237] Lothe, Refsum og Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "ideologi."
[238] Lothe, Refsum og Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "ideologi" (my translation).
[239] Lothe, Refsum og Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "ideologi" (my translation).

autobiography works as a powerful feministic ideology, and the fact that she is able to write her own life and her own person is clearly a strength.

Another interesting approach to this fictional autobiography, is via Austin and the original meaning of performativity, or speech acts. A speech act is a linguistic utterance that performs an action.[240] In this connection, one might observe that to say something is to make it true; when Jenny writes that she only wants to do the right thing, she is colouring her actions. "A linguistic utterance which creates instead of describes."[241] Arguably, Jenny is "creating" her actions and choices as good actions and choices. One might say that Jenny believes she is describing, even though she is very much creating. This is especially interesting in connection with the moral nature of her assault on the patient who became Garp's father. She writes that he wanted it to happen, and by writing it down and defining it as "the right thing to do," it is in some ways transformed into truth, even though it is clearly a very questionable choice of action.

This topic could easily be explored in much greater detail, and this subheading has only skimmed its surface, so to speak. For now it is only mentioned as an example of Jenny Fields' powerful feminism, and the feministic strength it is to be able to write oneself.

[240] Lothe, Refsum og Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "talehandlingsteori" (my translation).
This paragraph is partly quoted from my unpublished paper from "Race, Gender, Performativity,"Spring 2011: "Discuss identity as a performance in relation to *The Impressionist* by Hari Kunzru. How are identities/performances influenced by ideas of race, nation and colonialism?"
[241] Lothe, Refsum og Solberg, *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon,* s.v. "performativitet" (my translation).

Conclusion

John Irving is not usually considered a postmodern writer, and there are many valid reasons for this. For instance, one theorist claims that "[t]he postmodernist writer distrusted the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories, and preferred to deal with other ways of structuring narrative,"[242] and there is no doubt that John Irving is a story-teller in a more traditional sense. His novels are easy to read, and they have captured a large audience, which is naturally less common for typically postmodern novels that distort the traditional way of presenting a narrative. Postmodern literature can often be difficult to grasp for the lay reader, and when literature becomes increasingly difficult to understand, its audience will naturally decrease. As already mentioned, Irving's detailed stories with numerous characters resemble his idol Charles Dickens' stories, which, of course, are not postmodern. Though Irving uses temporal disorder in *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* the novel has a rather traditional build-up to a climax towards the end, and the story as a whole is quite coherent. *The World According to Garp* is an even more traditional composition that runs from beginning to end without much complication, though it must not be forgotten that there are some striking breaks in this story as well, namely Garp's own short narratives which are included, sometimes in their totality, in the running text. However, one cannot say that Irving deconstructs or destabilizes what is usually considered the correct way of relating a story. There are also several other aspects that are often associated with postmodernism, but which are not present in Irving's works.[243]

Not Postmodern?

Johnny Wheelwright is arguably somewhat paranoid when it comes to American politics, but that is perhaps the only example of this typically postmodern sense of paranoia, in both *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. The characters of both the novels in question do not seem bothered by this postmodern worry that someone is out to get them. Instead, Jenny and Garp for instance, live rather pragmatic lives (except for Garp's incessant worry about his children). These two characters are hated by so many that they could easily have engaged in a variant of conspiracy theory. Yet, they do not. Furthermore, any sense of a

[242] Lewis, "Postmodernism and Fiction," 116.
[243] The following points of postmodernism are from Erik Kielland-Lund, "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism," Handout.

loss of self or an instability of identity, are not prominent in the two novels. The two protagonists are both deprived of a relationship with their father, and this is often grounds for major questions regarding identity. Johnny Wheelwright in particular does search for his father, probably as a result of his mother's untimely and tragic death. Another way of looking at it, is that Johnny in many ways loses himself when Owen dies. In his adult life, he seems to have become a bitter man. However, his loss of self is not a postmodern one: "For postmodernists, the subject is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time."[244]

Also connected to the destabilization of identity, is modern technology with all its implications. Many postmodernists emphasize the way we tend to focus on what happens on TV instead of our actual lives. If it is not on the news, it has not happened, so to speak. This is connected to what was mentioned in the introduction regarding Baudrillard's claim that the Gulf War was not real; it only happened on television. Even though television does play a small part in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (e.g., 261), it is still not typically postmodern. There are several mentions of how it was introduced to the Wheelwrights, what programs they watch, and the historical events that they can witness, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy. However, the ideas that it only happens on TV, or that TV makes events more real, do not come across. Modern technology is often problematized in postmodern fiction, because "[w]ith the advent of new sciences and technologies, the models that can be produced to understand the world have become more real, more sophisticated and more accurate than reality itself,"[245] and I do not find any indication of this in Irving's novels. In other words, what this modern technology results in is the hyperreal according to Jean Baudrillard: "The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent distinction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model."[246] Neither in *The World According to Garp* nor *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, is there any presentation of reality as a form of hyperreality.

Apparently, neither Irving nor his characters take part in the common postmodern fear that "the real is no longer real."[247] Except for Irving's destabilization of the established truths on gender and sexuality, and the way in which one might interpret gender as a form of simulacra, there is not a representation of the world and reality as simulacra (a copy of

[244] Stuart Sim quoted in Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 57.
[245] Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 94.
[246] Baudrillard quoted in Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 93.
[247] Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 126.

something that has no original). Irving's is a more traditional presentation of the world, where the characters do not question the "reality" of their lives.

"Language [is] seen as constructing and constituting our subjective 'realities.'"[248] This is not a view that is emphasized in the two novels. Even though one might interpret Garp's and Jenny's writing in this direction, I do not think that it is necessarily correct. Garp and Jenny construct realities with their writing, but they do not seem to represent the postmodern notion of the world as constructed out of language. Much as the television and other technologies do not constitute the characters' reality, language is not constructing their lives.

In postmodernism, materialism often seems to be the new promise of fulfillment. The notion of simulacra is tied to mass production, which again is tied to capitalism: "For some postmodern theorists, it is not just objects but also images, ideas and people that are in danger of being reduced entirely to commodities by international capitalism."[249] Neither Irving nor his characters seem afraid of or even interested in capitalism and its effect on people.

Or Postmodern?

Even though it is clear that Irving does not belong among the more experimental postmodernists, I have tried to explore how even a writer like him might be said to be influenced by the dominant literary direction of the 1970's and the 1980's. In my thesis I have focused on those aspects of these novels which could possibly be seen as postmodern. Most critics agree that "it cannot be said that these [postmodernist] writers ...formed a unified movement for which a coherent theory could be formulated,"[250] which means that there is a wide range of characteristics that has been tied to postmodernism. I have tried to focus on some of the most established postmodern parameters, with a discussion of more technical qualities like intertextuality, metafiction, and parody, and certain thematic points like sexuality, gender roles, and feminism.

The increased importance of intertextuality in postmodernism is a somewhat difficult point to handle. In order to determine whether or not its importance is increased in Irving's novels, a comparison with other non-postmodern novels is required, and non-postmodern novels obviously do not all inhabit the same level of intertextuality. In my discussion of the novels, I have established that there are numerous instances of intertextuality to be identified there. However, the prevalence of intertextuality alone is hardly enough to determine if

[248] Erik Kielland-Lund, "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism," Handout.
[249] Malpas, *The Postmodern*, s.v. "commodity."
[250] Raymond Federman quoted in Lewis, "Postmodernism and Fiction," 112.

Irving's fiction is postmodern, because intertextuality is not exclusive to postmodernism. How can we really determine whether it is a postmodern repetition of earlier works, or if the author is just employing one of the most common literary tools? Instead, the discussion of intertextuality in the novels serves more as a foundation for both metafiction and parody, which may both indicate a much stronger connection to postmodernism.

Furthermore, intertextuality is complicated because of its different definitions. It is usually Julia Kristeva's form of intertextuality that is connected with postmodernism, but as explained, this is difficult to use in an actual analysis. However, the use of parody in *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* as well as the way some of the episodes from both novels are colored by preceding narrations and stories, are possible examples of Kristeva's point. Still, to focus on specific literary references is not how Kristeva's theories are usually interpreted. This is another reason why intertextuality alone is not a good enough indicator of postmodernism, at least in this analysis.

Self-conscious and self-reflexive literature is easier to interpret, as well as use in a conclusion on postmodernism. *The World According to Garp* is very much a self-conscious novel, with its repeated presentations of Garp's writings, in addition to the characters' comments on the works they create. The effect of this is a "loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse."[251] *A Prayer for Owen Meany,* with Owen's speech in capital letters, could perhaps also be called self-conscious, but not at all to the same degree. As discussed, these capital letters work more as a connection to Jesus' speech in the Bible (which is sometimes written in red). I believe that *A Prayer for Owen Meany*'s connection with, and parody of, the Bible is perhaps the most postmodern aspects of this novel, both because parody is the most postmodern of genres, according to Linda Hutcheon, and because of the disparate nature of religion and postmodernism. By inverting and parodying the religious story of the New Testament, Irving kills two birds with one postmodern stone.

When it comes to the possibly postmodern themes in these two Irving novels, I find it important to emphasize once again that there is a discrepancy between certain views on postmodernism. Some postmodernists argue for an absolute relativism, where Truth is dead and where the ideas of moral rules or a desire to improve society, are self-contradictory. I will therefore repeat and stress Linda Hutcheon's opinion that one may see postmodernism as a school of thought which opens up for the possibility of political change and improvement. With support from the theories of Michel Foucault, who like Irving does not wish to be called

[251] Lewis, "Postmodernism and Fiction," 113.

a postmodernist, it is possible to adjust the predominant position of relativism. Even though one of postmodernism's most characteristic goals is to destabilize established truths, this does not mean that "anything goes." The discussion of how Irving places himself in relation to this death of Truth versus binding moral norms, is therefore very interesting.

There is no question that Irving is fighting for greater acceptance of different sexualities and the destabilization of the so-called truths of essential gender qualities. Characters like Garp, John, Roberta, Jenny, and Hester, all prove that there are no natural connections between body, femininity/masculinity, and sexual desire. Yet his depictions of the possible connections between sex and punishment (especially with women), seem quite ambivalent, both in terms of how they can be interpreted, and whether or not they can be considered postmodern. However, one possible interpretation of this is that the absurd chains of events that are displayed on several occasions, satirize any notion of sex as "bad". Especially the links between Helen's infidelity and Walt's death, and Tabitha's affair and her death by a wayward baseball, are just a little bit too far-fetched for a realistic representation. Therefore, one might claim that these presentations also support the interpretation of Irving as a postmodern writer. On the other hand, they could also indicate an old-fashioned and basically Christian view of the world, but for obvious reasons, this is much less likely.

When it comes to feminism, I have found that Irving is presenting a postmodern view. He is clearly criticizing the more traditional forms of feminism, and emphasizing that one should be able to do as one pleases, without having to consider meaningless customs or new, powerful and influential directions (e.g., the Ellen James Society). Foucault's insistence that one must always consider the moral nature of one's actions, resonates in the character of Jenny Fields, and her insistence that she only wishes to do the right thing. Furthermore, Garp's view on women inverts the traditional presentation of females in literature as either angelic or sinful, as do the portrayals of both Helen, Jenny, and Tabitha. The fact that such diversity within the category of women is an indisputable fact, comes across clearly in these two Irving novels, making them representations of postmodern feminism.

•••

In general, Irving is a writer who is influenced by the time he lives in, much like any writer would be. He is not your average postmodern writer, and though there are postmodern aspects in his novels, it is not the first thing that comes to mind when reading them. However, I find that my discussion of important points in the novels has made it clear that there are many

examples in the two novels that may be used as illustrations of some of the most typical characteristics of postmodernism. The distinct use of metafiction in *The World According to Garp*, as well as this novel's repeated outspoken views on gender and sexuality, may clearly be seen to be typical of the postmodern novel. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*'s parodic inversion of the New Testament and the overall presentation of religion and religious practice, are no doubt its main postmodern strands; this novel is in many ways permeated by parody. Its temporal disorder and its untrustworthy and somewhat paranoid narrator, are also relevant indicators of postmodernism.

Works Cited:

Primary Sources:

Irving, John. *The World According to Garp.* New York: Ballantine Books, 2009. Originally published in 1978.

Irving, John. *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* New York: William Morrow, 2012. Originally published in 1989.

Secondary Sources:

Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. 2nd edn. Oxford: Routledge, 2011.

Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography.* 2nd edn. Oxford: Routledge, 2001.

Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History.* London: Routledge, 1995.

Bertens, Hans, and Joseph Natoli, eds. *Postmodernism: The Key Figures.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002.

> Bertens, Hans. "Jean-Francois Lyotard". In *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*. 244-248.
>
> Racevskis, Karlis. "Michel Foucault". In *Postmodernism: The Key Figures.* 136-140.

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism.* Oxford: Routledge, 2004.

Bristow, Joseph. *Sexuality.* 2nd edn. London: Routledge, 2011.

Butler, Christopher. *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York/London: Routledge, 1990.

Campbell, Josie. *John Irving: A Critical Companion.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Colebrook, Claire. *Irony.* Oxford: Routledge, 2004.

Davis, Todd F., and Kenneth Womack eds. *The Critical Response to John Irving*. Westport: Praeger, 2004.

French, Marilyn. "The Garp Phenomenon". In *The Critical Response to John Irving.* 74-78.

McKay, Kim. "Double Discourse in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*". In *The Critical Response to John Irving.* 78-92.

Dickens, Charles. *The Christmas Books: A Christmas Carol, The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth.* London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

Grass, Gunter. *The Tin Drum.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959. Translation by Breon Mitchell (2009).

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance.* In *The Scarlet Letter: and Other Writings*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. Edited by Leland S. Person. 4-166.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* Oxford: Routledge, 1988.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism.* 2nd edn. Oxford: Routledge, 1989.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody.* Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Irving, John. "My Favorite First Sentence." In John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. New York: William Morrow, 1989. Article from 2002.

Kielland-Lund, Erik. "Don DeLillo in the Context of American Postmodernism." 26.09.2004. Lecture handout.

Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. London: Pocket Books, 2006.

Lodge, David, and Nigel Wood, eds. *Modern Criticism and Theory.* 3rd edn. London: Pearson Education Limited, 2008.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse". In *Modern Criticism and Theory.* 235-263.

Bartes, Roland. "The Death of the Author". In *Modern Criticism and Theory.* 313-316.

Jakobson, Roman. "Linguistics and Poetics". In *Modern Criticism and Theory.* 141-164.

Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society". In *Modern Criticism and Theory.* 542-554.

Lothe, Jakob. " ENG2321/ENG4361 Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Narrative." 03.02.2009. Lecture handout.

Lothe, Jakob, Christian Refsum, Unni Solberg. *Litteraturvitenskapelig Leksikon.* 2nd edn. Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget, 2007.

Malpas, Simon. *The Postmodern.* Oxford: Routledge, 2005.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction.* London: Routledge, 1987.

Mills, Sara. *Discourse.* 2nd edn. London: Routledge, 2004.

Sim, Stuart, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism.* 2nd edn. Oxford: Routledge, 2005.

Anderson, Pamela S. "Postmodernism and Religion". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism.* 45-50.

Lewis, Barry. "Postmodernism and Fiction". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism.* 111-121.

Thornham, Sue. "Postmodernism and Feminism". In *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism.* 24-34.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* Ed. Terence Hawkes. London: Routledge, 1984.

Internet Sources:

- Coontz, Stephanie. "Why Gender Equality Stalled". 16.02.2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/why-gender-equality-stalled.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 19.04.2013).

- Eckholm, Espen. "Boy Scouts Move to Lift Ban on Gay Youth Members". 19.04.2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/boy-scouts-move-to-lift-ban-on-gay-members.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 21.04.2013).

- Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History". In *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction,* eds. P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, (1989): 3-32. http://hdl.handle.net/1807/10252 (accessed 15.08.2012).

- Irwin, William. "Against Intertextuality". In *Philosophy and Literature* , vol. 28, nr. 2, (October 2004): 227-242. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/philosophy_and_literature/v028/28.2irwin.pdf (accessed 04.05.2013).

- Kaluza, Susanne. "Oppskjørta: Når pappa er superhelt i kjole". 28.01.2013, http://www.susannekaluza.com/?p=3115 (accessed 18.04.2013).

- Marsh, Jan. "Sex and Sexuality in the 19th Century". http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/sex-and-sexuality-19th-century/ (accessed 21.04.2013).

- Philip, Page. "Hero Worship and Hermeneutical Dialectics: John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany". Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature,* vol. 28, nr. 3, (September, 1995): 137-156. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-

2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:mla:R02964957:0 (accessed 17.10.2012).

- Wilson III, Raymond J. " The Postmodern Novel: The Example of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*", *Critique*, VOL. XXXIV, NO.1, (Fall, 1992), 49-62. http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:rec:mla:R02841998 (accessed 01.09.2012).

- BBC World Book Club Interview with John Irving. http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/wbc/all (accessed 21.04.2013).

- http://john-irving.com/john-irving-author-q-a/ (accessed 09.04.2013).