

Subversion of Literary Conventions in John Irving's Novels *The World According To Garp* and *Last Night in Twisted River*

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ABSTRACT

John Irving is a prominent American storyteller whose plot-driven novels are full of memorable characters. Despite his influences from Victorian novelists, his narratives are unconventional and complex, with various discourses intertwined. Irving's novels, The World According to Garp and Last Night in Twisted River contain absurd "flat" characters and grotesque incidents. Violence, death and humour are dominant in The World According to Garp. Powerful depictions of the main character, Danny, and the way his imaginative world works parallels the "real" story (Irving's fictional story). By incorporating into his stories various popular genres such as detective story Irving transgresses the boundary between high and low art, and through metafictional techniques he, as Patricia Waugh would put it, "lays bare the conventions of realistic techniques."

KEYWORDS

Metafiction, framing devices, violence, death, postmodern, John Irving, *The World According to Garp*, *Last Night in Twisted River*

John Irving's novels in the context of conventional and experimental narrative

Austrian professor Monika Fludernik states that "the presence of conversational narrative all around us explains why elements of this everyday, oral storytelling find their way into literary narratives. [...] Postmodern narratives, too, imitate certain aspects of spoken narrative for ideological reasons or in order to show how different they are from established literary models."¹ Traditional realist texts are characterized by narrative closure (identity is established, the murder is exposed). This is the case with many 19th century novels, such as those written by George Eliot and Charles Dickens. Since then the novel had to transform along with the dramatic changes in the history of the world, particularly in Western Europe, where the novel as a prose genre has developed for several centuries. Novelists reacted to these profound changes by experimenting with the form of the novel, finding new ways to describe reality through writing, employing various techniques of recording characters' speech as well as using discoveries in sciences such as psychology. On one hand, they radically diverted from traditional realist mode of representation of reality (from *mimetic* representation of the reality, to borrow the term from Aristotle). This was reflected in painting as well through anti-mimetic forms used by Cubists, for example. Modernists borrowed terms such as stream of consciousness to describe the continuity of experiences and impressions of an individual as recorded in a written narrative. Narratives and poems of high modernism show anti-mimetic perspectives (the structure of Joyce and Don Passos' novels, and T.S. Eliot's poetry are typical examples). However, the modernists often problematised the role of the narrator by using free indirect discourse, sometimes even discarding the presence of a mediator between the text and the recipient; this is manifested in figural speech, an example being Hemingway's iceberg theory and his use of dialogue without introductory sentences.

1 Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (Routledge: New York, 2009), 111.

Postmodernist texts are typically disjointed, fragmented, and full of intertextual links. The metafictional technique is often employed by the novelists who try to subvert the conventions of traditional storytelling. "In postmodernism [...] diegesis has been foregrounded with a focus on the process of narration itself."² John Irving often "tells" us rather than "shows" us about action through commentary and summary. Postmodern writers turned to fabulation and their fiction was aimed at a broader audience; this distinguishes them from their predecessors the modernists, whose works were often difficult to follow or draw meaning from (Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"). Unlike postmodern novelists, the fiction of Victorian writers was mostly uniform, with one controlling voice, and focused on diegesis as their narrative mode. Modernist and postmodernist novels are polyphonic, which means that various voices and points of view are incorporated in their structure. Similarly, John Irving brings together characters' speeches with the sarcastic and humorous voice of the anonymous narrator.

The realist novel went out of fashion in the Anglo-American literary tradition in the 20th century, with only a few writers such as John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett continuing in the tradition. Storytelling and realist representation did not disappear, but became overshadowed by other modes of literary expression after World War II, namely non-fiction writing (New Journalism), metafictional writing, magic realism, and other experimental forms. John Irving is one writer who based his stories on traditional storytelling in the fashion of 19th century fiction writers. However, his novels would not have been so popular if they merely copied, for example, the narratives of Dickens, who has had a major influence of Irving. John Irving's novels share many features with the experimental authors of the literary postmodernism.

Metafiction and framing devices

Writers of metafiction reject the traditional figure of the author as a transcendental imagination, fabricating, through an ultimately monologic discourse. The metafictional novel is a celebration of the creative imagination, a fabulation.³ John Irving's novel *The World According to Garp* contains a multilayered plot. Stories within stories play an important role in the meaning, since the narrator continually draws attention to them by making comments. *The Bedford Glossary* defines metafiction as "a literary term popularized by Robert Scholes to describe novels that specifically and self-consciously examine the nature and status of fiction itself, and that often contain experiments to test fiction as a form in one way or another"⁴. John Irving's characters, such as Jenny (Garp's mother), Helen (Garp's wife), professor Tinch, Jilly Sloper (a cleaning lady), or an anonymous narrator make both positive and negative remarks and comments about the works Garp has written and which are part of the novel *The World According to Garp*. Especially Jilly Sloper, to whom the book is ultimately dedicated, both praises and condemns Garp's

2 W. Randolph Tate, *Interpreting the Bible: a handbook of terms and methods* (Hendrickson: Publishers, 2006), 103.

3 Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of the Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 16.

4 Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 210.

novel, saying: “this book’s so sick you know something’s gonna happen, but you can’t imagine what [...] There surely ain’t no other reason to read a book, is there?”⁵

“The Pension Grillparzer,” one of the short stories written by the main hero – writer Garp, (broken into two pieces) had previously been published as a John Irving short story in *Antaeus* (a literary quarterly) in 1976, two years before *The World According to Garp* ultimately came out as well as later, in 1996, when it was included in the collection of short stories and memoirs *Trying to Save the Piggy Sneed*. This shows the way contemporary writers play with the form of their stories and subvert the traditional understanding of a novel as being a closed form containing a linear narrative. Framing devices (novel within a novel, or story within a story) are common in prose, but they are laid bare in metafiction.

The narrator informs the readers at the beginning of the novel *Last Night in Twisted River* that “THE YOUNG CANADIAN, WHO COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE than fifteen, had hesitated too long.”⁶ This information is communicated through first-degree narrative. At the very end of the novel the narrator puzzles the reader by attributing the same utterance to his main character:

Just then, without even trying to think of it – in fact, at that moment, Daniel Baciagalupo had reached out to rub Hero behind the dog’s good ear – the first sentence came to him [...] “The young Canadian, who could not have been more than fifteen, had hesitated too long.” Oh God – here I go again – I’m starting! the writer thought.⁷

This is second degree narrative, and breaking the different levels of narrative is another feature of postmodern fiction.

If Patricia Waugh refers to metafiction as “a fabulation” and gives the reader a “far more active role in the construction of the meaning of the text”, John Irving’s novel fits this description. The stories Irving includes in his novel (written by his characters) have completely different spatio-temporal nature in comparison with the diegesis of the story in the novel. However, besides the descriptions and implications the readers get from the main story there are stories within stories which illuminate the main protagonist’s qualities both as a writer as well as those of an individual in the (fictional) world. Thus, the readers of all stories (the novel and its stories within stories) must work hard to get to the meaning of the novel by bridging the gap between two different ontological levels – between the diegesis of the story and the overtly made-up story (written by Garp). The narrator reaffirms the reader that “Helen would later say that it is in the conclusion of ‘The Pension of the Grillparzer’ that we can glimpse what the world according to Garp would be like.”⁸

Bridging the gap between high and low literature

Postmodern authors are known to use up-to-date and slang vocabulary in their novels, as well as conventions of popular genre forms such as detective fiction and references to popular music or pornography. Humour and absurd situations are the backbone of

the narrative in Irving’s bestseller *The World According to Garp*. This is achieved through his use of slang in both dialogue and narrator’s comments. When the child Garp is nowhere to be found in the infirmary, the narrator sarcastically comments: “She [Jenny] checked the boiler room and the scalding, huge, hot-water furnace, but Garp had not been cooked there.”⁹ Various metanarrative and ironic comments from the narrator add to the comic effect of the novel.

Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag described a gap between high art/serious literature and popular art/pulp fiction, in order to describe the new literature by authors such as John Barth, Leonard Cohen, and Norman Mailer, and at the same time to re-assess the inclusion in the literary canon such maligned genres such as science fiction, the western, erotic literature and the other subgenres.¹⁰

“The World According to Bensenhaver” is both one chapter of the book written by Garp and one of the chapters in *The World According to Garp*. Readers are not presented with further chapters from Garp’s book; however, Irving gives a description of the book along with a brief synopsis. It is a typical detective story containing a detective, a villain, a victim, and a suspenseful chase. It starts *in medias res*, and Irving plays with perspectives and creates ambivalent feelings in the reader. While one of the main characters, a woman named Hope is being abducted by a rapist Rath and driven away in a van, her husband is looking out of the window of his office and spots a rushing van in which a woman reminds him of his wife. However, it is improbable that it might be her in such a dirty van. The implications and conflicts within the story copy those of the world according to Garp. One difference between traditional detective stories, say by Agatha Christie or Arthur Conan Doyle, and Irving’s tale is in the structure of the story and the characterisation. While in traditional detective stories the protagonists are the culprits who commit the crime, the victim who suffers, and the detective who tries to solve the case, in Irving’s detective story the incidents are prolonged by the anguished cry of the main character (Hope) after killing the murderer (Oren Rath). Irving provides a detailed and vivid description, full of dirty language. Furthermore, through free indirect speech, Irving mixes two seemingly incompatible images: that of the anxiety felt in a situation such as rape and murder with the free association that Hope was having at that moment. Hope misinterprets the sound of the helicopter engines as that of a tornado.

I should get dressed, Hope thought. But something seemed wrong with the weather. Out the truck windows [...] Hope saw the gravel at the roadside was lifted up in little swirls [...] And the noise! It was like being in the afterblow of a speeding truck, but there was still no traffic on the road. It’s a tornado! Hope thought [...] She was so angry, she struck the cool, viscid thigh of Oren Rath. After she had lived through this, now there was a fucking tornado, too!¹¹

This digression within a traditional popular genre creates a parodying effect, which corresponds with Jaroslav Kušnir’s view that “postmodern literature has often used and at the same time parodied the narrative conventions of popular literature”.¹²

5 John Irving, *The World According to Garp* (London: Black Swan, 1986), 424. Page number references to follow refer to this edition.

6 John Irving, *Last Night in Twisted River* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), 4.

7 Irving, *Last Night in Twisted River*, 554.

8 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 166.

9 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 48.

10 “Cross_the_Border_Close_the_Gap.” The Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia. 5 May 2010. http://artandpopularculture.com/Cross_the_Border_-_Close_the_Gap

11 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 403.

12 Jaroslav Kušnir, *American Fiction: Modernism – Postmodernism, Popular Culture, and Metafiction*. (Prešov: Impreso, 2003), 39

Irving's *The World According to Garp* not only features popular literature, such as the detective story, but porno magazines such as in which Garp's first chapter of the novel "The World According to Bensenhaver" is published. But *Garp* also appeals self-consciously to a wider audience through its straightforward, often foul language. The distinction between high and low culture is evident in Irving's/ Garp's characters' use of vulgar language, as well as references to sexuality and pornography. Garp's fiction appears in porno magazines, such as *Crotch Shots*.¹³ Moreover, on extra-fictional level, the reader is informed about author's acknowledgement that his novel *The World According to Garp* has also appeared "in different form in the following magazines: *Antaeus*, *Esquire*, *Gallery*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, *Ploughshares*, and *Swank*." (Author's acknowledgement) This all is reflected in Irving's novel and appeals to a wide scope of his audience. As Kelly Boyer Sagert remarks,

during the 1970s [to discuss] sexuality, to read about sex, and to watch plays and movies about sex became significantly easier – and more acceptable. For example, during the 1960s mainstream women magazines discussed cohabitation – the arrangement wherein an intimate couple lives together without the benefit of marriage – in a cautious, even hesitant, manner.¹⁴

Irving also relies on the opinion of ordinary people, those often from the marginalised society. "There was a woman in the publishing house [...]. She was a cleaning woman [...]. When he [John Wolf] asked her about books and she told him how unlikable they were to her, he kept using her to test books he wasn't sure of."¹⁵ This confirms a distinct break in understanding popular culture in the postmodern age, but also a shift towards a wider audience which can be understood as a parody on the modernist focus on elitist readership. Irving's use of the traditional popular genre of detective story as well as his use of pornography in his novel shows this blurring of distinctions between mass culture and highbrow literature. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernist artists "have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, [...] the popular autobiography, the murder mystery: material they no longer quote [...] but incorporate into their very substance."¹⁶

The reversal of genre features is expressed in content as well as in form when the narrator himself reviews the novel: "*The World According to Bensenhaver* – a short story written by Garp is about the impossible desire of the husband, Dorsey Standish, to protect his wife and child from the brutal world."¹⁷ At the level of content, characters' roles are subverted. Normally, after the resolution an order is restored – culprits are arrested. The part in the novel full of sexual violence is portrayed in detail, sometimes in grotesque and eerie ways. The rest of Garp's story (in the narrator's summary) shows what life after a "happy ending" is like. The readers' expectations are thwarted, as traditional detective stories offer good and bad characters that end happily or sadly, but never absurdly or grotesquely. This shift in focus of attention can be viewed as a parody of genre and is a striking feature of postmodern narrative. The morally incorrupt detective

13 According to the *Urban Dictionary*, "'Crotch shot' means a quick frame, usually in a music video or movie, that shows a man's crotch covered with pants. Most likely used to draw in a female audience."

14 Kelly Boyer Sagert, *The 1970s: American Popular Culture Through History* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 64.

15 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 420-421.

16 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism," *New Left Review* 143 (1984): 53-94. qtd. in Joe Nicholas and John Price, *Advanced studies in media* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd., 1998), 82.

17 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 417-418.

is expected to be rational and helpful. After Hope, apparently the main protagonist, is freed, Arden Bensenhaver becomes the centre of attention, and personally involved and obsessed with Hope and her life. Grotesque descriptions highlight the subversion and parodying effect of the genre.

Hope insists they have another child, but the events have made Standish [Hope's husband] determinedly sterile. He agrees that Hope should encourage her lover – but merely to impregnate herself [...] Suspecting that Hope is meeting her lover clandestinely [...] Standish alerts the senile Bensenhaver to the existence of a prowler, a potential kidnapper and rapist [...] Bensenhaver [...] has a stroke. Partially paralyzed, he moves back with the Standishes. [...] He shoots Dorsey [Hope's husband].¹⁸

Last Night in Twisted in River also features parodying effects. John Irving parodies a traditional prose genre of Western film. Constable Carl ("Cowboy") is the local law officer in Twisted River who spends his time breaking up bar-fights and sending French Canadians looking for work back to Quebec. He is often drunk, foul-mouthed and regularly beats up his girlfriends. He decides to pursue Dominic in retaliation – he wants to kill him.

Patricia Waugh argues how the "use of popular forms in 'serious fiction' is therefore crucial for undermining narrow and rigid critical definitions of what constitutes, or is appropriately to be termed 'good literature'".¹⁹

The notion of violence and death in postmodern narrative

Violence and death are closely linked with grotesque and black humour. According to one definition of black comedy, it is "a kind of drama (or, by extension, a non-dramatic work) in which disturbing or sinister subjects like death, disease, or warfare, are treated with bitter amusement, usually in a manner calculated to offend and shock."²⁰ Violence too has become a common subject of twentieth century writers, and with the help of the media many forms of violence have become commonplace. In the wake of such authors as Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, John Irving continues to depict the anxieties of the world, (especially sexual violence in society) by analyzing their causes, effects and possible resolutions.

Death and dying also play a crucial role in the novel in various forms – comic, brutal, grotesque, or abstract. We often learn about the death of the characters, however, in a light-hearted tone. Death is presented as a natural and inevitable part of our life, one which takes an infinite number of absurd but possible forms: "Randolph Percy was called Dopey until his dying day."²¹ Jenny's older brother would be killed in a sailboat; characters are assassinated by radical feminists (Garp) and some by anti-feminists (Jenny Fields); others die in accidents (Walt), and one even dies of a heart-attack while reading pornography (Ernie Holm). Death is random, and there is hardly any time to feel sympathy for the characters.

Death is a recurring motif in the novel and has various connotations. It is seen as an inevitable part of life, as is demonstrated in numerous incidents. We are all

18 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 418-419.

19 Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of the Self-Conscious Fiction*, 86.

20 "Black humour," Answers.com. 15 June 2009. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/black-comedy>>

21 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 70.

“terminal cases,” as Garp reminds us throughout the novel. Secondly, it has a metaphorical meaning as it is applied to inanimate objects. Thus, Vienna can be “in its death phase.”²² Next, death is used in Garp’s contemplation and philosophical discussion. In a letter to his reader, Garp tells a story in which death is depicted in various ways – both in a serious and mocking or ironic tone: “Alongside death by starvation, this method of enormous dying must seem funny, or at least quick, to an undernourished Indian.”²³ Paradoxically, the positive side of death is seen after Garp’s death, when he is finally established as a famous figure.

It sometimes nauseated him [Wolf] to see how violent death was so good for business [...] Garp’s rare manner of dying was, in fact, so perfect that John Wolf had to smile when he imagined how pleased Garp would have been with it. It was a death, Wolf thought, which in its random, stupid, and unnecessary qualities – comic and ugly and bizarre – underlined everything Garp had ever written about. It was a death scene [...] that only Garp could have written.²⁴

Garp writes death scenes in his own stories, and together with his wife predicts the way he will die. Lastly, death is personified by Garp when he says that “Death, it seems, [...] does not like to wait until we are prepared for it. Death is indulgent and enjoys, when it can, a flair for the dramatic.”²⁵

Death is often foreshadowed by the concept of Under Toad (derived from the word “undertow” which is mispronounced by one of Garp’s sons). This a play on words becomes a code phrase in Garp’s family, referring to any kind of danger possible at that moment which could result in death. At the end of the novel in an epilogue readers are reminded of what the rest of the characters do after Garp has died, and how they themselves will die. But death as a natural end of life is contrasted here with fictional death willed the writer - narrator, or even a character. All characters live on, as they are fictional. Garp says: “[Writers] must try to keep everyone alive, forever. Even the ones who must die in the end. They’re the most important to keep alive.”²⁶ Therefore, suspending disbelief, readers are made to believe in the existence of the characters depicted. On the other hand, readers feel detached from the story time of the characters by the remarks and comments from the narrator and retrospective accounts of characters. Sentiment diminishes and grotesque and black humour can therefore come into effect to divert the reader’s attention from negative connotations of death.

Death is closely connected with other elements, such as the grotesque, comic situations, and black humour. Silvia Pokrivčáková describes the interconnectedness between death and the grotesque: “Death in this system is not regarded as a negation of life [. . .] Death fits with life as its inevitable part, as a precondition for its constant renewal and rejuvenation [. . .] death in the grotesque is not regarded tragic at all.”²⁷ Since “telling” prevails over “showing” in the narrative, Irving is able to give all the tragic events a humorous tone. Pokrivčáková further concludes: “Tragedy slowly fades

away in postmodern literature.”²⁸ The dichotomy of death/life is apparent from the beginning of the novel. Garp’s father dies in a grotesque way while giving life to his son. Death produces or retains life. In the end Garp dies, but remains alive through the fiction: he becomes a celebrity. In a state of drunkenness, he anticipates his destiny:

“Do you want to know how I die?” Garp asked them. [Helen, Harris and Alice] They didn’t say anything. “I kill myself,” Garp said, pleasantly. “In order to become fully established, that seems almost necessary [...] Killing yourself seems to mean that you were serious after all.”²⁹

Similar descriptions of incidents which seek to evoke both sympathy and astonishment in readers can also be found in Irving’s latest novel. The grotesque and absurd images of fatal events bring something new to a family saga as the humorous and unrealistic blends with the plausible. Daniel, a 12-year-old boy, mistakes his father Dominic’s lover Jane for a bear. In a panic, he attacks the bear with an eight-inch cast-iron frying pan and kills Jane:

Jane must have heard the boy utter her name, because she raised her head and turned to face him. That was why the skillet caught her full-force on her right temple. The ringing sound, a dull but deep gong, was followed by a stinging sensation young Dan first felt in his hands...For the rest of his life [...] it would be a small consolation to Danny Baciagalupo that he didn’t see the expression on Jane’s pretty face when the skillet struck her.³⁰

Violence and death are recurring images in many of Irving’s novels. John Irving depicts those phenomena in a light-hearted and humorous tone. The grotesque and absurd take turns with seriousness and tragedy. In this way the novels are built upon their tightly-woven plots with lots of suspense and unpredictable incidents.

Conclusion

Irving’s use of the popular fictional form of detective story as part of the diegesis of the main story as well as a story within the story is subverted and parodic. His interest in subjects such as sexuality and pornography and their subsequent subversion through his play with language, as well as his use of black humour and irony mark a distinct rejection of distinctions between high and low (or popular) culture. This shows Irving’s focus on his play with readers’ expectations through depicting shocking incidents full of random coincidences and taboo topics. This makes his novels attractive not only to critics but to a wider public.

It is also humour, often bawdy and dirty, that captivates readers. The grotesque comes in succession black humour, evoking absurdity and joy simultaneously. Grotesquerie is associated with death, which is foregrounded in every situation and has varied appearances, ranging from direct to abstract representations, having animate as well as inanimate characteristics, and evoking both absurd and sentimental feelings. This is typical of many American post-war novelists.

22 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 121.

23 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 226.

24 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 539-540.

25 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 479.

26 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 570.

27 Silvia Pokrivčáková, “Textové podoby postmoderny. Vizuálna poézia, próza, dráma,” [Textual forms of the postmodern: visual poetry, prose, drama] ed. T. Žilka (Nitra: VŠPg, 1995), 122. (my translation)

28 Pokrivčáková, “Textové podoby postmoderny. Vizuálna poézia, próza, dráma,” 129.

29 Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 438.

30 Irving, *Last Night in Twisted River*, 94-95.

Using metafictional techniques, Irving undermines the conventions of realism. This is achieved through the disregarding of literary techniques such as the suspension of disbelief. Irving uses many metafictional techniques, many not necessarily overt. Irving's vision is also similar to some of his contemporaries in that he presents the world in America as a zone full of its own rules, with inexplicable and bizarre coincidences causing often fatal results, sometimes imagined rather than perceived. Irving's vision of the world in both novels, *The World According to Garp* and *Last Night in Twisted River*, is a combination of late modernist interest in stylistic innovation, Victorian plot-driven novels and postmodernists' focus on playfulness, ambiguity, and self-consciousness.

John Irving's novels *The World According to Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*). His research interests include American postmodern fiction, namely the poetics of John Irving and Tom Robbins.

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