

ONE TEXT, MULTIPLE AUTHORS: A METAFICTIONAL READING OF IRVING'S *THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP*

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ABSTRACT

*Metafiction as a form of writing makes the reader aware of the process of creating fiction. It explicitly shows the reader the fictional quality of a novel and celebrates the power of creative imagination along with self-consciousness about language. John Irving's *The World According to Garp* is an exemplary metafiction which includes multiple narratives within its scope and accommodates more than one author in the same. John Irving might be the technical author of the text but there are, if not more, at least three other authors viz., T. S. Garp, Jenny Fields (two aspiring authors within the text) and the reader who complete the meaning of the text. This paper intends to subvert the role of the reader into a co-author along with Irving and the fictional authors and understand the dynamics of interpretation within the text. This paper would closely study the metafictional tendencies of the novel highlighting the reader's point of view and would try to uncover the layered meanings within the narrative.*

KEYWORDS: *Author, Metafiction, Narratives, Reader, Self-Consciousness, Writing*

INTRODUCTION

A metafictional narrative consists of a fictional story and an underlined narrative about the procedure of creating that story. Metafiction is a celebration of the power of creative imagination along with the self-consciousness about language and the act of writing fiction. It blurs the fine line between fiction and reality, and creates a relationship between the writer and the reader in order to bring out the meaning of the text. It allows the reader to question the existing structures and provides an alternative vision. Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction can be considered as a standard explanation of what metafiction actually does: 'Metafiction is 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. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.'

^[1] This definition precisely provides an overview of what metafiction is and what it does. However, it does not comply with all the functions that metafiction performs. Metafiction actually moves beyond definition to defy the concept of adhering to a certain set of norms for writing fiction. It tends to move towards the unknown. Metafiction is explained by Robert Scholes as an assimilation of all the perspectives of criticism; namely formal criticism, structural criticism, behavioral criticism and philosophical criticism into the fictional process itself. In his book *Elements of Literature* he says:

Fiction is not reality but the illusion of reality. The writer of fiction is a verbal magician whose aim is to deceive us into accepting a collection of words as the equivalent of actual experience. In recent years this depiction has weighed on the consciousness of certain writers to such an extent that they have felt obliged to write about it. Rather than deceive their readers by pretending to tell them what is true, these writers hope to make their readers aware of the truth about the deception that is fiction. We call such writing about fiction in the form of fiction 'metafiction'.^[2]

In this definition, Scholes suggests that it is the writer's awareness of critical methods that provides the added perspective that joins the 'meta' to the 'fiction'. The prefix 'meta' when affixed to 'fiction'; extends the periphery of meaning. It gives the author the liberty to play with the set norms of writing fiction and uses the same in an innovative manner to critique the form in the process of creating. Metafictional novelist works simultaneously as a creator and a critic.

The World According to Garp as a Metafiction

In the afterword of the novel *The World According to Garp*, entitled 'Twenty Years Ago' John Irving discusses the issues his book talks about. He writes: "And at another time, *The World According to Garp* began with chapter 3 ('What he wanted to be when he grew up') – for isn't the novel also about that? Garp wants to be a writer; it is a novel about a novelist, although, almost no reader of the book remembers it as such."^[3] Irving acknowledges the fact that he wanted his novel to be one about a novelist and his writing endeavors, but his readers never bothered to highlight that aspect of his novel. *The World According to Garp* is the story of two aspiring writers T. S. Garp and his mother Jenny Fields who becomes famous as a radical feminist. The novel begins before Garp's birth and documents the entire life of Garp and days after his death. The story opens with Jenny Fields, a young aspiring nurse with an unconventional desire. She wants to have a child but does not want a husband or companion or any kind of commitment towards another person, she wants complete control over her life. The horrors of the war grants Jenny's wish. Nursing the wounded soldiers in a stateside hospital during the Second World War, she comes across a dying ball turret gunner known as Technical Sergeant Garp, who had a severe brain damage, and was a terminal patient. Due to his improper brain function, Sergeant Garp was having autonomic sexual arousal. Her desire to have a child and her practicality made Jenny take this opportunity, she rapes him and impregnates herself using his semen resulting in the protagonist of the novel T. S. Garp. Jenny takes a job at Steering School in New England and raises Garp alone. As Garp grows up he becomes inclined towards wrestling and writing fiction. In 1961, after Garp's graduation, Jenny and Garp go to Vienna, where they start to write. After returning to Steering Garp marries Helen and continues his ventures with writing. The publication of Jenny's autobiography *A Sexual Suspect* marks a turning point in the novel along with changing the lives of the characters within. *A Sexual Suspect* makes Jenny a famous feminist icon, the book becomes a manifesto for women who want to live their lives on their own terms. Jenny becomes a public figure who nurtures and supports women in distress. Garp matures to be an overprotective father fighting all the odds of the world to keep his children safe. The novel moves forward with incidents and accidents that make the characters change and grow.

The World According to Garp embodies a number of themes that also recur in Irving's other novels, like love, death, sex, lust, violence, family in general and specifically wrestling, New England, Vienna, bear, art, boarding school. Irving uses the purpose of intertextuality in a complicated manner. The play of certain sets of themes in Irving's novels is a conscious effort on his part to make his works appear as a product of the postmodernist literary culture.

It depicts that Irving consciously makes this attempt of using these themes recurrently to create an interconnection between his novels hinting to mark them as metafiction. Garp's short story "Pension Grillparzer" anticipates Irving's next novel *Hotel New Hampshire*; there are some denoting similarities between the two. By connecting his present work with his past and future works, Irving is enlightening the self-conscious nature of his novels. It can be assumed that Irving might have been influenced by John Barth whose works also follow this same strategy, his novel *Letters* is a novel about the letters of the characters of his other novels to him. Irving creates a world where all his characters co-exist, where New England, boarding school and bear are prominent images.

Harold Bloom in his Introduction to *John Irving* writes "What then survives of *The World According to Garp*? Literary echoes (as opposed to controlled allusions) are everywhere: Joyce, John Updike, John Barth, Fitzgerald, Pynchon, and more many more."^[4] Irving's story reflects the plot of the Dickensian novel at the beginning but as it moves forward it transforms into more of a postmodernist text. No doubt that the evolution of Garp can be traced as it happens in a Bildungsroman, inspired by nineteenth-century classics like *Great Expectations*. The book starts with the conception of Garp and ends after his death, mapping the changes and developments in his life. But, Irving brings some twists in the altogether linear storyline with the inclusion of the texts written by Garp. The stories within the context of the novel, challenge the traditional storytelling process, thus making *The World According to Garp* an example of self-conscious fiction. Raymond J. Wilson III remarks: "*The World According to Garp* plays with the modernist forms of the artist's bildungsroman and the midcentury 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 by Barth and Coover."^[5] Irving initially presents his novel as a Bildungsroman and when a reader starts expecting the traditional features of the same, he twists the plot and pulls the strings and alters the rules of the established genre.

In terms of referring to literary texts other than following and twisting the genres *The World According to Garp* consists quite a lot of references: 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*. Although Garp is not an avid reader, he mentions his favorite books 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." [WAG P.119] This shows Garp as an ideal postmodern reader; reading a novel thirty-four times obviously gives such insights and generates new meanings turning him an active co-author of the text. At many stages, the life of Garp is foreshadowed by Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Raymond J. Wilson III in his article "The Postmodern Novel: The example of Irving's *The World According to Garp*" draws a number of parallels between Garp and Stephen. In the earlier days in Steering School, the incidents of Garp getting stuck at the edge of the roof and his ear being bitten by dog draws close resemblance with Stephen's school days when he was shouldered into a playground puddle and was hit by his teacher. Garp's emotional attachment with the whore Charlotte, whom he knew for a long time shapes his mind as a writer. "Combined with the play of Garp's imagination on the war damage at the Vienna zoo, the death of Charlotte ties Garp's emergence as an adult to his emergence as a writer: a creator and reflector of modern consciousness like Stephen Dedalus."^[6] While visiting the zoo Garp realized that while writing something, everything seems to be related to each other. The destruction of war enlightened Garp about the relation between the history of mankind at large and the history of an individual being. This realization enabled Garp to finish his story

“The Pension Grillparzer” thus turning him into “A real writer, as Helen had said.” [WAG P.99]

Some of the prime metafictional features- reading, writing, books, publication, authors and teaching literature persist in the narrative of *The World According to Garp*. Jenny Fields and Helen are avid readers. Jenny kept a library of books which she bought and read in her infirmary, “what a wet dream for the lovers of literature to lie sick at steering.” [WAG P.49] At its core *The World According to Garp* is the story of the dream of a young boy to become a successful writer. The novel fulfills the “lowest common denominator” as Patricia Waugh refers it to simultaneously create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. Both Garp and his mother Jenny Fields are writers, and their writings are an integral part of the narrative of the novel. This creation of literature within a work of fiction is a powerful brandish of the fictional illusion that metafiction talks about. The extradiegetic level in this novel is the story of Garp and his mother writing whereas the intradiegetic are the stories by Garp like “The Pension Grillparzer”, “The World According to Bensenhaver” where Garp becomes the author coming out of Irving’s narrative. We encounter a radical feminist author within the novel in the narratives of Jenny Fields. Presiding within the same text Jenny and her son voice two completely different narratives of their own. The rejection note received by Garp “The story is only mildly interesting, and it does nothing new with language and form. Thanks for showing it to us though.” [WAG P.186] or Helen’s letter to Garp- “Dear Garp, This story shows promise...There is a care taken with the language, and a feeling for people, but the situation seems rather contrived and the ending of this story is pretty juvenile, I do appreciate you showing it to me though. Yours, Helen” [WAG P.102] include literary criticism within the scope of creation. Not only the works of Garp, but there is the criticism of Jenny’s famous autobiography *The Sexual Suspect* which Helen and Garp both agree “was no literary jewel.” [WAG P.174] This makes an understatement that popular literature does not reach the benchmark of good literature. The rejection note mentioned earlier provokes an interesting conversation between Garp and Mr. Tinch, and we find within the scope of the extradiegetic narrative a comment about self-conscious fiction.

‘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. [WAG P.187]

In this excerpt with an air of playfulness, Irving makes a statement about metafiction within a metafictional text. Not only does Irving make the statement about metafiction, he also makes comment regarding what certain bodies of writing actually meant. Garp defines an epilogue “is more than a body count. An epilogue in the disguise of wrapping up the past, is really a way of warning us about the future.” (Irving555) The comment of John Wolf on Garp’s death: “It was a death, Wolf thought, which in its random, stupid, and unnecessary qualities- comic and ugly and bizarre- underlined everything Garp had ever written about how the world works. It was a death scene, John Wolf told Jilly Sloper, that only Garp could have written.” [WAG P.569] It marks the novel as a metafiction where a character is remarking about the death of the protagonist of the novel that he would have written about a death scene in the manner he died in the novel. And to add to this metafictional discourse the narrator writes an epilogue in his writing “so here it is: an epilogue ‘warning us

about the future as T. S. Garp might have imagined it." [WAG P.565] This act of a narrator writing an epilogue for the character in a way that the character would have liked it makes the novel nothing but an exemplary metafiction.

The novel uses the language of biography and also that of fiction simultaneously. There is always a conflict between memory and imagination within Garp's mind and till the end, Garp fails to separate his personal life with his fiction thus turning the novel into a layered narrative with multiple interpretations. The divergence between Garp and his mother as authors and the difference between the kind of literature they produce strikes a chord of variance among the narrative frames of the novel. The reader reads Irving, Garp, and Jenny and creates his own perspective thus completing the process of meaning-making. Irving blends various forms, incorporates a number of voices opens more than one avenues for the reader to realize and understand the outlooks of the characters and the author. Nothing could conclude this discussion better than this extremely relevant observation by Raymond J. Wilson III:

In writing this novel, Irving stays true to his rejecting the spirit of the unreadable masterpieces of high modernism, but he is not returning to the mode of the nineteenth century; he is moving forward into postmodernism. In his desire to avoid the esoteric, Irving might find an ally in John Barth, who in "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" offers his "worthy program" in hopes that the postmodern mode may become a fiction "more democratic in its appeal" than the marvels of late modernism, reaching beyond the "professional devotees of high art" but perhaps not hoping to reach the "lobotomized mass-media illiterates." In its best-seller popularity, *The World According to Garp* has at least fulfilled that aspect of Barth's program for postmodern fiction. This success may be described by the proposition that the postmodern novel, besides its special characteristics, also contain all earlier fictional forms, and John Irving's use of them opens his novel to a fruitful variety of combination and interaction.^[7]

REFERENCES

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3. John Irving, *The World According to Garp*. (1976; rpt. Great Britain, England: Black Swan, 1998) P. 600. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers are indicated in square brackets.
4. Harold Bloom (Ed), *John Irving*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001) P. 1
5. Raymond J. Wilson III, "The Postmodern Novel: The Example of Irving's *The World According to Garp*", in *John Irving*, P. 75.
6. *Ibid.* P. 79.
7. *Ibid.* P. 85.

