

The World According to Garp Study Guide

The World According to Garp by John Irving

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Contents

The World According to Garp Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Introduction.....	4
Author Biography.....	5
Plot Summary.....	7
Boston Mercy.....	11
Blood and Blue.....	13
What He Wanted to Be When He Grew Up.....	15
Graduation.....	16
In the City Where Marcus Aurelius Died.....	17
The Pension Grillparzer.....	19
More Lust.....	20
Second Children, Second Novels, Second Love.....	22
The Eternal Husband.....	23
The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky.....	24
Mrs. Ralph.....	25
It Happens to Helen.....	26
Walt Catches Cold.....	27
The World According to Marcus Aurelius.....	29
The World According to Bensenhaver.....	30
The First Assassin.....	31
The First Feminist Funeral, and Other Funerals.....	33
Habits of the Under Toad.....	35
Life After Garp.....	37
Characters.....	39



[Themes..... 54](#)

[Style..... 56](#)

[Historical Context..... 58](#)

[Critical Overview..... 60](#)

[Criticism..... 62](#)

[Critical Essay #1..... 63](#)

[Critical Essay #2..... 67](#)

[Critical Essay #3..... 69](#)

[Critical Essay #4..... 71](#)

[Critical Essay #5..... 73](#)

[Adaptations..... 75](#)

[Topics for Further Study..... 76](#)

[What Do I Read Next?..... 77](#)

[Further Study..... 79](#)

[Bibliography..... 80](#)

[Copyright Information..... 81](#)



Introduction

Although John Irving's first three novels were relatively well-received by the critics, he was basically unknown to the general public until *The World According to Garp* became an international bestseller when it was published in the United States in 1978. The novel features the memorably eccentric characters, outlandish situations, and moments both joyous and heartbreaking that so many readers cherish. It is the tragicomic life story of author T. S. Garp, son of the controversial feminist Jenny Fields. Garp's world is filled with "lunacy and sorrow." His mother is a radically independent nurse who conceives him by taking advantage of a brain-damaged soldier. His best friend is a transsexual who was formerly a tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles. Garp struggles vainly to protect the people he loves. His life is both hilarious and ultimately tragic.

Irving's novel was especially popular on college campuses across the nation because of its youthful energy, and the novelist was applauded for creating realistic and strong female characters. *Garp* is an intricately plotted novel, and its themes are universal: love, sex, death, art, gender roles. The book shares many of the characteristics of Irving novels published before and after it. For example, in several Irving novels, children grow up without one or more parents, as in *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) and *The Cider House Rules* (1985). *Garp* is also influenced by Irving's experiences in Austria in the 1960s, as are *Setting Free the Bears* (1968) and *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974).

For the most part, critics gave the novel excellent reviews. Millions continue to read Irving's books, and thus he remains one of the most popular and successful American writers of the last twenty-five years.



Author Biography

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, on March 2, 1942. Although Irving has said that *The World According to Garp* is not autobiographical, there are many similarities between the novelist and the title character. Irving, like Garp, has never met his biological father. (However, Irving's mother gave him some letters his father had written during World War II and he used his father's experiences for a character in *The Cider House Rules*. "Being a novelist," Irving once said, "is never throwing anything away.") Irving also grew up at a prep school, Exeter Academy, where his stepfather taught Russian history. He eventually attended the school himself and there acquired his lifelong interests of wrestling and writing. He was an average student, but he later discovered that one of the reasons he struggled was because he was dyslexic.

Irving was disenchanted during his brief time as a student at both the University of Pittsburgh (1961) and the University of New Hampshire (1962). He traveled to Austria in 1963 to attend the University of Vienna and the decision profoundly affected him. He lived in Vienna off and on through much of the 1960s, and the city's influence is seen in his fiction. He also married painter Shyla Leary while he was in Austria. He became the father to two boys, Colin and Brendan. He earned his M. F. A. at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop in 1967 where Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was one of his mentors. In 1969, he stayed with director Irvin Kershner in a castle built by Charlemagne while they vainly worked on an unproduced screen adaptation of Irving's first novel, *Setting Free the Bears* (1969). His next two novels, *The Water-Method Man* (1972) and *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974) didn't share his first book's modest success. During this period, Irving was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation grant (1971-1972), a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship (1974-75), and a Guggenheim fellowship (1976-77).

The publication of his fourth novel, *The World According to Garp*, changed everything for him. Irving left publishing giant Random House for E. P. Dutton because he was unsatisfied with the publicity for his second and third novels. *Garp* was a huge critical and popular success. The novel was nominated for a National Book Award in 1979 and won an American Book Award in 1980. The book was made into a moderately received film version starring Robin Williams as Garp.

All of Irving's novels since *Garp* have been critically acclaimed bestsellers, including *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), *The Cider House Rules* (1985), *A Prayer For Owen Meany* (1989), *Son of the Circus* (1994), and *A Widow For One Year* (1998). Irving has been both an English professor and wrestling coach through the years. A collection of his fiction and some essays, *Trying to Save Peggy Sneed*, was published in 1996. Two volumes of his memoirs, *The Imaginary Girlfriend* (1996) and *My Movie Business* (1999), have also been published. Since *The World According to Garp* was adapted to film in 1982, film versions of two of his other novels have been made: *The Hotel New Hampshire* in 1984 and *The Cider House Rules* in 1999. Irving won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Cider House Rules* (Michael Caine won the Best Supporting Actor award for his portrayal of Dr. Larch). Irving divorced his first wife in

1981. He remarried in 1987 his Canadian agent, Janet Turnbull. He currently lives with Turnbull and their son, Everett, in southern Vermont.



Plot Summary

Garp's Conception, Birth, and Childhood

Irving's novel opens in Boston, 1942, with the introduction of T. S. Garp's mother, Jenny Fields. Jenny is an independent woman ahead of the times. She quits college to become a nurse when she decides that higher education for women is meant to groom them for marriage. Jenny has little tolerance for the behavior of men, as demonstrated by the incident that opens the book. A soldier in a movie theater attempts to fondle Jenny. She uses a scalpel she carries in her purse to slice his arm from shoulder to wrist. She is perturbed when the authorities, as well as her own brothers, suggest that she has some kind of relationship with the man. She is released when it is discovered that the man has a wife and child in New York. The incident, along with the treatment she receives from her wealthy family, reinforces her beliefs about men, women, and relationships:

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.

Thus, Jenny becomes something of a maverick for the time: A single, working woman, living alone, with no use for men. However, while working in the obstetrics ward at Boston Mercy, she comes to realize that, although she doesn't care for men, she *does* like babies. Jenny informs the other nurses that she intends to find a man to make her pregnant, "just that, and nothing more." The hospital administration moves her to the intensive care unit in an effort to discourage her. Instead, she finds the answer to her dilemma in the form of Technical Sergeant Garp, a soldier whose wounds have severely damaged his brain. T. S. Garp can still function sexually, however, and Jenny takes advantage of this. Garp eventually ends up dying from his wounds, but Jenny becomes pregnant. After she loses her job, she moves in with her parents until the baby, a nine-pound boy, is born; she names the boy T. S. Garp (she never learned the soldier's first name).

Jenny takes a job as a nurse at Steering School, a private school for boys. The young Garp enjoys his life growing up at Steering. The hospital becomes his home, and he has a near-death experience at the age of five when he attempts to capture pigeons on the roof with a lacrosse stick. He becomes friends with the numerous children of the Percy family although Stewart and Midge Percy (heirs to the Steering fortune) look down their noses at Jenny and Garp. Jenny, of course, is unafraid to show her disdain for them. She becomes especially contemptuous of the Percys when their dog, Bonkers, bites off a large chunk of Garp's ear, and Stewart refuses to put the dog to sleep. Garp survives his childhood and eventually attends Steering himself.



Garp's Adolescence

With his mother's help, Garp becomes a competent student. He has difficulty, however, choosing a sport. He dislikes any of the sports using balls. One day while Garp is sick in bed, Jenny visits the gymnasium where she meets Ernie Holm, the wrestling coach, and his daughter Helen. Helen's mother was a nurse who abandoned the family when Helen was a small child. Helen mistakenly identifies Jenny as her mother, embraces her, and is embarrassed when she learns the truth. Jenny signs Garp up for wrestling. Garp is at first hesitant, but then discovers that he loves the sport. He also becomes interested in Helen. After Helen tells him that she plans to marry a writer ("a *real* writer"), Garp is determined to become an author.

Garp writes a short story every month from the end of his freshman year in high school until graduation. Mr. Tinch, Garp's English teacher, encourages him. Garp shows Helen his first story during his junior year. She is kind in a letter she writes to him reviewing the story, but she is nonetheless unimpressed. Garp becomes a champion wrestler in his senior year. He and his mother decide to travel to Austria to write after he graduates. Garp has his first sexual encounters with Cushie Percy. On his graduation night, Cushie sneaks out of her house to meet Garp. They are confronted by the old, but still vicious, dog Bonkers. The dog lunges; Garp pins the dog down and bites off its ear, thus avenging himself.

It is 1961 when Garp and Jenny arrive in Vienna. Jenny begins to write her autobiography; Garp has less success with his short story. He spends the beginning of his stay in Vienna wandering through the city. Garp and his mother discuss the nature of lust. Jenny cannot understand it; the eighteen-year-old Garp is of course overwhelmed by it. They run into some prostitutes while on a walk one day and Jenny pays one of them, a woman who calls herself Charlotte, to sit and chat. Garp becomes one of Charlotte's regular customers. After cancer kills Charlotte, he discovers that she was old enough to be his mother. He eventually finds enough inspiration to begin his first serious short story: "The Pension Grillparzer." Helen reads the finished story and knows that Garp is truly a writer. She agrees to marry him. Jenny sends her manuscript to a brilliant editor, John Wolf, and he publishes her autobiography. Wolf becomes Garp's editor as well.

Garp's Adult Life

Jenny becomes a famous and controversial figure when her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*, is published. After her parents die, she uses their New Hampshire mansion as a women's counseling center. Garp is mystified by her success, and he dislikes some of the people that begin to associate with Jenny. He especially detests a group of women known as the Ellen Jamesians. Named after a young girl who was beaten, raped, and horribly mutilated, the women surgically remove their own tongues as a protest against the awful treatment women sometimes receive from men. Jenny supports Garp and Helen as they begin their lives together. The young couple have their first child, a boy



they name Duncan. Helen teaches at a university as Garp writes his first novel. *Procrastination*, a historical novel about Vienna during World War II, is published when Garp is twenty-four. Garp captures a child molester in the city park. He later feels like a child molester himself when he has a brief affair with one of Helen's students who baby-sits for Duncan.

Walt, Garp and Helen's second child, is born. They become friends with another young couple, Harrison and Alice Fletcher. The Fletchers are a mirror image of the Garps: Harrison is a teacher, and Alice is a writer. One night, Alice tearfully informs Garp that Harrison is having an affair. The betrayal prevents her from writing. Helen (who discovers Garp's previous indiscretions) proposes an unusual solution to the problem. She determines that if she were to have an affair with Harrison while Garp has an affair with Alice, the Fletchers marriage can be saved. Of course, this only makes matters worse: Harrison falls in love with Helen while Alice and Garp fall in love. Helen ends the relationships after six months, and the Fletchers move away because of Harrison's affair with a student. Garp uses the experience as inspiration for his second novel, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*. The novel is an abysmal failure, and Garp finds himself unable to write. Meanwhile, he is surprised when he is able to befriend one of the people in his mother's entourage. Roberta Muldoon is a transsexual and former professional football player. She and Garp become very close friends.

Garp occupies himself with raising the family while he has writer's block. He has an odd encounter with the mother of Duncan's friend, Ralph. He chases down speeders and lectures them about the dangers of their behavior. He writes an essay about this practice in an effort to shake off his writer's block, but Helen is unimpressed by it. She begins to tire of Garp's irritable behavior and decides to have an affair with Michael Milton, one of her graduate students. One of Milton's ex-girlfriends reveals the affair to Garp. He is furious, and he demands that Helen end it immediately. Helen, who is still in love with Garp, agrees. Garp takes the children out so that Helen can call Milton and let him know that the relationship is over. Milton comes to the house to see Helen one last time. They are sitting in Milton's car parked in the driveway when Garp pulls up without his headlights on. In the car crash, Walt dies, and the rest of them are terribly injured.

Jenny nurses the physically wounded and heartbroken family back to health at the mansion at Dog Head's Harbor. As they heal, Garp and Helen decide to have another child, and they have a daughter named Jenny. Garp writes a lurid and tragic novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, to help him cope with the overwhelming sadness stemming from the loss of Walt. John Wolf can't believe that Garp expects him to publish it. However, Wolf gives the novel to the woman who cleans his office. Her opinion has proven to be valuable to Wolf in the past. Although she doesn't actually like Garp's novel, she is unable to put it down. Wolf decides to publish the novel, and he advises the Garps to leave the country to avoid the inevitable controversy. The book becomes a bestseller. Jenny gets involved in New Hampshire politics while the Garps are in Austria. She is assassinated during a political rally, forcing Garp's family to return home from Europe.



When the family arrives back in the United States, they stay at Steering. Funeral arrangements have already been made before Garp's arrival by his mother's followers, and no men are to be allowed. Garp dresses up like a woman to attend, but he is forced to flee when he is recognized by Pooh Percy. He meets the actual Ellen James on his flight home and invites her to join his family. Ellen admires Garp and wants to become a writer as well. Upon his return to Steering, Garp discovers that Ernie Holm had a heart attack and has died. Garp becomes the new wrestling coach when he and Helen decide to raise their children at Steering. Roberta convinces Garp to use part of Jenny's estate to establish the Fields Foundation to help women in need. Ellen James writes an essay entitled "Why I Am Not An Ellen Jamesian" and Garp encourages her to publish it. After it is published, Garp publicly defends Ellen. Garp survives an assassination attempt by an Ellen Jamesian. He begins to write *My Father's Illusions*. Before he can finish, he is shot to death by Pooh Percy (now an Ellen Jamesian) inside the Steering gymnasium in front of Helen and his wrestling team. An epilogue summarizes what happens in the lives of the other characters after Garp's death.



Boston Mercy

Boston Mercy Summary

The World According to Garp is John Irving's novel of T.S. Garp, an author born to a pioneering feminist, and his struggle to build a satisfactory life among tragic and quirky events. This dark comedy addresses the topics of feminism, lust, death, and creativity as played out on the backdrop of the mid-twentieth century.

The story begins in 1942 with the introduction of Jenny Fields, a nursing student in Boston, who wounds a lecherous man in a movie theatre by slicing his arm with a scalpel she keeps in her purse. Outraged by the insinuations from the police that the situation is a result of a love affair gone bad, Jenny analyzes her life and the lives of all women and concludes that each woman is either on her way to becoming a whore or a wife. Jenny balks at the appraisal that if a woman does not fit in either of these categories, there must be something wrong with her and sets out to live her life on her own terms.

Jenny, twenty-two years old, is the daughter of a wealthy New England shoe magnate and a provincial mother. Her parents want her to attend Wellesley with the objective of acquiring a husband and an education, in that order, but Jenny finds that she is not attracted to men and has no desire to fulfill a typical woman's role as wife.

Jenny drops out of Wellesley to attend nursing school at Boston Mercy Hospital where she enjoys working in the obstetrics ward caring for the mothers and babies. Jenny wishes to be a mother, but without the complications of intimacy with a man before and after childbirth.

Jenny's plans to conceive are well known throughout the hospital and she has many offers from the hospital staff to accommodate her needs, although she declines. Her obsession with the babies becomes intense, and she is transferred to the hospital's intensive care unit where she encounters a dying soldier named Garp, who has severe brain damage.

Jenny realizes that although Garp's mental state is regressing, he is still sexual and she capitalizes on this fact to become pregnant. Garp dies soon after, and Jenny is fired when the hospital administration discovers that she is pregnant. Jenny returns to her parents' estate at Dog's Head Harbor in New Hampshire, where she delivers the child whom she names T.S. Garp after his dead father, Technical Sergeant Garp.

Boston Mercy Analysis

The novel is set in New England which is known for its provincial code of behavior and ethics and against which Jenny Fields' unconventional life is played. Jenny is a true independent spirit and well ahead of her time in terms of women's rights, as she

eschews her parents' wishes and chooses instead the difficult path of single parenthood, complicated by the situation of Garp's conception. Jenny's baby symbolically embodies Jenny's desire to live outside of society's norms.



Blood and Blue

Blood and Blue Summary

Jenny's family wants Jenny to stay in seclusion at the estate to raise her son but Jenny chooses to work as a nurse at Steering, a private boy's school. Jenny and Garp take up residence in an area of the infirmary, and Garp is befriended by the students as he grows up. Being raised in the middle of an educational facility encourages young Garp to read, and he becomes a precious and conscientious child.

Garp is a huge source of joy for Jenny and does not make any trouble until one day when he is five years old when does not come as Jenny calls for him on the intercom in the infirmary. Jenny enlists the help of some of the students to help find the missing child who is ultimately found trapped in the rotting gutters of the four-story building.

Garp had been attempting to capture pigeons with a lacrosse stick when the gutter gave way. Garp is rescued with the efforts of his mother, several students, and the dean of the school. Understandably, Jenny becomes overprotective of Garp from this point on and the people in the small town label the son as mischievous and a little dangerous because of his lack of a father.

Soon after, Garp positions himself as a friend to the many children in the Percy family. Midge Percy's father established the Steering School in the early 1900's and it is well known that the position of her husband, Stewart Percy, of school secretary is clearly one of entitlement with no real function.

Jenny allows Garp to play with the Percy family but fears for his safety because Jenny grew up around wealthy families like the Percys and knows that the children normally do what they please without much supervision. Jenny's fears are realized one day when the Percy family dog, Bonkers, bites off a large piece of Garp's ear. Garp is taken to the infirmary for treatment and Jenny offers to give Bonkers a shot to euthanize him and the formal feud between Jenny and the Percys begins.

During Garp's childhood, Jenny takes advantage of the educational environment and takes many of the courses at the school so that she may advise Garp when it comes time for him to attend classes there. Jenny has worked at Steering for fifteen years when Garp is formally enrolled and she receives the traditional gift of dinner plates boasting the school colors of blood and blue.

Blood and Blue Analysis

The author writes about the themes of prejudice and class structure in this chapter with the introduction of the Percy family. Although Jenny had grown up in a wealthy New England family, her wealth is considered "new" money as opposed to the "old" money of the Percy family. In New England society, the established wealthy families are perceived



to be superior to any others, which accounts for Stewart Percy's condescending attitude toward Jenny and Garp. Even the school colors of red and blue, affectionately termed "blood and blue" allude to the blue blood purity of the wealthy children who have the right to attend the prestigious school by birthright.

The fact that Jenny is raising Garp alone with no substantive story about his father is also a source of contention for the established families in this time period when the nuclear family unit was the only acceptable form.

The author also uses the literary technique of foreshadowing when Bonkers bites off a piece of Garp's ear, which will come full circle later in the book.



What He Wanted to Be When He Grew Up

What He Wanted to Be When He Grew Up Summary

Jenny is able to advise Garp on his classes because she has taken most of them herself, but is ignorant about sports because she was never interested in athletics. Garp's search for a sport in which to participate is a perplexing task because he does not like games that use balls and is not fond of water. One day, frustrated by Garp's inability to choose, Jenny walks to the Steering gym in order to determine a sport for Garp and solve the problem.

Inside the gym, Jenny enters the first door she sees and finds herself in a padded room where young boys are practicing wrestling. Jenny waits for the end of practice and introduces herself to the coach, Ernie Holm, and his young daughter, Helen. Ernie is raising Helen alone because his wife, who was a nurse, left him when Helen was small. Helen sees Jenny in her nurse's uniform and rushes to hug her, assuming that Jenny is her long lost mother.

Ernie sets the situation straight by telling Helen that Jenny is not her mother but Ernie and Jenny strike a friendship and Jenny chooses wrestling as Garp's new sport. To his dismay, Garp finds that he enjoys wrestling and particularly likes the stewardship of Ernie Holm as a male figure in his life. Garp toys with the idea of Helen as a girlfriend but Jenny attempts to keep the two young people apart.

Soon, Garp and Helen begin a friendship and Garp realizes that he would like to marry Helen someday. Helen's caveat is that if she were to marry she would choose a writer. From that day forward, Garp declares his intention to write in the hopes of winning Helen's heart forever.

What He Wanted to Be When He Grew Up Analysis

For the first time in his life, Garp reaches out to relationships beyond the one with his mother and Jenny does not like the transition. Jenny tries to keep Garp and Helen apart for as long as possible so that she will not have competition for Garp's affections but Garp pushes past Jenny's jealousy to begin making his own decisions. Jenny had been so single-minded in her purpose of conceiving and raising Garp that it had never occurred to her that her son might have interests outside the mother-son bond.

Irving uses irony in the novel in the fact that Jenny Fields wants no intimate contact with men yet finds herself working and living in an all-male institution. It is assumed that Ernie Holm would like a deeper relationship with Jenny but the thought of Ernie being more than a good friend never crosses Jenny's mind.



Graduation

Graduation Summary

Garp practices the craft of writing all through his high school years and is anxious for Helen's approval of his work, yet she is always reserved in her praise. Garp finds his artistic validation from an English teacher, Mr. Tinch, who encourages Garp to find his literary voice in spite of what others may or may not say.

The Steering School is still an all-boys school so Helen attends another school out of town. Because her father is the wrestling coach, if Helen had been a boy she would have received an exceptional education at Steering. Garp does not lack for female companionship while Helen is away and is particularly fond of Cushie, one of the Percy girls.

Helen is not able to come home for Garp's commencement, so on the night of his graduation, he and Jenny have a couple of beers, and Jenny retires early leaving Garp free to meet Cushie. Garp makes his way to the Percy home in an inebriated state and in his attempts to rouse Cushie from outside her bedroom window, manages to awaken Bonkers. Bonkers lunges for Garp and the two fight on the ground until Garp bites Bonker's ear to distract the dog so that he and Cushie can run to the infirmary.

After Jenny tends to Garp's scratches, Garp and Cushie find an empty room in the infirmary where Garp loses his virginity. Before long, Cushie's father, Stewart, appears at the infirmary demanding the return of his daughter who giggles as she lies in a metal bed beside Garp listening to the rain.

Graduation Analysis

Garp's encounter with Bonkers brings full circle the events of a few years ago when Bonkers bit off Garp's ear. Jenny, in her characteristically cool demeanor, states "An ear for an ear," when Garp produces the remnant of Bonker's ear.

The author continues to drive home the point of inequality for women, as Helen must leave town to attend a girl's school. This is especially ridiculous because she would receive the exemplary Steering education because of her father's employment there if she had been a male.



In the City Where Marcus Aurelius Died

In the City Where Marcus Aurelius Died Summary

After Garp's graduation from high school, he and Jenny move to Vienna for a year so that Garp may experience more of the world and develop some substance for his writing. It is now 1961 and Garp is fascinated by everything and tours the city voraciously while Jenny prefers to remain in the pension, a European-style hotel. For all of his life, Garp had been strongly managed by Jenny but the situation is now reversed because Garp must help Jenny cope with the language, food, and transportation since she is not interested in learning the Viennese culture.

During her extended free time, Jenny begins to write an autobiography, leaving Garp free to wander the streets where he soon encounters prostitutes, circus people, and all kinds of street people whom he hopes will one day work their way into his novel.

Jenny's prolific writing pains Garp because he is unable to write more than letters to Helen back in America. Garp's writing breakthrough arrives after a visit to the Museum of the History of the City of Vienna where he and Jenny observe the preserved room of the famous Viennese poet and dramatist, Franz Grillparzer.

Although Grillparzer had achieved notoriety in his home country, Garp does not share Austria's enthusiasm for the man's abilities and takes on a personal challenge to write better than this national celebrity. Jenny and Garp delight in the references to Grillparzer all over Vienna with everything from pastries to zoo animals taking on the name. From that point on, Jenny and Garp's secret language included the word Grillparzer for anything that they considered to be inferior or ridiculous.

One day on the way home from a museum, Jenny suggest that she and Garp hail a taxi instead of taking the subway which is Garp's favorite method of transportation. Soon Jenny and Garp pass three prostitutes on the street and Jenny points to the woman holding a fur muff, which offends the women. Garp quickly saves the situation by explaining that Jenny does not speak German and means no disrespect.

Jenny offers to buy the fur muff but instead ends up buying time from one of the prostitutes, Charlotte, in order to interview her on the topic of lust. After the meeting, Jenny gives Garp money to spend time with Charlotte even though Jenny is disgusted by men's lust, especially that of her son.

In the City Where Marcus Aurelius Died Analysis

The significance of this chapter's title comes from the story Garp hears from a bookshop owner that Marcus Aurelius had died while in Vienna. Garp reads some of Aurelius' writing which includes the thoughts that, "In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his sense a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul



an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, his fame doubtful. In short, all that is body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors." Garp feels that Aurelius has captured the essence of Vienna and ultimately the serious topics to which a serious writer should devote his time. The difference between bad writing and good, Aurelius versus Grillparzer, is a matter of grace and art. Garp feels fortunate to have made this important distinction at this point in his life.



The Pension Grillparzer

The Pension Grillparzer Summary

Jenny is proceeding quickly with her book based on her premise that, "In this dirty-minded world, you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore - or fast on your way to becoming one or the other." The title of Jenny's book, *A Sexual Suspect* stems from Jenny's wanting to have a job and also wanting to live alone, both desires which made her a sexual suspect in mainstream New England society. Jenny's wish to have a child without benefit of a husband adds to her "sexual suspect" persona.

Garp becomes a customer and friend to Charlotte until she dies from cancer shortly after their first time together. This emotional experience provides Garp with the impetus he needs to write his first important story, "The Pension Grillparzer."

Garp writes to Helen that a young writer needs to live with someone and he asks Helen to marry him but Helen is not yet satisfied with Garp's attempts. During this time, Jenny has secured a publisher, John Wolf, for her book. Garp and Jenny return home so that Jenny can meet with John, and Garp can see Helen again in the hopes that she will agree to marry him this time.

The Pension Grillparzer Analysis

After almost a year and a half abroad, Jenny and Garp return home refreshed and with the rebirth of dreams and ideas. Jenny's experience is similar to what her parents wished for her when she was pregnant with Garp. Jenny's conservative family wanted Jenny to stay out of sight until she delivered the child and could come up with a proper excuse for his existence. In a metaphor for childbirth, Jenny has created and delivered another part of herself, her autobiography which she will present to the world with as much pride as she did when she delivered her son.



More Lust

More Lust Summary

Helen is moderately pleased with Garp's story, marries him, and the two fall in love sometime later. Helen graduates from college in only two years and accepts a teaching position at a women's college while Garp works on his first novel.

In the meantime, John Wolf publishes Jenny's book and Garp is especially embarrassed by the chapter addressing lust because it is an emotion that Jenny has never experienced in her entire life. Jenny has the good fortune to produce a book on a topic that is relevant to the mood of the country, especially women readers who want the opportunity to make their own life choices, and her book becomes hugely popular.

Soon after, Jenny's mother becomes very ill and Jenny moves into the family's Dog's Head Harbor estate to care for her. Women soon find out where Jenny lives and arrive seeking guidance for their own lives on topics both big and small. Being a nurse at heart, Jenny never turns anyone away and her new path as a feminist counselor has begun.

After the death of her mother, Jenny begins to make public speeches, each time dressed in her nurse's uniform. Jenny would always consider herself to be a nurse although she would never practice again, dedicating her life to caring for emotional wounds.

It is during this time that Garp learns about the Ellen James Society in which women cut out their own tongues in sympathy for a young girl named Ellen James who had been raped and her tongue cut out. These women, known as Ellen Jamesians, flock to Jenny in their combined grief and support for Ellen and for women's rights. It becomes very common to find women conversing at the Dog's Head estate by writing little notes to each other.

Garp is deeply sorry for what happened to Ellen James but finds her so-called followers disgusting by capitalizing on the girl's personal tragedy. Garp keeps his complaints to a mild roar, though, because Jenny pays the bills for Helen and him for the first five years of their marriage.

Garp's first novel, entitled *Procrastination*, is mildly successful mostly because of the reference of Garp being Jenny Fields' son. Garp is not pleased with John Wolf as his publisher but John encourages Garp on his first effort and promises that Garp's future works will do better.

In frustration, Garp wants another child in addition to his four-year-old son, Duncan, so that he will have something new in which to invest his energy. It is also during this time period that Garp begins to have extramarital affairs with Duncan's babysitters.



Garp comes upon a naked young girl while jogging one day and determines that she has been raped. The police suspect Garp, but he is able to convince the officers that he is innocent and apprehends the suspect while still in the park. Later that night, Garp confides to Helen that he seems to be surrounded by the topic of rape and he feels the burden of all men who are capable of the crime.

More Lust Analysis

Irving introduces the Ellen James Society in this chapter to symbolize the fact that women have been silenced by the brutality and force of a male-dominated society. Garp's compassion for the girl, Ellen James, is very real but his contempt for those who capitalize on her terror is viable and will surface again later in the novel.

Symbolically, Irving keeps Jenny in her nurse's uniform even though she has quit the profession in order to manage her retreat at Dog's Head Harbor. Jenny tends to the emotional wounds of women whose lives have been compromised in some way and Jenny's nurse's uniform becomes the symbol for her feminist movement and source of refuge.

Irving uses Garp's obsession with rape as foreshadowing, as the topic will surface again in the novel.



Second Children, Second Novels, Second Love

Second Children, Second Novels, Second Love Summary

Garp and Helen have another child, a boy named Walt. Soon after, Helen takes her second position as an associate English professor at another university. During her employment there, Helen encounters Harrison Fletcher who becomes Helen's very good friend. Harrison's wife, Alice, is also a writer and becomes blocked when she learns that Harrison is having an extramarital affair with a student.

Helen encourages Garp to befriend Alice since they are kindred spirits and Garp finds himself strangely attracted to Alice, who speaks with a very definite lisp, not unlike the Ellen Jamesians. Helen suggests an unconventional plan to save the Fletchers' marriage where Helen will sleep with Harrison and Garp will sleep with Alice. Not surprisingly, the plan backfires after six months and the Fletchers move away because Harrison commits yet another indiscretion with a student.

Garp uses the situation for his next book entitled *Second Wind of the Cuckold* about two married couples having affairs. The book is not nearly as popular as Garp's first and the rejection paralyzes him for some time.

It is at this point in time that Garp meets the person who will become his best friend, Roberta Muldoon. Roberta is a transsexual, formerly a tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles professional football team and has been befriended by Jenny at the Dog's Head estate.

Garp takes time out from writing to manage the household, complete with childcare and cooking, while Helen works at the university.

Second Children, Second Novels, Second Love Analysis

Irving addresses the topic of gender roles, a topic that was especially pertinent in 1976 when the book was written. Jenny completely rejects the expectations forced on her by her family and society to become a single parent at a time when that situation was strictly taboo. Garp accepts the typically female role of taking care of the house and children while Helen goes out into the world to work. The most obvious gender reversal is the character of Roberta Muldoon who rejects all things masculine to become a transsexual woman. All these character situations were uncommon for the time period and are typical of Irving's quirky character traits and developments.



The Eternal Husband

The Eternal Husband Summary

Garp and Helen have been married for eleven years and Garp has never had a real job. This revelation occurs to Garp one day while browsing the Yellow Pages of the phone book and he wonders if he is capable of any of the listed professions such as ministry or marriage counseling.

Garp is interrupted from his phone book reverie by Duncan asking permission to stay overnight at his friend Ralph's house. Garp does not approve of Ralph's mother and does not want Duncan to go but ultimately relents and Duncan leaves on his bike.

Garp begins to fix dinner and is interrupted by the sound of a speeding car which he chases until the driver sees him and stops. Surprisingly, the car is driven by Ralph's mother whose name escapes Garp at the moment and he calls her "Mrs. Ralph" to himself. Mrs. Ralph is annoyed at having been stopped by Garp who makes it very clear that he does not approve of Mrs. Ralph's single parent lifestyle of too many men and not enough child supervision.

Garp notices that Mrs. Ralph has a copy of Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband* which Mrs. Ralph hates because of the author's portrayal of women being less than objects. Realizing Mrs. Ralph's volatile state of mind, Garp offers to pick up Duncan but Mrs. Ralph promises that Duncan will be fine at her home tonight. Mrs. Ralph drives slowly home and Garp returns to his stove with the copy of *The Eternal Husband*.

The Eternal Husband Analysis

There is both foreshadowing and irony in this chapter when Mrs. Ralph gives Garp her copy of *The Eternal Husband*, a novel about infidelity. Ironically, Mrs. Ralph and Garp will soon have an intimate encounter and both Garp and Helen will initiate extramarital affairs.

Garp's impotence with writing makes him seek out situations in which he can prove his virility, acts which make him almost animalistic in his attempts. Chasing down speeding cars outside the house is more the activity of the family pet than the man of the house. Garp has been reduced to his lowest primal needs and his activities bear that out.



The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky

The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky Summary

At dinner, Garp tells Helen that he is uncomfortable with Duncan spending the night at Ralph's house because of Mrs. Ralph's inappropriate behavior. Helen is not worried but tells Garp to go and get Duncan if he is so concerned. She tells Garp that she wishes that he would let the children grow up and stop being so overprotective.

Later that night, when Garp puts Walt to bed he tells Walt a story about a dog that is always chained to an old truck in front of his owner's business and is tormented daily by a mean cat which knows that the dog's chain prevents the dog from coming close enough to attack. Each day, the dog's pulling on the chain moved the truck just a little bit until one day the dog was able to get close enough to the cat to bite its head. The cat then ran into the street and was smashed by a passing truck. Garp's lesson for Walt is to look both ways before crossing the street. Walt considers himself warned and vows not to end up with a fate like the unfortunate cat.

Garp dreams that night of he and Duncan on an airplane when Duncan needs to use the restroom. Garp points to the back of the cabin and tells Duncan to read the sign for the appropriate door. Duncan reluctantly walks to the back and looks back at Garp for one last chance for the right answer but Garp motions for Duncan to make a choice. The next thing Garp notices is the pilot running to the back of the plane swearing at the stewardess because Duncan has opened the cabin door instead of a restroom door. Garp pushes past the pilot and is soon sucked out into the atmosphere just as Duncan had been.

The Dog in the Alley, the Child in the Sky Analysis

Garp's obsessions about his children are revealed in this chapter by the stories and dreams that consume him. Helen is amazed at Garp's inventiveness but wishes that Garp could relax a little bit and let the boys live and grow up without constant lessons about safety. In all likelihood, Garp is overcompensating for the father he never had by going to extremes in his own parenting.



Mrs. Ralph

Mrs. Ralph Summary

Later that same night, Garp sneaks over to Mrs. Ralph's house because of a nagging feeling that Duncan is in danger there. Peeking in the windows of the house, Garp can see Duncan and Ralph asleep in the living room while the TV plays. Suddenly Mrs. Ralph appears in Garp's view, having fallen down inebriated. Mrs. Ralph's state of undress embarrasses Garp who walks around to the front of the house and enters by the door as if he had just arrived.

Mrs. Ralph seeks Garp's help in removing a young man from her upstairs bedroom, after which Garp returns to Mrs. Ralph's bedroom where he and Mrs. Ralph display their genitals to each other. Garp is strangely attracted to Mrs. Ralph but leaves her bedroom and begins to wash dishes to kill some time so that he can wake Duncan at dawn and take him home. A phone call from Helen brings back to reality and Garp proceeds to wake Duncan and carry him home.

Helen questions Duncan about Mrs. Ralph's household in order to catch Garp in a lie about his activities at the house but Duncan's answers confirm that Garp has told Helen the truth.

Mrs. Ralph Analysis

Garp is drawn to the ill-fated Mrs. Ralph because she suffers from low self-esteem and depression just as Garp does. Mrs. Ralph relies on her powers of seduction and entices a young man to her bedroom to prove her worth as a beautiful woman. Ironically, both Mrs. Ralph and Garp long to be validated for their intellectual pursuits but rely on their baser instincts to communicate. Garp feels compassion for Mrs. Ralph but Helen does not understand and accuses Garp of another infidelity. This hurts Garp since he sees Mrs. Ralph in a completely different context.



It Happens to Helen

It Happens to Helen Summary

Garp is awakened in the middle of the night by a phone call from Roberta Muldoon who has just ended a relationship with her latest boyfriend. Roberta tells Garp, "Oh, I never knew what shits men were until I became a woman." Garp talks to Roberta for a while and then recommends that Roberta speak to Jenny who is much better qualified to help in circumstances like these.

Roberta begins to call Garp regularly in the middle of the night and the two men develop a close friendship. Helen does not understand the connection and, more often than not, leaves the bed to read downstairs. One night Garp finds Helen reading a paper written by a new student named Michael Milton. Helen's evasive answers about Michael alert Garp that there may be an intimate relationship between the young man and his wife but he chooses to say nothing for the time being.

Helen knows that she should show some discretion when it comes to Michael but she is not happy at home and the little quirks of Garp's that she used to think of as interesting are now just annoying. Helen is particularly annoyed with a trick Garp plays when pulling in or backing out of the driveway in the Volvo. At night, Garp cuts the lights and the gas, then coasts up the edge of the driveway and down into the darkened garage, having gained momentum from coasting downhill in front of the house.

Helen and Garp also argue about who is responsible for maintenance on the Volvo, particularly the gearshift knob which has been loose for quite awhile. Garp's attempt to tape the knob back into place infuriates Helen who chooses to shift gears without the knob in spite of the fact that the stick-shift shaft rubs her hand raw.

Helen is increasingly attracted to Michael Milton yet shows restraint until one night when Garp is especially petulant about wanting Helen to read something he has written. Helen does not think that Garp's new story lives up to his potential so they argue and go to bed without speaking.

It Happens to Helen Analysis

The author uses two very important scenarios of foreshadowing in this chapter. The first is Garp's irresponsible method of pulling into the dark driveway with the car lights and engine off. So far, Garp has only hit some toys but the practice will soon result in tragedy. Related to the tragedy is the loose gearshift knob for which neither Helen or Garp will take responsibility for fixing. As Helen drives, she first thinks that the loose knob is Garp's fault, and then thinks that it is her fault, but then decides that it is no one's fault... "It's just one of those things." This is important because of the event which will soon occur, which each parent will desperately need to blame on the other.



Walt Catches Cold

Walt Catches Cold Summary

Garp's protective instincts are on alert because Walt has a cold, which makes his breathing a little difficult. Helen wishes that Garp would begin to write again so that ordinary issues like colds and stuffy noses could be put into proper perspective. Garp's lack of writing leaves his imagination open for dreams, which these days consist of horrible things happening to Duncan and Walt.

Garp's focus on the children and lack of attention for Helen is the impetus for Helen to initiate an affair with Michael Milton. Helen lays the specific ground rules for the liaison including the fact that Michael must get a car because she will never let Michael ride in the Volvo. Michael buys an old station wagon with wood panels on the side and a wide front seat, just perfect for Helen to lie down and hide while Michael drives to his apartment.

Garp notices bruises on Helen's body but thinks that they have come from his own hands which are still strong from his wrestling days. The affair continues unnoticed until Michael's former girlfriend, Margie Tallworth, withdraws from Helen's class because Michael has ended his relationship with Margie. Fueled by rejection, Margie stakes out Garp's house and delivers a note to him one day revealing the affair between Helen and Michael.

When Helen returns home that night, Garp can barely control his anger and demands that Helen call Michael to end the affair. Helen promises that she will and Garp takes Duncan and Walt to a movie after dinner. While standing in line at the theater, Walt notices the old station wagon with the wood panels drive by and Duncan mistakes it for a hearse.

Michael has not accepted Helen's rejection on the phone and it is Michael's station wagon that Garp and the boys see driving by the theater. Michael arrives at Helen's house but she will not go away with him and agrees to talk to him in the car only after Michael has given her the car keys.

Michael tries to convince Helen not to end the relationship and their proximity in the front seat of the station wagon leads to the intimate act of fellatio while Helen calculates how much time she has left before Garp and the boys return home. Helen does not hear the phone ringing in the house and does not know that Garp has tried to reach her.

Unable to talk to Helen, Garp senses that she is with Michael so he and the boys leave the theater before the end of the movie. Garp blames their early departure on Walt's cold and his need to be home in bed.



Just as Michael is about to orgasm in the station wagon, Garp and the boys hit the driveway at about 40 m.p.h. Garp proceeds to cut the lights and the motor and the Volvo sails into the dark driveway slamming into Michael's station wagon.

Walt Catches Cold Analysis

Irving utilizes more foreshadowing in this chapter beginning with Garp's bad dreams about Duncan and Walt. It is as if his parental instincts tell him that something horrible is about to happen and, through his dreams, he tries to learn what it is so that he may somehow prevent it.

Duncan's comment that the unusual station wagon looks like a hearse is important due to the vehicle's significance in the accident in the Garps' driveway. It is also noteworthy that on the way to the movies, Garp tells Duncan and Walt to sit down because if he had to stop suddenly, the gearshift shaft could severely injure whoever would fall on it.



The World According to Marcus Aurelius

The World According to Marcus Aurelius Summary

After the accident, Jenny suggests that Garp and his family move into the Dog's Head estate and she begins to nurse them back to health. Duncan had lost his right eye when he was thrown forward onto the Volvo's gearshift shaft and Jenny gets him fitted for a glass eye when Garp and Helen cannot bear to do it.

Jenny suffered a broken collarbone, a gash above her nose and her spine was injured so that it would bother her the rest of her life. Michael Milford lost three quarters of his penis when the impact of the accident forced Jenny's teeth to clamp down on it, and Garp's jaw is broken and his tongue severely cut from the impact of hitting the steering wheel. Unfortunately, little Walt was killed after being thrown from the Volvo.

Jenny resigns her position at the college and the whole family moves to Dog's Head to heal physically and emotionally. Eventually Roberta takes Duncan to the beach and teaches him to play football with his altered peripheral vision and even Garp and Helen come to an understanding that they were both to blame in this horrible accident.

During their stay, Garp is forced to communicate by writing little notes just as the Ellen Jamesians do. In time, Garp's mental and emotional states heal and he is able to write again, this time a novel called *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Helen knows that this is how Garp works through his emotional issues and refuses to read the book because she needs to forget the incidents leading up to the tragedy. Helen and Garp agree to have another child, not to replace Walt, but to heal their marriage.

The World According to Marcus Aurelius Analysis

The significance of the chapter's title comes from Garp's days in Vienna and his reading about Marcus Aurelius who said, "in the life of a man, his time is but a moment... his sense a dim rushlight." Garp understands this now in a way he could never have understood it before. The fragility of life has taken Walt away and wounded the family so that they will never be the same again. Garp also knows that he and Helen both share in the guilt of what has happened but both of them deal with it differently and long for the chance to alter events knowing that that can never happen.



The World According to Bensenhaver

The World According to Bensenhaver Summary

This chapter is the first chapter of Garp's new novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver* in which a young woman named Hope Standish is at home with her baby when a boy of seventeen named Oren Rath brutalizes her and cuts her baby's cheek with a hunting knife.

Hope's ordeal continues as Oren forces her into his truck where they drive to the Rath farm where Oren talks to two men in his family about taking Hope somewhere to rape and kill her. Oren knows that the police will be looking for his truck so he takes a different one from the farm and forces Hope inside.

Hope's mind races as she tries to anticipate what Oren's next move will be and she capitalizes on his sexual inexperience to distract him long enough to retrieve his hunting knife from its sheath and proceed to slice and disembowel him as he rapes her.

The detectives who come upon the scene have never witnessed a more brutal act but tell Hope that she was justified in what she did given the fact that she would have been killed herself had she not killed Oren first. Hope begins to feel safe with the lead detective named Bensenhaver who commends Hope on her behavior. Bensenhaver also makes a mental note to speak to Hope's husband because it is Bensenhaver's experience that husbands do not always understand rape situations.

The World According to Bensenhaver Analysis

Garp begins this novel as a therapeutic exercise to address all his hidden rage and guilt about the accident that killed Walt and seriously wounded Duncan and Helen. There is significance in the perpetrator's name, Rath, in that Garp has so much anger inside and he does not know where to put it so it comes out in brutal justice with the wrath inflicted on the young character Rath in the story.

Oren's family members symbolize the people who are indifferent to tragedy, as the two men do not attempt to stop Oren from brutalizing Hope, even know he intends to kill her. Garp gives Hope a name with significance too, as she is determined to live in hopes of seeing her husband and child again, which she ultimately does.



The First Assassin

The First Assassin Summary

Garp sends this first chapter of his new book to John Wolf who cannot believe that Garp wants to publish such blatantly gory material about rape and murder. Jenny is the only person who likes the beginning of the new book because the heroine, Hope Standish, survives and is given credit for the horrific act she is forced to commit.

Garp ignores John's protests and completes the novel just before Helen has a baby girl whom they name Jenny in honor of Garp's mother. Helen is not especially overjoyed at Jenny's birth but is relieved to have some distraction from the overwhelming grief of losing Walt.

John is finally able to see the redeeming qualities of Garp's new novel but before agreeing to publish it, gives the manuscript to his office cleaning woman named Jillsy Sloper. It has been John's experience over the years that Jillsy's instincts about a novel are more on target than any scientific study could ever be.

Jillsy is upset by the physical violence in the manuscript but tells John that she was unable to put it down and John knows that this means the book will be a success. Garp is pleased and takes John's advice to take Helen and the kids to Europe for a while in order to avoid any negative reviews or possible repercussions from the book.

The Garp family travels with John from Boston to New York where they stay at John's apartment for one night before they catch their flight to Vienna. That evening Garp shares with John and Helen his idea for his next book entitled *My Father's Illusions* about an idealistic father who tries to establish utopian lives for his many children.

Garp has some sketchy ideas for subsequent books that will bring him to a total of six published novels at which point he feels that he will die. Helen is obviously uncomfortable with this conversation but Garp continues to say that death brings fame for an author better and quicker than any other tactic available.

The next morning John takes the Garps to the airport and hands Garp a package containing the completed book jacket for the new novel. After the plane has taken off, Garp is able to open the package and is furious to find a photograph of a small body being taken away from an accident scene on the front cover of the book. The back cover holds a picture of Garp with both Duncan and Walt with the notation that the picture was taken before the accident.

Both Garp and Helen are outraged at John's sensationalism of their personal tragedy on a book whose content is something entirely different. Garp never completely forgives John for this huge indiscretion and the use of Garp's children, one of whom is dead, for profit and gain.



During the flight, Garp imagines an image of Jenny in her nurse's uniform floating in the sky high above a huge group of people. Disturbed by this image, Garp turns his attention to Duncan who recalls the family's use of the name Under Toad established by little Walt who mistook the warnings of the undertow in the sea for some huge amphibian. Walt had always wanted to know if the Under Toad was green or brown but Garp now knows that it is the color of himself and Helen and about the size of an automobile.

Soon after their arrival in Vienna, Garp receives a phone call in the middle of the night from Roberta who tells Garp that Jenny is dead. Jenny had been speaking at a rally and was shot by an outraged man with a deer rifle. Garp, Helen and the children fly back to America immediately wracked with grief.

The First Assassin Analysis

This part of the novel is filled with more foreshadowing beginning with Garp's statement to John and Helen that he will die which will make his books and image more popular. There is some element of truth in Garp's statement, as if he can sense his own destiny.

The image that Garp has of Jenny floating in the sky above a crowd is more imminent as Jenny is shot at a rally just a few days later. Garp's imagination when he is not writing has to go somewhere and he has an eerie sense of premonition about events which will happen to his family.

Irving uses the metaphor of a toad to describe the indescribable fear that grips the family. Little Walt knew that there was something dangerous in the sea and his mistaken understanding for the word undertow has become a family colloquialism but they all know what Under Toad means and Garp feels the Toad's presence very strongly now.



The First Feminist Funeral, and Other Funerals

The First Feminist Funeral, and Other Funerals Summary

Arriving in New York, Garp, Helen and the children meet John Wolf in his office where John informs them of the massive memorial service planned for Jenny. Roberta is also with them and tells Garp that this will be the first feminist funeral and that no men will be allowed admittance. Garp rails against such a ridiculous notion and vows to attend his mother's service.

Helen tries unsuccessfully to reach her father by phone while Duncan looks out onto the street and sees many people who are crippled in one way or another. Helen does not want to attend the memorial service and leaves for Steering with Duncan and little Jenny.

Garp is able to gain admittance to the memorial thanks to Roberta's new talents with wigs and makeup and the acquisition of a turquoise jumpsuit and high boots. During the service, Garp is recognized by the youngest of the Percy children, Pooh, who creates a disturbance when she yells out that a man is in attendance. Garp barely escapes with his life and arrives at the airport where he is able to purchase a ticket home after some lengthy explanations about the discrepancy of his current appearance as a woman with that on his driver's license.

On the flight, Garp manages to deflect the attentions of a lecher who moves away once he realizes that Garp is not interested in a liaison. The seat is then taken by a slight young woman who informs Garp that she is Ellen James. Ellen writes notes to explain her story of being orphaned with no home and Garp invites her home with him to become part of his family. Garp feels a sense of completion knowing that this is what his mother would have expected from him.

Returning to Steering, Garp learns that Helen's father has suffered a heart attack and died while looking at a pornographic magazine. The dean of the school tells Garp that Stewart Percy has also died and that funerals for both men will be held on the same day. Helen sends Garp to the chapel to make sure that the music for her father's service will be different from that at Stewart's funeral.

Stewart's funeral has already begun when Garp arrives at the chapel and the funeral director enlists Garp as a pallbearer because there are only two other relatively young men in attendance. Garp is seated next to Midge Percy who does not recognize Garp who introduces himself as Mr. Smoan so he does not stir up any emotions if the elderly Midge were to hear Garp's name again.



After the service, the dean of the school asks Garp to stay at Steering and he agrees to speak to Helen about it after her father's funeral.

The First Feminist Funeral, and Other Funerals Analysis

The theme of death figures prominently in this section of Irving's novel. An assassin has struck down Jenny and both Ernie Holm and Stewart Percy have succumbed to heart attacks. Ellen James relates her sad story of the death of her parents, and Garp and Helen still mourn for their dead son, Walt. As quirky as Irving's characters are, they still suffer from the inevitability of death which Jenny had called the great equalizer.

Symbolically, these deaths are important because Garp and Helen are now without parents; and Garp's feelings of inadequacy stemming from Stewart Percy's prejudice against him have died with Stewart. Garp is free now from all the restrictions of his childhood and is in a position to rewrite his life at Steering, as he would like it to unfold.

There is more foreshadowing in the chapter with Duncan's view of the streets of Manhattan populated with crippled and maimed people. This is therapeutic for the young boy who has lost one eye and foretells his future, especially when he sees a man who has lost an arm.



Habits of the Under Toad

Habits of the Under Toad Summary

Garp and Helen decide to stay in Steering so that Duncan and Jenny can attend school there. The family buys the Percy mansion when Midge Percy moves to Pittsburgh to live with one of her sons. Garp becomes the school's wrestling coach, not for the income, but to have something to do every day. Helen is not yet prepared to return to teaching and stays at home to read. Ellen James stays with the Garps and becomes like another member of the family

Garp learns that Jenny had named him the executor of her estate and he balks at having to make the decisions about which women will be allowed to move into Dog's Head for their therapy and tries to push much of the responsibility to Roberta who is now running the center.

Ellen James follows in Garp's footsteps and becomes a writer with her first article entitled, "Why I'm Not an Ellen Jamesian," which decries the sensationalism of the Ellen Jamesian women taking advantage of Ellen's personal tragedy. Garp encourages Ellen to publish her story against the better judgment of Helen who thinks that publication will raise more ire than consciences. Ellen proceeds with the publication of her story and the family celebrates her personal victory.

Garp reaches a personal crisis when one of the Dog's Head applicants is the former wife of the man who shot Jenny Fields. The woman, Mrs. Truckenmiller, needs financial assistance because she has no major source of income to support her children since her husband, Kenny, was shot down after he killed Jenny.

Garp makes the trip to meet Mrs. Truckenmiller anonymously to determine her veracity and finds that she operates a small beauty shop out of her kitchen. Garp pays for a permanent and a haircut and leaves without telling Mrs. Truckenmiller who he is. Helen does not like Garp's new hairstyle and senses the presence of the Under Toad.

Soon after the publication of Ellen's story, Garp is nearly run down by a car while out for his daily jog. Garp escapes serious injury by leaping a wire fence surrounding a cow pasture but the woman driving the car crashes into a stone wall and is killed instantly. Garp finds evidence that the woman had been an Ellen Jamesian.

Garp recovers from some minor injuries and returns to his coaching job as Helen returns to teaching. Ellen attends classes at a nearby university and the family has settled into a pleasant mode, however, "in the world according to Garp, an evening could be hilarious and the next morning could be murderous."



Habits of the Under Toad Analysis

Jenny Fields would be pleased to know that the Steering School now admits girls so that her namesake, Jenny Garp will be able to attend school there. Garp is also content to be back at Steering because he knows that his mother thought it was the best choice for him and he wants to provide the best for his own children.

Ironically, Ellen James writes a story about why she is not part of the Ellen James Society. Ellen is upset that scores of women have mutilated themselves by cutting out their tongues in support of Ellen, whom they have never even met. Ellen prefers for her personal tragedy to not be used as a rallying cry for feminism and that she be given her privacy.

Irving uses foreshadowing in the attempt on Garp's life by an Ellen Jamesian and he thinks he has escaped danger but Helen feels a sense of dread brought by the Under Toad.



Life After Garp

Life After Garp Summary

The next day, Garp works on his new novel in the morning and calls Roberta for a game of squash but Roberta is unable to play today. Garp has his usual lunch at the local diner where he talks to a new Steering English teacher, Donald Whitcomb, about Garp's new novel and about writing in general.

After lunch, Garp proceeds to the gym to begin wrestling practice and speaks to some of the wrestling team members about methods for improving their techniques. Garp sits down and leans against the padded wall and sees Helen enter bringing a book so that she can read in the steamy gym this afternoon.

Garp sees a nurse approaching him and at first mistakes her for one of the women who helped him escape from Jenny's memorial service but this woman has young breasts and legs in contrast to her gray hair and Garp senses that something is not right. Suddenly the nurse pulls a gun and shoots Garp twice before anyone is able to subdue her. Garp realizes that the nurse is Pooh Percy, the Ellen Jamesian who had attacked him at Jenny's memorial service, and the youngest child of Stewart and Midge Percy.

Garp is thankful that Duncan is not here to watch this scene and regrets that Helen has had to witness his death but is reassured in some way to have her near him. Garp dies in the wrestling room with Helen by his side.

Helen lives a very long life and has many suitors but never remarries. Donald Whitcomb, the new English teacher who spoke to Garp shortly before his death is employed to write Garp's biography. Ellen James grows up to be a writer and an ardent feminist like Jenny Fields. Mrs. Ralph finishes her education and accepts a position as an English professor at a local university. Pooh Percy lives a very long life and works with retarded children after intensive psychiatric counseling. Roberta Muldoon dies lying in a hammock at Dog's Head after reporting some popping sensations in her head after a jog on the beach. Duncan Garp loses an arm in a motorcycle accident and dies not long after by swallowing a cocktail olive while laughing at one of his own jokes. Jenny Fields grows up to become a cancer research doctor with her grandmother's medical skills and her father's intuition that the terminal cases are the most important.

Life After Garp Analysis

According to Garp, "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." Garp's words prove true for his own death as he is taken completely by surprise when Pooh Percy pulls her gun. It is ironic that Garp should lose his life just at a point when he is finally content with his life. Garp has come full circle from his childhood at Steering where his life essentially began and where it ends.

It is ironic that Garp is murdered by one of the women his mother supported in the Ellen Jamesian Society, whose tenets include nonviolence and right to life. Perhaps Garp's death is inevitable because he challenges the authenticity of the Society's motives and his voice needs to be silenced in order for the Society to continue.

Fortunately, Garp dies in the place he considers home, the padded comfort of the wrestling room where he has had much success and validation. In the end, Garp is a flawed character like all human beings who try to achieve personal satisfaction amidst the demands of a family dynamic that is ever-changing.



Characters

Arden Bensenhaver

Arden Bensenhaver is the titular character in Garp's third novel, *The World According to Garp*. Bensenhaver is a police detective who works on the rape case of Hope Standish. His own wife was raped and murdered years earlier. Bensenhaver has no mercy for rapists, and he tampers with contradictory evidence in an effort to ensure that Hope's rape is seen exactly for what it is. Bensenhaver is forced to retire from the police force for his unorthodox methods, and Dorsey Standish, Hope's paranoid husband, hires the exdetective as a bodyguard for his family. Hope forces her husband to make Bensenhaver leave their home after she tires of the bodyguard's intrusion on their family's life. Bensenhaver later has a stroke and returns to the Standish home. He mistakes Dorsey Standish for an intruder one night and shoots him. He lives the remainder of his life in an old-age home for the criminally insane.

Dean Bodger

Bodger is the gruff but caring dean of Steering School, an exclusive prep school for boys. He is one of the few people to befriend Jenny Fields, the school nurse, as she raises Garp at the school's infirmary. He drives around the school grounds at night, with a spotlight attached to his car, looking for students out past curfew. Garp attempts to capture pigeons on the infirmary roof one night and becomes dangerously trapped in a rusty gutter. Bodger shines his spotlight on the boy, startling the pigeons. The gutter breaks apart, but fortunately Jenny is there to catch the boy. One of the pigeons strikes Bodger in the chest and knocks the wind out of him. He regains consciousness thinking that he caught the falling Garp. He spends the rest of his life thinking that he has saved Garp's life. Later, he hires Garp to be the wrestling coach at Steering after Ernie Holm dies. Bodger remains dean long enough after Garp's death to see Duncan graduate from Steering. After his retirement, Bodger dies during a wrestling match.

Bonkers

Bonkers is the large, vicious Newfoundland dog owned by the Percy family. Jenny wants the dog put to sleep when it bites off a piece of Garp's ear, but Midge and Stewart Percy refuse to do it. Garp gets his revenge many years later on the night of his graduation as he is sneaking Cushie away from the Steering mansion. When Bonkers lunges at him, Garp uses a wrestling move to throw the old dog down and bites part of the animal's ear off.

Bonkie

See Bonkers



Florence Cochran Bowsby

Florence Cochran Bowsby is the seductive, divorced mother of Duncan's friend Ralph. Garp refers to her as "Mrs. Ralph" because he never learns her name. Garp's first close encounter with Florence occurs when he chases her down for speeding. Garp, although he is somewhat attracted to her, doesn't approve of her behavior. Florence recognizes this, and she assures him that Duncan, who is spending the night at her house, will be safe. Later that evening, the restless Garp decides to run by the woman's house to make sure that Duncan is secure. He finds the woman drunk and depressed; she asks him to make the young man in her bedroom leave. Garp forces the young man to leave. Florence then tries to seduce Garp, but Garp controls himself. He realizes that he has misjudged her before he leaves with Duncan. Florence ultimately obtains a Ph.D. in comparative literature. She corresponds with Helen after Garp's death, writing in a letter that "[Garp's] seduction [was a] non-occurrence I have always regretted but respected."

Charlotte

Charlotte is one of the prostitutes that Garp and Jenny meet in Vienna. Jenny pays the beautiful, older prostitute to sit with them and answer Jenny's questions about lust. Garp finds himself attracted to her and he eventually becomes one of her regular customers, as well as her friend. One evening, Garp cannot find her, and he discovers that she is sick in the hospital with cancer. He visits her often, telling the nurses that he is her son. Charlotte's death disturbs him. He later finds out that Charlotte has paid Tina and Wanga, two other prostitutes, to each give him a session for free.

Dickie

Dickie is the brother of Harriet Truckenmiller, the wife of Jenny's assassin. He is one of several men who were forced to shoot Kenny Truckenmiller after he murdered Jenny. He is very protective of his sister when Garp visits her incognito.

The Dream-Teller

The dream-teller is one of the members of the Circus Szolnok in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He was married to Herr Theobald's sister at one time. He accurately tells the disturbing dream of Johanna, the grandmother of the traveling family in the story. She is so upset that she slaps him. The dream-teller is institutionalized years later when he goes mad. His removal from the pension coincides with its return to a Class C rating.



Duna

Duna is the old, unicycle-riding bear in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He is owned by the sister of Herr Theobald, the pension's manager. Duna is part of a pathetic Hungarian circus troupe living at the Pension Grillparzer. The bear becomes senile and is forced to move into a zoo. He dies at the zoo, "embarrassed to death" when zoo officials must shave his chest to treat a rash.

Fat Stew

See Stewart Percy

Father

The father is one of the characters in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." His job is to rate various hotels, restaurants, and pensions for the Austrian Tourist Bureau. He is a decent man who brings his family along on his travels. He constantly makes mental notes about the establishments he examines. His assignment in the story is to investigate the Pension Grillparzer's application to be upgraded from a Class C rating to a Class B. Despite his family's odd experience at the pension, he very kindly upgrades the rating.

Jenny Fields

Jenny Fields is the eccentric mother of Garp. She is a strong, independent woman who, as a young nurse in Boston during World War II, is ahead of her time. She lives alone, much to her family's chagrin. They believe that she must be leading a promiscuous lifestyle. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth; Jenny has no interest in sharing either her body or her life with a man. She is basically asexual, and perhaps somewhat aloof, but she is not without warmth or passion. In fact, she discovers that she loves children as she works in the obstetrics ward of Boston Mercy Hospital. She informs her colleagues that she is determined to use a man to impregnate her, no strings attached. The administration of the hospital learns of her plans and she is transferred to the intensive care unit. It is in the ICU that she is actually able to fulfill her wishes as she cares for the brain-damaged Technical Sergeant Garp. She uses the helpless, yet aroused, soldier to impregnate herself.

After Jenny gives birth to Garp, she gets a job as a nurse at the Steering School, an exclusive prep school for boys. Garp later notes that: "It's odd . . . that my mother, who perceived herself well enough to know that she wanted nothing to do with living with a man, ended up living with eight hundred boys." Jenny raises Garp at the infirmary and cares for him through the various traumatic incidents of his childhood. She watches as Garp becomes a champion wrestler, falls in love with his coach's daughter, and nurtures his talent as a writer. She travels with him to Austria, where both plan to write. She is



perturbed by the nature of lust, and her opinions on the subject play a large role in her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*.

The publication of Jenny's book makes her a celebrity and a feminist champion. She also becomes wealthy and is able to support Garp and Helen, who have married, as they pursue their respective careers. She attracts a wide variety of followers, including the Ellen Jamesians and transsexual Roberta Muldoon. She opens her family's mansion at Dog's Head Harbor as a retreat for troubled women. After the accident that kills Walt Garp and maims the rest of the family, Jenny nurses them back to health at Dog's Head Harbor. Helen and Garp have a daughter they name after Jenny. Garp writes *The World According to Bensenhaver* during his recovery and John Wolf, his editor, recommends that he leave the country before the book's release to avoid the publicity. Jenny becomes involved with the New Hampshire gubernatorial campaign while Garp and his family are out of the country. She supports a female candidate who is being demonized by her male rival. Jenny is assassinated when she appears to speak at a rally in support of the woman. Garp, as executor of Jenny's estate, agrees to establish the Fields Foundation. The foundation continues Jenny's work helping women in need.

Alice Fletcher

Alice Fletcher is the wife of Professor Harrison Fletcher. She is a frustrated writer with a speech impediment. She and Garp fall in love when Helen agrees to a swap of partners in an ill-conceived attempt to teach Harrison not to have affairs with students. Alice is heartbroken when Helen ends the swap after six months. Alice and Harrison are forced to move away because the university learns of his affair with the student. Alice later has a daughter who becomes a cello player. The daughter goes on a date with Duncan after a New York City performance. Alice and Harrison end up dying in a plane crash on a trip to Martinique.

Harrison Fletcher

Harrison Fletcher is a colleague of Helen Holm. The professor is married to a lisping writer named Alice. The Garps and the Fetters become friends. Garp discovers that Alice cannot write because of Harrison's love affair with one of his students. When Helen finds out, she proposes that the couples swap partners in an effort to make Harrison forget his dalliance with the student. The swap is a disaster; Alice and Garp fall in love, and Harrison falls in love with Helen. Helen breaks the affair off when she realizes it is useless. Harrison is forced to take a job at another college when the university denies him tenure because of his affair with the student. He and Alice later die in a plane crash on the way to Martinique.

Duncan Garp

Duncan is the first son of Garp and Helen. Garp assumes the traditionally female role of primary caretaker in bringing up both Duncan and Walt. This allows him to write as



Helen teaches. Garp is an extremely protective father, and both of the boys grow up in relative safety and comfort until the horrible car accident that kills Walt and maims Duncan. Duncan loses his right eye when his head is impaled on the knobless stick shift of Garp's Volvo. Duncan recovers at Dog's Head Harbor, and his artistic talents emerge when he begins to study photography. He illustrates a version of "The Pension Grillparzer." Duncan attends Steering School after Garp's death. He becomes a close friend to Roberta Muldoon and Ellen James, and he helps raise his younger sister, Jenny. He also becomes an accomplished painter and photographer. He survives a motorcycle accident, but loses one of his arms. After Roberta's death, he marries one of the former football player's transsexual friends. He helps Donald Whitcomb publish Garp's unfinished novel, *My Father's Illusions*. He lives a long life before choking to death on an olive as he laughs at one of his own jokes.

Jenny Garp

Jenny Garp is born after the death of Walt. She is named after her grandmother, Jenny Fields. She is a toddler when Garp is assassinated. She is brought up by Helen, Duncan, and Ellen James. While caring for Duncan during his recovery from a motorcycle accident, she decides to become a doctor. Jenny is married, twice, and gives birth to three children. She becomes a director of a branch of the National Cancer Institute. She orders copies of Garp's novels in stores across America in order to keep his books in print. After a long life, she dies of cancer.

T. S. Garp

The World According to Garp is the life story of T. S. Garp, bastard son of proto-feminist nurse Jenny Fields. Garp is reared by his loving, dangerously straightforward, and independent mother at an exclusive prep academy for boys, the Steering School. Jenny is a nurse at the school, and she lives with Garp in the school's infirmary. Garp is eventually old enough to attend the school and he becomes a champion wrestler. He falls in love with his wrestling coach's daughter, Helen Holm, and he works to become a writer to win her heart. After he graduates, he travels to Europe (joined by his mother) for inspiration. He writes his first serious short story, "The Pension Grillparzer," while living in Vienna. The story convinces Helen that he is a true writer and they marry. Meanwhile, to Garp's horror, Jenny's autobiography turns her into a celebrity.

Garp writes and cares for the children while Helen teaches at a university. The novel details Garp's many struggles with his art. He is forced to deal with a nonexistent audience for his work, irate readers, and writer's block. Garp and Helen love each other dearly, but their marriage is forced to survive many trials. First, they make an odd attempt to save another couple's marriage by swapping partners. Garp has affairs with babysitters and Helen takes a graduate student as a lover. Finally, their marriage faces the ultimate test when a tragic car accident kills one child and permanently disfigures another. They spend months physically and mentally healing at Garp's mother's home at Dog's Head Harbor. Garp and Helen finally forgive each other, and Garp purges the



horror of the accident by writing *The World According to Bensenhaver*, a disturbing and violent novel.

Garp is often at odds with his mother throughout his life. He is irritated by her attitude toward lust and he dislikes many of the oddballs she attracts (with the exception of Roberta Muldoon, who becomes a good friend). However, in many ways, Garp is much like his mother. He shares her love for children; he is a good nurturer. He is also stubborn and fearlessly opinionated. It is these latter traits that doom both mother and son. Garp is murdered not long after his mother is assassinated. Perhaps the most succinct analysis of Garp's character is made at the beginning of chapter 11:

If Garp could have been granted one vast and naïve wish, it would have been that he could make the world *safe*. For children and for grownups. The world struck Garp as unnecessarily perilous for both.

Technical Sergeant Garp

Technical Sergeant Garp is the brain-damaged, ball-turret gunner that Jenny discovers in the ICU of Boston Mercy. A severe head wound causes the soldier to regress to infancy. Jenny nurses the man as the debilitating injury slowly but surely kills him. Although the man has the mind of an infant, Jenny realizes that he is potent enough for her to realize her dream of pregnancy and she uses him successfully. The soldier dies a short time later; Jenny never learns his first name.

Walt Garp

Walt is the second son of Helen and Garp. He dies tragically in the car accident that maims the rest of his family. Later in the book, the family discusses the origin of its code for an indefinable feeling of fear just beneath the surface of everyday life: the Under Toad. One day while swimming, Walt misunderstood his father's instructions to "watch out for the undertow" as "watch out for the Under Toad." Walt mistakenly believed that a creature lived in the water waiting to pull unwary swimmers underneath. In an afterword written twenty years after the original publication of *The World According Garp*, Irving admits that the idea of the Under Toad came from one of his own children.

Hathaway

Hathaway is the lacrosse player laid up in the Steering School infirmary with two broken legs when young Garp disappears. Hathaway tells the impressionable, five-year-old Garp that a lacrosse stick might be used to capture the noisy pigeons living on the roof. Garp almost falls off the roof when he steals Hathaway's stick in an attempt to catch the pigeons.



Herr Theobald's Sister

Herr Theobald's sister is the owner of Duna the bear in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." She has, at one time or another, been married to each of the members of the Circus Szolnok. Her brother allows the circus to stay at his pension. She is forced to give Duna to the zoo after the bear grows senile. She is the only one left when the narrator of the story returns years later to visit the pension.

Ernie Holm

Ernie Holm is the wrestling coach at Steering and the father of Helen. Originally from Iowa, Ernie goes to New Hampshire to coach after his wife leaves him and abandons Helen. He turns the Steering wrestling team into state champions, and Garp becomes one of his star wrestlers. Ernie becomes friends with Jenny Fields after she signs Garp up for the team. He dies of a heart attack while reading pornography shortly after Jenny's assassination.

Helen Holm

Helen is the daughter of Steering School wrestling coach, Ernie Holm. Helen's father brought her to New Hampshire from Iowa after her mother abandoned them. Helen is a bright, studious girl who is always reading. Helen tells Garp she will only marry a real writer, and the lovesick Garp is determined to become one. He demonstrates his ability after he graduates from Steering and travels to Vienna to write "The Pension Grillparzer." For Garp, Helen is the quintessential audience, the ultimate reader. She agrees to marry him.

Their marriage triumphs over great adversity. Helen, usually sensible, makes a poor decision when she decides that swapping partners would be the best way to save the Fletchers' marriage. Helen, weary of Garp's egocentrism, takes a graduate student as a lover. This leads indirectly to the horrible car accident that kills Walt and maims Duncan. However, Helen and Garp are able to forgive each other while mourning, and they have another child. She cannot bring herself to read *The World According to Bensenhaver*, because she knows that Garp has used the writing of the lurid novel as a catharsis for the loss of Walt. Helen is incapable of restraining Garp from becoming a public figure after he publishes the novel and his mother is assassinated. Garp publishes a defense of an essay written by Ellen James against Helen's wishes. After Garp is murdered, Helen protects his memory by jealously guarding his journals and unpublished work. Donald Whitcomb, the young Steering English teacher who worships Garp, is the only outsider who is granted access to Garp's papers. Helen remains close to Roberta Muldoon and John Wolf. She lives a long life, and while there are other men, none can compete with the memory of Garp.



The Hungarian Singer

The Hungarian singer is one of the characters in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He is a member of the sad circus troupe living in the pension. He was once married to Herr Theobald's sister. He runs off with another woman at the end of the story.

Ellen James

Ellen James is the namesake of the radical feminist group known as the Ellen Jamesians. As a young girl, Ellen was beaten and raped by a group of thugs; her tongue was sliced off in an effort to prevent her from identifying them, but they neglected the young girl's ability to write. The members of the Ellen Jamesians purposely remove their own tongues as both a show of "support" for Ellen and a protest against the mistreatment of women by men. The Ellen Jamesians are major supporters of Jenny Fields, but Garp despises them. Garp meets the actual Ellen James as he returns from his mother's funeral. She resents the Ellen Jamesians as well. She admires Garp and hopes to one day be a writer as well. Garp invites her to join his family at Steering. Ellen writes an essay rejecting the Ellen Jamesians and Garp encourages her to publish it. Garp's defense of this essay leads to increased hostility between him and the Jamesians and, ultimately, to his assassination. Ellen stays with the Garp family after the novelist's death. She becomes a respected poet, and Roberta Muldoon often reads her work in public for her. She becomes an accomplished swimmer as well, but she drowns one day when the undertow is too strong.

Jenny's Brothers

Jenny's two unnamed brothers (one a law student, the other a legal professor) come to her rescue when she is arrested for stabbing a soldier who gropes her in a movie theater. They, like their parents, misunderstand Jenny. They mistake her independence for promiscuity. One of the brothers dies during World War II, and the other is killed in a sailboating accident.

Jenny's Father

Jenny's father is the wealthy owner of a shoe manufacturing company. Her father, like the rest of the family, doesn't understand her independence. He believes that Jenny is promiscuous, and Jenny's pregnancy convinces him that he was right. He allows her to live at the family's home while her pregnancy comes to term. He is disappointed when she takes a job at Steering School because he would rather she stay in hiding at Dog's Head Harbor until her bastard son grows up and moves away.



Jenny's Mother

Jenny's mother disapproves of Jenny's solitary lifestyle. Again, like the rest of the family, she believes that Jenny is promiscuous. She gives the young nurse dozens of what Jenny believes are water bottles. Later, Jenny discovers that her mother was really giving her dozens of douche bags.

Johanna

Johanna is the grandmother who travels with the family in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." The father in the family works for the Austrian Tourist Bureau. He travels to critique the various hotels, restaurants, and pensions around the country. Johanna is described as a "regal dame" with little patience for some of the lower-class places the family is forced to stay. She is shaken and disturbed when a "dream-teller" at the Pension Grillparzer relates her mysterious dream to the family at dinner. The family leaves the circus-like atmosphere of the pension with the upset Johanna after only one night. Johanna dies in her sleep some time later.

The Man Who Could Walk Only on His Hands

The man who could walk only on his hands is one of the circus characters in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He can walk only on his hands because the Russians supposedly removed his shin bones. As with all the other (human) members of the Circus Szolnok, the man was at one time married to Herr Theobald's sister. He is killed when his necktie gets caught in an escalator.

Michael Milton

Michael Milton is the unlikable, arrogant graduate student taken as a lover by Helen. Milton is a pompous Francophile. He stubbornly refuses to accept Helen's break-up phone call as their final meeting and insists on going to her house while Garp takes the boys to the movies. He is horribly mutilated in the ensuing accident in Garp's driveway. Years later, he visits Duncan Garp, posing as a biographer and asking questions about the accident. Duncan, who does not recognize Milton because he never knew him, sends the man away.

Mother

The mother is one of the characters in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." She travels with her family as her husband rates the hotels of Austria for the Austria Tourist Bureau. She grows tired of the pension because of the effect the visit is having on her mother, Johanna. Later, after Johanna dies, the mother begins having the same strange dream told by the dream-teller at the Pension Grillparzer.



Robert Muldoon

See Roberta Muldoon

Roberta Muldoon

Roberta Muldoon is the lovable transsexual who becomes a close associate of Jenny Fields and an intimate friend of the Garp family. Roberta is the former Robert Muldoon, a tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles of the National Football League. She admires Jenny and is extremely protective of the provocative nurse. Roberta and Garp become especially close; she often cries on his shoulder after breaking up with one of her many lovers. Roberta blames herself when Jenny is assassinated, and she is heartbroken when Garp is murdered as well. She remains close to the remaining members of the Garp family after Garp's death. She has an affair with Garp's editor, John Wolf. She dies while Duncan Garp is recovering from a motorcycle accident.

Narrator of "The Pension Grillparzer"

One of many characters in the stories within the novel is the narrator of Garp's short story "The Pension Grillparzer." The narrator of the story is the older of two brothers who travel with their family to hotels across Austria. The father works for the Austrian Tourist Bureau; he secretly ranks the hotels, pensions, and restaurants that the family visits. The narrator drives the car for the family and helps determine the rankings. His visit to the Pension Grillparzer deeply affects him and he visits the pension years later to discover its sad condition.

Bainbridge Percy

Bainbridge (Pooh) Percy is the odd and disturbed youngest child of the Percy family. She wears diapers until she is a teenager. For some strange reason, she bears a grudge against men in general and Garp in particular. She recognizes Garp at his mother's funeral and alerts the other women. Garp is forced to flee. Pooh later becomes an Ellen Jamesian and murders Garp. After being institutionalized for many years, Pooh is finally rehabilitated. She works with retarded children and, at the age of fifty-four, she has her own child. She dies of a stroke after a long life.

Cushie Percy

See Cushman Percy



Cushman Percy

Cushie Percy is the eldest daughter of Stewart and Midge Percy. She and Garp are childhood friends who become physically attracted to each other as teenagers. Garp shares his earliest sexual experiences with Cushie. They spend Garp's graduation night together in the Steering School infirmary. Several years later, Cushie dies during childbirth.

Midge Percy

Midge Percy is the heir to the Steering fortune. She and her husband Stewart live in the sprawling Steering mansion with their five children and a dog, Bonkers. Midge is a conceited woman who looks down her nose at Jenny and Garp. Although Jenny allows Garp to play with the Percy children, she is contemptuous of the adult Percys. Jenny is furious when Midge refuses to have Bonkers put to sleep after the dog bites Garp. Midge does not recognize Garp at the funeral of her husband.

Pooh Percy

See Bainbridge Percy

Stewart Percy

Stewart Percy is the boorish husband of Midge Percy (heir to the Steering fortune). He meets Midge Percy in Hawaii while he is in the service. Stewart teaches a ridiculous class at Steering called "My Part of the Pacific," which details the history of the two naval battles in which he was present. The students call him "Fat Stew" and "Paunch" behind his back. Stewart looks down on Jenny and Garp. Jenny, recognizing this disdain, dislikes him intensely. She gets a great deal of pleasure informing Stewart that "Garp bit Bonkie." Stewart dies soon after Jenny's assassination, and he and Ernie Holm are buried on the same day.

Benny Potter

Benny Potter is a cruel student who mocks the English teacher Tinch. Years after they graduate, Potter runs into Garp in the bar of a New York City hotel. Potter cavalierly informs Garp of Tinch's death. Garp angrily roughs Potter up.

Ralph

Ralph is Duncan's friend, the son of Florence Cochran Owlsby (known to Garp as "Mrs. Ralph"). He grows up to become a newspaperman and is killed in a war.



Mrs. Ralph

See Florence Cochran Bowsby

Randy

Randy is the young hippie that "Mrs. Ralph" asks Garp to remove from her bedroom. Randy ignores the woman's commands to leave and Garp must use force to get him out of the house. Later, the police pick Garp up as he is carrying Duncan home, and Randy is in the car. After the accident, Randy appears briefly at Dog's Head Harbor and befriends Duncan. He leaves, discouraged by Garp's intolerance.

Oren Rath

Oren Rath is the ignorant brute who rapes Hope Standish and forever alters the course of her family's life in Garp's third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Hope kills him with his fishing knife while he is raping her.

Robo

Robo is the narrator's younger brother in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He travels with the family as they rate various hotels and restaurants. Robo's main concern is how well each establishment cooks its eggs. He is more entertained than frightened by the strange occurrences at the Pension Grillparzer; he actually enjoys his stay. Years later, he dies in an explosion at the university he attends.

Jillsy Sloper

Jillsy Sloper is an uneducated black woman who cleans the office of editor John Wolf. Occasionally, when the editor is determining whether or not to publish a particular book, he will give a manuscript to Jillsy. He first discovered that Jillsy had a knack for predicting popular success when he gave her *A Sexual Suspect*, the autobiography of Jenny Fields. He is astonished when Jillsy tells him that she couldn't stop reading Garp's lurid, violent novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Garp dedicates the novel to Jillsy at Wolf's suggestion even though he has never met the woman. Garp finally does meet her on the day of his mother's funeral; she tells the surprised novelist that Jenny "was worth two or three of you!" Jillsy ends up dying of breast cancer.

Dorsey Standish

Dorsey Standish is one of the characters in Garp's third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. His wife's horrible rape turns him into an overprotective, hopelessly paranoid man. He attempts to protect his family by hiring Bensenhaver, the ex-detective



who worked on his wife's rape case, as a private bodyguard. His wife resents Bensenhaver's intrusion into the family's life and she forces her husband to make him leave. The couple loses their second child to a horrible accident while Dorsey is spying on Hope (he correctly believes she is having an affair). Dorsey becomes sterile and concocts an outlandish scheme for Hope to become pregnant by her lover so that they can have another child. Meanwhile, Bensenhaver has a stroke and he is allowed to return to the Standish home. One night, Bensenhaver mistakenly shoots and kills Dorsey as the man lurks about the house spying on his wife.

Hope Standish

Hope Standish is the woman who is brutally raped in the first chapter of Garp's third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*. She is forced to kill her rapist, Oren Rath, as he rapes her. Arden Bensenhaver is the detective who finds her after the ordeal. Hope is victimized not only by her rape, but by her husband's overwrought reaction to the rape. Although her husband hires Bensenhaver as a bodyguard, Hope resents the intrusion into her family's life and forces Dorsey to make the ex-detective leave. She suggests having a second child in an effort to counter her husband's anxieties. Unfortunately, the child accidentally chokes to death on a piece of gum when Dorsey leaves the two boys alone to follow his wife. Hope is having an affair because she can no longer bear her husband's idiosyncrasies. Dorsey, who becomes sterile, determines that Hope should try to become pregnant by her lover, but she should not see the man for any other reason. Dorsey is killed by Bensenhaver, who mistakes Dorsey for an intruder as Dorsey sneaks around the house. Hope does have another child. She and her family are now able to live a happy life, free from the anxieties of her dead husband.

Margie Tallworth

Michael Milton breaks off a relationship with college student Margie Tallworth when Helen agrees to have an affair with him. Margie sees Helen in Michael's car and writes a note to Garp informing him of the affair.

Herr Theobald

Herr Theobald is the owner of the pension in Garp's short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." He desperately desires to upgrade his pension's rating from a Class C to a Class B. However, he cannot bring himself to expel the Circus Szolnok from the pension's premises because of his sister's involvement with the odd troupe. The father in the story, a representative of the Austrian Tourist Bureau, pities the man and upgrades the pension from a C to a B. Herr Theobald dies years later while investigating strange noises in the night. He has a heart attack when he sees Duna the bear wearing the dream-teller's suit.



Tina

Tina is one of the prostitutes Garp meets in Vienna. She has a large scar on her forehead resembling a peach pit. Charlotte tells Garp that nothing is "too funny" for Tina. After Charlotte's death, Tina informs Garp that Charlotte has paid for two free "visits" with the prostitutes.

Mr. Tinch

Mr. Tinch is the stuttering, halitosis-cursed, English teacher who becomes a kind of mentor to Garp while he attends Steering School. His nickname among the students is "Stench." When Tinch asks Garp if his breath stinks in front of the class, Garp denies it to spare his teacher from embarrassment. It is Tinch who recommends that Garp and Jenny stay in Vienna when they travel to Europe. On his way home from a faculty party one winter night, Tinch slips, hits his head, loses consciousness, and freezes to death.

Harriet Truckenmiller

Harriet Truckenmiller is the divorced wife of the man, Kenny Truckenmiller, who assassinates Jenny Fields. She is a hairdresser in a small New Hampshire town. She is looked after by her brother, Dickie. Garp visits her, in disguise, to determine whether she deserves a grant from the Fields Foundation. He determines that she does indeed deserve a grant and tells the board to give her money.

Kenny Truckenmiller

Kenny Truckenmiller is the assassin of Jenny Fields. He is a deer hunter who blames Jenny for his divorce from his wife, Harriet. After shooting Jenny, he is gunned down by a group of men including Dickie, his brother-in-law.

Wanga

Wanga is one of the prostitutes Garp meets in Vienna. She has a disfigured lip from a cut obtained when she was a child. Garp later uses the free sessions paid for by Charlotte for "visits" with Wanga.

Donald Whitcomb

Donald Whitcomb is the young English teacher at Steering who worships Garp. He witnesses Garp's assassination in the gymnasium. He befriends Helen, and she chooses him to write Garp's biography. He waits until Helen's death to write the last chapter.

John Wolf

John Wolf is the editor whose company publishes both the autobiography of Jenny Fields and the novels of T. S. Garp. He has a sharp eye for work that has the potential to be a popular or critical success. However, he also listens to the opinion of his cleaning woman, Jilly Sloper, whenever he is stumped. He becomes a friend and confidant to Garp. He ruthlessly, but cleverly, uses Garp's tragedy to publicize *The World According to Bensenhaver*. He has an affair with Roberta Muldoon after Garp's death. Wolf dies of cancer before he can see Garp's biography in print.



Themes

Gender Roles

Irving's novel examines the significance of gender roles in American society. Jenny's independence as a woman is frowned upon by both her family and society in general. Young women usually didn't live alone in the 1940s. For example, it is immediately assumed that Jenny has some relationship to the soldier she stabs in the movie theater. Jenny resents the idea that a woman has to be "either somebody's wife or somebody's whore." In fact, Jenny exhibits some traditionally masculine traits: she is strong, plainspoken, and willful. This is demonstrated when her lack of a husband doesn't prevent her from getting pregnant. Her refusal to allow society to pigeonhole her because of her gender stirs great controversy and ultimately leads to her assassination. Alternately, Jenny's son Garp reverses gender roles. Garp, although he is very masculine, assumes the traditionally female role of domestic caretaker. Helen works while Garp cleans, cooks, and cares for the children. Although the arrangement is simply a matter of convenience (Garp can also write as he performs the domestic chores), the role of "house-husband" was unusual at the time. Finally, the character of Roberta Muldoon demonstrates the most drastic gender reversal in the novel. The former football player is obviously happy to be a female.

Death and Disfigurement

Irving's novel ends with the words, "in the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases." Irving seems almost obsessed with the absurdity and randomness of violence and death. The author often details the deaths of his characters in *The World According to Garp* almost immediately after introducing them. Garp himself is conceived amongst dying and disfigured men in the intensive care unit of Boston Mercy. He is disfigured as a child when Bonkers the dog bites off part of his ear. Garp is disgusted by the self-mutilation of the Ellen Jamesians; he is more sympathetic to the gender-changing mutilation performed on Roberta Muldoon by doctors. His family is traumatized by the car accident that kills Walt. Duncan loses one of his eyes in the accident, and Michael Milton is horribly injured. Late in the novel, the concept of the Under Toad is introduced. The Under Toad, a play on the word "undertow," is the code word the Garps use for a powerful feeling of dread. Garp "smells" the Under Toad when he receives the phone call in Austria informing him of Jenny's assassination. Garp himself is assassinated near the end of the novel. Finally, the epilogue details the various deaths of most of the remaining characters. Irving leaves very few loose ends.

Love and Lust

The World According to Garp is concerned with all the various types of love. The love between parents and children is demonstrated first by the relationship between Jenny



and Garp and then by the relationship Helen and Garp have with their children. Garp loves his children so powerfully that he is overprotective. Irving also examines the love between husband and wife. Garp and Helen love each other so fiercely that their marriage is able to withstand several catastrophes. There are also many loving friendships in the book; for instance, Garp and Roberta Muldoon become extremely close and loving friends. The novel also examines the nature of lust. Garp believes that his mother is somewhat cold because she doesn't experience lust, but Jenny recognizes that lust can often be disastrous. She takes care of dozens of women at Dog's Head Harbor who have been victims of lust. Garp's own life is affected by lust. First of all, Garp contracts gonorrhea in Austria when he runs into a trio of American tourists and he can't control his baser instincts. Garp also threatens his marriage when he has brief flings with babysitters. Finally, Helen's lust leads her into an affair that almost destroys the family.

Art and Creativity

Garp's life as a writer is an important subject in the novel. He often struggles with his art. He has difficulty writing in Vienna as his mother churns out her autobiography. However, he is finally inspired enough to write a charming short story, "The Pension Grillparzer." Irving uses the device of fiction within fiction to display Garp's work in the novel. The complete texts of "The Pension Grillparzer" and the essay "Vigilance" are part of the novel. In addition, the entire first chapter of Garp's novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, is chapter 15 of *The World According to Garp*. The plots of novels both written and unwritten are discussed as well. Garp, like many authors, is cursed by writer's block at various moments in his career. He also uses his art as a catharsis for personal tragedy when he writes *The World According to Bensenhaver*. He appears to be entering a productive stage in his career, with plans for three novels, shortly before he is murdered.



Style

Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is a German word meaning "novel of development." A *bildungsroman* is the study of the growth of a youthful character and thus it applies to Irving's novel. The novel concerns Garp's coming of age, and his maturation as a person and artist. The main character in a *bildungsroman* learns about life through all of its ups and downs and through his interactions with the variety of people he meets and relationships he forms. Garp learns about women through his relationships with his mother, Cushie Percy, Helen Holm, Charlotte the Austrian prostitute, Alice Fletcher, Mrs. Ralph, and Ellen James. His experiences as a husband and father teach him invaluable lessons about love, discipline, responsibility, pain, and hope. He encounters friendship with John Wolf and Roberta Muldoon, and he endures hatred from the Ellen Jamesians and Pooh Percy. Garp lives a full life in a mere thirty-three years.

Black Humor

Black humor, or comedy, can be defined as writing that displays elements of disillusionment and cynicism. *The World According to Garp* is a work of tragicomedy. The book moves from one moment to the next between "lunacy and sorrow." In his review published in the April 13, 1978, edition of *The New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt perfectly describes the black humor of *The World According to Garp*:

This is not going to be easy to explain. At the climax of John Irving's fourth novel . . . a truly horrifying accident occurs. Bones are broken, flesh is torn, eyes are put out, and appendages are severed. It is highly realistic, too, and in order to explain exactly how it happens, one would have to sum up dozens of plot details, all the way down to why the knob on a Volvo's gear shift happens to be missing. Moreover, at the point in the story when the accident occurs, we have grown extremely attached to the characters involved . . . Yet one of our reactions to this catastrophe is to burst out laughing. There we are, numb with shock and sick with concern, and suddenly we are laughing. And not feeling all that guilty about doing so either.

Foreshadowing

Irving uses foreshadowing, a literary device that creates expectation or sets up an explanation of later developments, to great effect in *The World According to Garp*. One example is Garp's childhood confrontation with Bonkers the dog. The vicious



Newfoundland bites off a piece of Garp's ear. This scene foreshadows Garp's retaliation when, as a teenager, Garp bites off a piece of the dog's ear. Another instance of foreshadowing involves the broken knob on the gearshift of the Garp family's Volvo. The Garps procrastinate replacing the knob, and Duncan ultimately loses an eye when his head is impaled on the knobless shifter in a car accident. Later in the novel, Duncan is spotting handicapped people from the windows of John Wolf's Manhattan office. The first person he notices is a man with no arm; after Garp's death, Duncan loses an arm in a motorcycle accident. Finally, Garp's death, in many ways, is foreshadowed by Jenny's assassination.

Irony

Irony in literature can be defined as the effect of language in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is stated. This can also be applied to the actions of characters in a novel. For example, it is ironic that Garp, an otherwise loving and overprotective father, contributes indirectly to the death of one son and the injury of another when he smashes into Michael Milton's car. Garp's friendship with Roberta Muldoon is ironic in the context of his distaste for the self-mutilation of the Ellen Jamesians. It is also ironic that Garp is murdered in the Steering School gymnasium, a place he and Helen have associated with safety.

Setting

The various settings of *The World According to Garp* are important to the atmosphere of the novel. The importance of the academic setting of the Steering School is demonstrated in the following passage in which Dean Bodger invites Garp to stay as wrestling coach after the death of Ernie Holm:

"Why don't you stay with us awhile?" Bodger asked Garp; with his strong, pudgy hand, sweeping the bleary windows in Buster's Snack and Grill, the dean indicated the campus of the Steering School. "We're not a *bad* place, really," he said. "You're the only place I know," Garp said, neutrally.

Garp is also deeply influenced by the weary decadence of Vienna. The setting directly influences his story, "The Pension Grillparzer." Hospitals and other places of rest, such as the mansion at Dog's Head Harbor, also play an important role in the novel.



Historical Context

Assassination in the Sixties and Seventies

Assassination can be defined as killing someone by sudden attack. The term assassin in the twentieth century generally refers to the hired or delegated killer of some politically important personage. Recent assassins have seem deranged and obsessed with notoriety. Although there have been many assassinations throughout history, it seems as if there was an epidemic of assassination in the last half of the twentieth century, especially in the United States. Irving has stated that the political events in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s had no effect on the writing of *Garp*. This is rather difficult to believe considering the important role assassination plays in the novel's plot.

There were four notorious American assassinations during the 1960s. These deaths dealt shocking blows to American idealism. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963, was the first of the four. The president was shot while riding in a motorcade through Dallas. Kennedy's assassination was the catalyst for a variety of conspiracy theories. However, the Warren Commission—a group of judges, senators, and representatives assigned by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate the assassination—determined that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone when he shot President Kennedy. Oswald himself was murdered by Jack Ruby, a Dallas restaurant owner, the day after the assassination.

Just two years later, Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 as he was speaking to an audience in a Harlem ballroom. Three men affiliated with the Black Muslim faith were convicted of the killing. It is generally held that Malcolm X was killed in an attempt to influence his followers to remain with the Black Muslims. Then, just three years later, the country was rocked by two more assassinations in quick succession. First, civil rights activist and minister Martin Luther King, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Career criminal James Earl Ray was convicted of the murder, but years later the King family supported Ray because they believed that he was the scapegoat in a conspiracy against the Reverend King. On June 4, 1968, just two months after King's assassination, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, the younger brother of John, was shot while leaving a hotel in California after winning the state's Democratic presidential primary. Kennedy died a day later, and Sirhan B. Sirhan was later convicted of the murder.

The assassination of Jenny Fields in *The World According to Garp* is similar to the attempted assassination of segregationist, Alabama governor George Wallace. Wallace was shot by Arthur H. Bremer on May 5, 1972, while campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination. There were two assassination attempts on President Gerald R. Ford (who was, ironically, a member of the Warren Commission) on separate trips to California in September of 1975. Both of the assailants were women: Lynette Fromme,



a former devotee of Charles Manson, and Sara Jane Moore. Certainly, one might determine that the prevalence of assassination in public life influences (at least indirectly) the plot of *The World According to Garp*.

Feminism

Feminism and the women's liberation movement play an important role in *The World According to Garp*. Women's issues are explored in many of Irving's novels. The origins of feminism, the theory that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to men, can be traced back to the late eighteenth century with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and the nineteenth century when women in Great Britain and the United States fought for property and voting rights. The invention of the birth control pill and the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) helped spur the rebirth of feminism and establish the modern women's liberation movement in the 1960s. Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and several other feminist leaders founded NOW, the National Organization for Women, in 1966. NOW, and many other feminist organizations, fought for such changes as abortion rights; federally supported child care; equal pay for women; the occupational upgrading of women; and the removal of all legal and social barriers to education, political influence, and economic power for women. Since the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which legalized abortion in the first trimester, there has been somewhat of a backlash against feminism. However, the influence of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s led to broad changes in American society.



Critical Overview

In the April 30, 1978, edition of the *Washington Post Book World*, William McPherson wrote that *The World According to Garp* is: "A wonderful novel, full of energy and art, at once funny and horrifying and Heartbreaking. . . . You know *The World According to Garp* is true. It is also terrific.

Many of the initial reviews for *The World According to Garp* were equally enthusiastic. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, in a favorable review published in the *New York Times* on April 13, 1978, recognized the book as "what is easily [Irving's] best novel to date." Mark Stevens, in a brief review published in the March 2, 1979, issue of the *National Review*, wrote that "*The World According to Garp* is the work of an extravagant imagination." In a review published in the April 23, 1978, issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Julian Moynahan stated that "[Irving's] instincts are so basically sound, his talent for storytelling so bright and strong, that he gets down to the truth of his time."

Several critics admired Irving's skillful blending of humor and tragedy. Lehmann-Haupt noted that "we find ourselves laughing throughout *The World According to Garp*, and at some of the damndest things." Stevens wrote that *Garp* is "richly comic, its dialogue and scenes sometimes filled with a riotous energy worthy of the Marx Brothers." Several critics also commented favorably on "The Pension Grillparzer," the first short story written by Garp in the novel. Moynahan wrote that "the utterly charming 'The Pension Grillparzer' . . . glows at the heart of *The World According to Garp*." Michael Malone, in a review published in the June 10, 1978, issue of *The Nation*, wrote:

The short story, 'The Pension Grillparzer,' which the novelist, Garp, rightly suspects is the best thing he ever wrote, and which I suspect is the best thing in *The World According to Garp*—and further suspect Irving may think so too—is a beautiful fiction.

There were, however, critics who did not find Irving's novel "utterly charming." For example, critic Richard Gilman attacked what he believed was the novel's "fundamental insincerity." In the October 6, 1979, issue of the *Nation*, he wrote:

The World According to Garp
is a model of its kind,
and its kind is a seductive imitation of literary seriousness,
an elegantly perpetrated, if not wholly deliberate,
hoax. Irving's book is an extremely instructive
example of how to have it all ways, an impressive
feat of having one's literary cake while eating off
commercial success."



Even some of the favorable reviews found flaws in Irving's novel. Moynahan, in noting a publisher's blurb saying that the book was "rich, humorous, and wise," wrote: "The book is certainly rich and humorous but it is more confused than wise." Malone, in his generally positive review, questioned what he called the novel's tendency to "explicate rather than embody" the idea that "comedy and death may be intrinsically joined."

Many academic articles on the novel have been published in various journals through the years as well. For example, Raymond J. Wilson examined the postmodern construction of *The World According to Garp* in the Fall 1992, edition of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. Wilson compares Irving's fiction to the works of John Barth and Robert Coover. He demonstrates that Irving's novel has a number of characteristics that identify it as a postmodern novel. For example, in *The World According to Garp* there is a "zone of the bizarre, where fantasy best expresses our sense of reality" as well as "a propensity for metafiction, in which writing draws attention to the techniques and processes of its own creation."

In another essay, published in *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges analyze the female characters in *Garp*. They contend that the strong female characters in the novel only serve to cover the "patriarchal power inscribed in traditional narrative conventions." They claim that in *The World According to Garp* "truth is structured in such a way as to guarantee paternal authority and to silence women no matter how much they speak." Of course, Irving, and many of his readers, would disagree with this conclusion.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5



Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, she examines the possible reasons why the characters and storyline in Irving's novel, although fraught with tragedy, elicit very little sorrowful or distressing emotional responses.

John Irving's *The World According to Garp* is often referred to as a tragicomedy, a term that identifies a story as containing representations of both the lighter situations of life that cause laughter and the more sorrowful consequences of human actions that cause tears. Irving's novel definitely has large quantities of both types of these situations, spurred by unending strings of episodes that readers might conclude only Irving could successfully place into one novel. However, although the comic reactions to Irving's story are easily stirred, there is a hesitation or outright nonreaction to the more mournful circumstances and their consequences in Irving's story. Why is this true? How does Irving pull readers in and make them fascinated enough about his characters to keep his readers compelled to turn the pages to the end of his story, making them laugh at all the impossible situations, and yet barely move them or, worse yet, make them laugh at horrendous episodes of bloody and tragic circumstances?

Possible answers to these questions might be found in Irving's own definitions of his writing. For instance, in an article by Richard Bernstein in the *New York Times*, Irving is quoted as saying, "I've read about myself that I am not to be taken seriously because I am a shameless entertainer, a crowd pleaser. . . . You bet. I am." In other words, by Irving's own definition, he wants to keep his readers entertained, a pursuit that usually entails delving only lightly into the material of a story with the goal of making one's audience smile or laugh. From this definition, readers might conclude that even if Irving himself categorized his novel as a tragicomedy, he would lean toward the comedic portion of this labeling.

Later in the same *New York Times* article, Bernstein has another Irving quote: "I am a comic novelist," claims Irving. Then Irving adds, "It is my deliberate decision to create someone who is capable of moving you and then hurting him." So with this statement, Irving confirms that his emphasis is on the comedic side of life despite the fact that he also admits that he wants to stir other emotions—empathy, for example, for the suffering that he inflicts on his characters. But is empathy evoked in his readers? Does Irving move his readers in both directions, toward the comedy and the tragedy as the term tragicomedy implies? Or is this term misapplied in reference to Irving's writing?

In an attempt to examine this question, this essay will take up the condition that Mel Gussow describes in another *New York Times* article in which he describes Irving's writing with the statement, "Irving himself is expert at alternating scenes of zestful humor and deep sorrow, eventually knitting together all diverse narrative strands until there are no degrees of separation." If by this statement Gussow means that Irving knits his humor and sorrow together until there is no separation between the two, then it might be that this lack of separation is the clue as to why it is difficult to feel empathy for



Irving's characters when they are suffering. Given the choice between laughing and crying, it seems only natural that readers would want to lean toward the humor in life. And maybe that is why readers of *The World According to Garp* find themselves laughing at the novel's scenes of death, mutilation, and rape.

At the beginning of *The World According to Garp*, the focus of the story is on Jenny Fields, Garp's mother. And the first blood drawn comes at the hands of Jenny in defending herself from a sexually aggressive male stranger who affronts her in a movie theater. The scene is bloody and brutal with Jenny slicing through skin and muscle and attempting to cut off the man's nose; and yet the reader feels very little sentiment, fear, or loathing for either the would-be assailant or for Jenny. The tension that might have built up from this scene is released in comic style, as with the line from Jenny: "'If I'd wanted to kill him,' she told the police, later, 'I'd have slit his wrist. I'm a nurse. I know how people bleed.'" Lines like this, at the height of a dramatic moment, cause readers to snicker, a response that comes out almost involuntarily like when witnessing someone falling down after slipping on a banana skin. The humorous aspects of the incident somehow wipe out empathy for the pain that is suffered. Forgotten in the laughter is the fact that Jenny was accosted and her assailant is in pain.

A little later in the story, Jenny meets Technical Sergeant Garp, (who is about to become the protagonist's father) whose brain has been accidentally mutilated by metal fragments, causing, in effect, a lobotomy (or severance of nerve fibers in the front part of his brain). The accident leaves the senior Garp in an imbecilic mental state, which gives Irving a chance to turn this bloody and horrific accident into another comedic scene. Irving does this by taking away all of Garp's abilities to function, except for one. Garp maintains an erection and is constantly masturbating. When Irving has Jenny taking advantage of Garp's erection by easing herself upon him, there is little thought of Jenny's inappropriateness. There is also little thought of defining Jenny as a rapist, which is what she is in essence; and had the sex of the characters been reversed, this scene might have been very controversial. Instead, this scene evokes laughter. Irving has not emotionally connected his readers to the senior Garp. He is just an almost-dead body, a casualty without family or loved ones to protect and care for him. Jenny is the closest thing this soldier has to a friend. And although she cares for him (albeit in a very unusual nursing fashion), even Jenny has no emotional connection to him. Jenny wants to be pregnant, and this soldier's body is her solution to accomplishing this without the messiness of having an affair. The scene and final moments of this man's life are funny because of Jenny's nonconformity, her unusual determination, and her inappropriateness. No one is saddened by the death because the only thing that the senior Garp is remembered for is his erection.

Books like Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Larry McMurty's *Terms of Endearment*, both of which were successful, popular novels that were eventually produced as movies, are also termed tragicomedies. But these two novels differ from *The World According to Garp* in that they make readers bond with the characters. The consequence is that readers feel the terror and loss as well as the humor as depicted in the character's fictional lives. Irving's novel continually comes up short on the tragic side. This is partly due to the fact that, as already described, Irving inserts comedy into



every tragic scene, not allowing his readers to come to terms or even realize that other emotions may be at play. But there is another reason why Irving's novel does not inspire empathy for the tragedies that his characters endure.

Irving tends to create characters that appear to be more like issues rather than flesh and blood people. Infidelity, for example, is an issue that Irving dwells on. So, he creates characters that he can use to represent infidelity. One such character is the young graduate student, Michael Milton, with whom Garp's wife, Helen, has an affair. While attempting to end the affair, Helen offers Michael a final act of oral sex, which results in her biting off part of Michael's penis. Michael is a one-dimensional character at best. Even though Irving briefly describes the agony that Michael suffers, there is little if any emotional response in reading about it. Michael represents just one in a long line of issues, and the loss of part of his penis not only tickles the funny bone, it also feels somewhat justified. Infidelity disrupts or strains the marital bonds. Since this is an issue that Irving wants to explore, Michael's loss substantiates Irving's conclusion.

There are also several feminist issues in *The World According to Garp*. Some of these issues deal with rape, others with transgender concerns, physical abuse, and general empowerment and sexuality topics. In discussing these issues, Irving creates situations that end in physical mutilation (such as women cutting off their tongues) and death. One such death is Jenny Fields'. Garp learns of his mother's death via a long-distance phone call. His reaction to the news is to first ask who killed her. When he finds out it was a man, his next reaction is to reflect on how difficult it must have been for the character Roberta (a man who has gone through a sex change) to say the word *man*. At first Irving diverts the emotions that might be lurking behind the tragedy of losing a mother by going immediately to the feminist issue as espoused by Roberta's distaste for men.

In this same scene, Irving next has Garp ask Roberta if she is alone. Roberta responds that she is with a group of women, all of whom once lived with Garp's mother. Garp's second response to the death of his mother, instead of reflecting on his own sense of loss, is to go directly to this group of women: "And Garp could imagine them all, the wailing women at Dog's Head Harbor—their leader murdered." By doing this, Irving dismisses Garp's emotions completely. Rather than having lost a mother, Garp relates only to the issues of feminism and how the movement has lost a spokesperson. And then to cap off this conversation, Irving has Garp say, "She [Garp's mother] wanted her body to go to a med school." This discussion of Garp's mother's death is neither sad nor funny. Rather it is bland, leaving the reader with words without any emotion. The issue of feminism has been played out. The topic is now somewhat resolved or at least it is coming to some kind of conclusion in this story. The loss of Garp's mother is not felt because by the time she dies in the novel, she too has become only an issue.

There is only one incident in the novel that evokes empathy. It occurs at the end of chapter thirteen, "Walt Catches Cold." However, readers don't even know that the tragedy occurs until the next chapter. There is a strange silence surrounding this tragic event, the death of Garp's son Walt; and it is in this silence that empathy is born. Walt dies in a car accident. But Irving encloses this accident in a sort of sick humor. The results of the accident begin with the aforementioned incident in which Garp's wife bites



off the grad student's penis. The consequences of the accident also include a broken jaw and arm and the loss of an eye. No one walks away from this accident unharmed and yet it is hard for the reader to know how to react to all the injuries. Irving points out the bodily harm done to Garp, his wife, their oldest son, and the grad student, but there is no mention of Walt. Walt is somehow skipped over. Readers are not even given a hint of this tragic consequence until the next chapter when Garp, his tongue swollen from having bitten it during the accident, says: "I *mish* him."

With these words, Garp opens up his heart to the reader. Irving has set the stage, having shown earlier in the novel Garp's love for his young son. As the details of Walt's death are slowly unfolded, so are the emotions. Walt's death has affected every member of the family. And in showing this, the reader is also affected. Irving does not use humor in this one incident. Neither does Walt represent anything other than a much-loved son. He is not an issue. He is a full-blown, flesh and blood character. If there is true tragedy in this story, it all centers on Walt. Irving has made a point to demonstrate how concerned Garp was for Walt's safety throughout the novel. Garp would run after cars that drove down his street too fast, admonishing the drivers to be more considerate for the safety of the children who lived on that block. Garp told Walt stories that had very pronounced moralistic endings so that Walt would be prepared to deal with the harsh realities of life. And yet, it was Garp himself who was responsible for Walt's death, because he played dangerously with his children, driving without the car's lights on, showing off.

Unfortunately, this tragedy is so embedded in a story filled with comic releases and issue-oriented characters that there is the possibility that this truly tragic moment is lost. Maybe if Irving had employed more silences around some of the other tragic events, his novel might not have been as entertaining, but the reading of it might have evoked stronger emotions. Instead, his novel is just as likely to be referred to as a comedy as it is a tragicomedy, which is sort of a tragedy in itself.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *The World According to Garp*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.



Critical Essay #2

In the following review, Griffin discusses *The World According to Garp's lack of plot, vulgar comedy, and obsession with "kinky violence."*

The World According to Garp was, of course, 1978's *Ragtime*, which is to say that it is the most recent manifestation of the greatest-novel-of-the-decade. . . .

Mr. Irving's previous novels were much shorter than the *Garp* book, and they hadn't attracted a great deal of attention. True, the man was "one of the most imaginative writers of his generation" (Dutton), but then so was everybody else. Clearly it was going to take more than mere imagination to turn Mr. Irving into a major literary event. It was going to take greatness. Let's face it, it was going to take a little naked profundity. . . .

The World According to Garp does indeed have "extraordinary" qualities. Its plot, for one thing. Like so many extraordinary things, the story lacks, shall we say, credibility. That is not necessarily a criticism: John Irving has never been able to construct a believable plot, but he has always tried to make a virtue of this chronic deficiency. Which is to say that, like other formless novelists—Pynchon, Barth, Doctorow—he abandons any pretense at narrative (and therefore psychological) realism, and seeks instead to attract and maintain the reader's attention with random monstrosities and grotesque occurrences, chiefly sexual or violent in nature, frequently both. The idea, in other words, is to horrify or titillate the reader to such an extent that he or she will be compelled to continue reading, even without the promise of any realistic development of story or explication of character. . . .

[Except] for numerous asides concerning art, genitalia, social diseases, and related subjects, it must be admitted that Mr. Irving writes mostly about (a) different ways of raping people and animals, and (b) different ways of killing people and animals. The novelist *Garp* is sometimes a participant, sometimes not.

Irving's talent is primarily comedic, and his purposes are best served by his dialogue, which is well done and often amusing. It is important to note at the outset that his style as a whole is *not* exhibitionistic, not even mildly tortured: it does not seek to function as a smokescreen for the author's views and perceptions. More than anything else, however, Irving's prose is the prose of a poorly educated man—his vocabulary is uninspiring, his knowledge of the grammatical proprieties is severely limited. He is a child of his time in his lack of respect for lucidity ("Garp was an excessive man," and "Garp felt a peculiar feeling of unfairness overwhelm him"). In Irving's case, however, the sporadic incoherence and the syntactical sloppiness seem to be simply the consequence of the author's unwillingness—or, perhaps, his inability—to polish his output, rather than a deliberate smog-policy. The carelessness, in other words, is in the expression, not in the sentiments which seek that expression. Like all other Major American Novelists, Irving says his ambition is to write "accessible" fiction, and he has done so. His style is simplistic, almost childlike—it is, in other words, what has come to be referred to as "readable." What *Garp* is, is a funny book. Or rather, it tries to be. But it

is a low humor, based chiefly on the prepubescent assumption that conscientious vulgarity is by definition amusing.

The immature quality of John Irving's comedic sense is worth mentioning primarily because of its subsidiary effect, which is to conceal, or at least to disguise, the novel's more fundamental flaw. What we are talking about, of course, is Irving's obsession with kinky violence (or violent kinkiness, it is hard to say which), and what concerns us here is the perverse enthusiasm with which many American critics have embraced that eccentric quality. . . .

The assumption of profundity extends . . . to the moral arena, so that many of us automatically accept John Irving's apparent bloodlust as something more than that, simply because the author's native intelligence is so obvious; whereas, in fact, the bloodlust may be merely . . . bloodlust. . . .

Source: Bryan Griffin, Review of *The World according to Garp*, in *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1979, pp. 51-55.



Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Moynahan speculates on the relation of the Irving's fictional world to his real-world experiences.

The World According to Garp shows that John Irving is haunted by the high level of quotidian American violence and the vulnerability of American lives. He can't get the frequency of assassination as a method of settling our domestic political and social quarrels out of his mind; and he is tormentedly aware of something like a war on women going on in our society as women's struggle for real equality continues and intensifies. He has not, however, arrived at wisdom on any of these matters. Apart from Andrew Greeley and some other heavy-breathing pundits, who has? . . .

Through its formal convolutions and sinuosities this novel is . . . a sort of treatise on how reality is processed by fiction; it takes a sophisticated view of the relations in art between the imaginary and the actual. For example, Garp writes as his fourth book "The World According to Bensenhaver." It has a lurid plot entailing rape, manslaughter and other violence, and represents Garp's idiosyncratic attempt to deal with the trauma of a terrible, ridiculous accident. . . . The Bensenhaver narrative, an entire chapter of which is included, is obviously a parody of the work containing it. So we are left to ponder the following question: What traumas suffered by John Irving elicited *The World According to Garp*, as Garp's traumas elicited "The World According to Bensenhaver"? The fact that such questions are not really answerable, except in imagination, does not make them less interesting and important.

A bit more on this point of the relation of fiction and "reality." Jennie Fields's assassination while campaigning in a shopping plaza evokes the assassination attempt on George C. Wallace during the 1972 Presidential primaries. The woman gubernatorial candidate loses ground in her campaign when she bursts into tears during a public appearance, recalling the famous incident of Senator Edmund Muskie's "womanish" tears outside the newspaper office in Manchester, N.H. There is no doubt Mr. Irving wants us to make these connections. It's all part of his demonstration of how fiction, in creating a world of its own, remains tied by the lifeline of the writer's experience to the world we all share. . . .

[Is the tale told in *The World According to Garp*] implausible? Not nearly so implausible as the actual history we have been through in the time John Irving's fiction covers. . . .

All novelists, if they are any good, want to use their craft to tell the truth. But this aim was perhaps more difficult to keep in view during the last 10 or 15 years than at any comparable period in our literary history. There was the lurid and unending public melodrama, which seemed to put the merely private imagination into the shade unless it went out of its way to astonish and amaze. Academic modernists such as Robert Scholes and Tony Tanner plumped firmly for types of fictional "fabulation" that would outdo and ignore historical reality in the shaping of self-sufficient worlds. . . . No wonder then that a fairly typical young novelist of the late 1960's, Tom McHale, should have



remarked. . ., "I am into exaggeration," and mentioned that several young writers in the University of Iowa Writing Program, when he was there, were into, or thinking of going into, the same racket.

The problem, of course, is to know when exaggeration becomes lying, emotional and mental lying, about the world one is struggling to discover and invent in one's fiction. This problem is not well handled in many fabulated works, and drastically limits their value. As for John Irving, who also did time at Iowa, I should say he was on the horns of the dilemma. That is, his new novel contains some febrile fabulations (the wrong sort of exaggeration) in its handling of the feminist theme, yet his instincts are so basically sound, his talent for storytelling so bright and strong, that he gets down to the truth of his time in the end. Especially in "The Pension Grillparzer," a touching work, as good as, and rather like the best of Buñuel, a work of love, realism and wild imagination that is both astonishing and true. . . .

Source: Julian Moynahan, "Truths by Exaggeration," in *New York Times Book Review*, April 23, 1978, pp. 1, 27-29.



Critical Essay #4

In the following review, Fremont-Smith describes the world of Garp as a "horrendous" but "marvelous" "invented contraption," in which Irving plays the role of master magician similar to that of the Wizard in the Wizard of Oz.

The World According to Garp is a book of dimensions. It is entertainment on a grand, anyway stylish, scale. It is bravado transfigured into bravery □or maybe the other way around. In fact, I think quite often the other way around□which is not to damn, but to wonder. . . .

Murder is a frequent occurrence in *Garp* (both Garp and his mother die in this fashion), but it isn't about murder really, it's about how to breathe life into life. Mayhem and mutilation are on every other page, but the theme of the book is addressed to making things whole. The Ellen Jamesians can't speak (and Garp himself smashes his jaw and must communicate by notes), yet the novel is concerned with articulation as perhaps the only saving grace. One of the most unforgettable characters is a football tight end turned trans sexual (there is homoerotic awareness everywhere), yet *Garp* is profoundly centered on heterosexual urges and itches and relationships and fulfillments, and, out of these *and* beyond them, on families and children. Garp is a true romantic hero: he wants the world safe, not for himself, but for them. . . .

One reads [the accident scene at the center of the book transfixed in horror. Also with the lips quivering to smile It's so awful, it's so funny. Perfect justice, and therefore farcical; its appropriateness (in New England yet) is ravcous. . . .

Garp's world is so bizarrely and completely dangerous that while one nods how true, how true, one never quite suspends disbelief. Like the accident, everything awful could happen, but that it does is somehow too neat. Part of the manipulation is disarmament by irony□for an awareness of ironic possibility accompanies every disaster, every shock. . . . Garp's second son was conceived as, in a sense a reserve□in case the first son became a victim of the unsafe world. It is the second who is killed.

So, the world (Garp's) is horrendous; yet his struggle to make it sensible□accountable, as it were, to a human sense of order□is strangely unnecessary. For the world (Irving's) works just fine: It is a marvelous invented contraption.

Another comparison comes to mind, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In Baum's tale, you will recall, Toto pulls aside a curtain in the Wizard's Emerald City palace to reveal the Wizard, not as he seemed to be to Dorothy and her companions, but as the former elixir salesman, now working his magic by manipulating a mechanical control board. Part of the lasting power of the *Oz* story is that while this magic is revealed, made rational, the greater magic (the cosmos of *Oz*) is left mysterious.

With *Garp*, however, it's the reader who pulls aside the curtain, and it is not Garp who is revealed at the controls but John Irving. He is a master magician, and the show is great.



But we see too much, and both Garp's dread and Irving's optimism fade away into what one too sharply realizes is an illusion. A grand illusion, very powerful; the book can freak you out. But, in the end, the interest of *The World According to Garp* lies not in that world, but in the Wondrous mechanics of its invention and the deft manipulation□while the show goes on□of our awe and tears and laughter. . . .

Source: Eliot Fremont-Smith, "Blood and Ketchup on Mat," in *Village Voice*, May 22, 1978, pp. 77-78.



Critical Essay #5

In the following review, Drabble focuses both on the novel's presentation of the sense of insecurity and the nearness of death and violence in everyday life and on its counter to the theory of creative writing that sees personal tragedy as material for future stories.

[*The World According to Garp*] is not merely a book about writing a book: in the first chapters, [Irving's] defensive, distancing techniques strike more than the reality of the subject matter; it is only gradually that the meaning is released. This is just as well, for the book contains almost intolerable pain. It is a bloody package, and if he had flung this in front of us we would have backed away in horror. As it is, we read on, at first entertained, then puzzled, then trapped, wanting to look away, but by this time unable to avert our eyes . . . or at least, this is what happened to me. . . .

It is a baffling book in many ways. Beneath the surface lies a solid, suburban, everyday life. . . . Garp's perceptions of his children, his anxious protective love, his rebellion against and acceptance of this deadly anxiety, are beautifully done: there is a fine scene where, worried about the fecklessness of the mother who has invited his son to stay for the night, he creeps around to spy at one o'clock in the morning, and sees through a window in the lethal rays of the television

crammed against the sagging couch the casual bodies of Duncan and Ralph, half in their sleeping bags, asleep (of course), but looking as if the television has murdered them. In the sickly TV light their faces look drained of blood.

This sense of death round the corner grows in the novel, and finally dominates it: the Garp family calls it the Under Toad, after a misapprehension of Garp's baby Walt about warnings against the undertow in the ocean. Every anxious parent knows the Under Toad, and I am not sure if anxious parents should be recommended to read this book, for the way in which the Toad gets Walt is really too much to bear, even dressed up as it is in such a macabre array of horror.

The macabre elaboration is, I imagine, designed to diminish rather than to intensify the book's message about the violent insecurity of the world we are forced to inhabit. But Irving's fantasies are so near the bone that three-quarters of the way through the novel I began to wonder whether perhaps there really *was* an American feminist society called the Ellen Jamesians, named after a child rape victim named Ellen James whose tongue had been cut out by her attackers. Lost tongues, lost ears, severed penises, blinded eyes, broken bones, Gothic nightmares, Jacobean melodramas, tasteless jokes about disability: it all sounds like a self-indulgent fantasy, the kind of clever creative-writingschool trick writing that one would go a long way to avoid. But it isn't that, at all.

For one thing, it does have a good deal to say about feminist movements and the changing roles of husbands and wives. . . . More important, to me, was the novel's



commentary on what I have to call the creative process, pretentious though those words always sound. Irving has some sharp comments on reviewers who took for autobiography in fiction, and the quarrels of Garp's biographers after his death ought to make one pause, but they don't. It is obvious that Garp/Irving is commenting in the novel on Irving's own literary career: his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, was set in Vienna and featured bears and the Vienna Zoo, as does Garp's first imaginative effort, "The Pension Grillparzer." . . .

The worlds of Bensenhaver and Garp and Irving are the worlds of the mid-thirties, of mid-career, when a crushing awareness of an accumulating store of memory, most of it unpleasant, threatens to warp and inhibit the imagination. Irving's account of this process is particularly interesting. Unlike poets, most novelists seem to look forward to middle age, and to the fund of experience and observation upon which the older writer can draw: after all, many major writers didn't even start until they were older than Irving now is. Moreover, most novelists tend to look upon personal tragedy as something that can eventually be made useful, turned into grist for the mill: the more the writer suffers, the more he has to write about.

Irving challenges this assumption. His protagonist looks back to the days of visionary gleam, when he could write purely, happily, from out of the air, not from out of himself. These days have gone. Garp, struck down by the death of his son, for which he bears terrible responsibility, looks back to the first sentence of his first book, and says:

Where had it come from? He tried to think of sentences like it. What he got was a sentence like this:

"The boy was five years old; he had a cough that seemed deeper than his small, bony chest." What he got was memory, and that made muck. He had no pure imagination any more.

This is finely said, though luckily untrue, for the novel itself contains muck, memory, and imagination, and the muck gives it a weight that *Setting Free the Bears* lacked. The zaniness has been replaced by stoicism, and the jokes are now black. But there are also tenderness, respect, humanity. I particularly liked publisher John Wolf, surely one of the most appreciative portraits ever drawn by a writer: he smokes himself to death, for his "deep restlessness and unrelieved pessimism could only be numbed by smoking three packs of unfiltered cigarettes per day." Forget the bears: the wolves will do fine. . . .

Source: Margaret Drabble, "Muck, Memory, and Imagination," in *Harper's Magazine*, July 1978, pp. 82-84.

Adaptations

The World According to Garp was adapted as a film written by Steve Tesich, directed by George Roy Hill, starring Robin Williams and Glenn Close, with music by David Shire, for Warner Brothers in 1982; it is available on Warner Brothers home video.

An unabridged audio-book version of *The World according to Garp*, narrated by Michael Prichard, was released by Random House Audiobooks in 1998.



Topics for Further Study

Irving has said that the *The World According to Garp* was not influenced by American political and social events of the sixties because he spent half of that decade in Austria. Write an essay using examples from the novel to contradict him.

Duncan Garp illustrates a version of "The Pension Grillparzer" with his father. Using the media of your choice (pencils, paints, clay, etc.), illustrate a scene or scenes from Garp's short story.

Near the end of the novel, Garp discusses his ideas for his next three novels: *My Father's Illusions*, *The Death of Vermont*, and *The Plot Against the Giant*. Write your own first chapter for one of these novels using information from the book.

The Ellen Jamesians mutilate themselves in protest of violence against women. Do you think this is realistic? What are some of the extreme methods people have used throughout history to protest real or imagined injustices?

Study and discuss the world of book publishing. What do you think makes one book a bestseller and another a failure? What are some examples of books that were both critical and popular successes, and what do these books have in common?

Look up the official rules of high school and college wrestling. Compare these rules to what is currently known as "professional wrestling."



What Do I Read Next?

The Hotel New Hampshire (1981) was John Irving's follow-up to *The World according to Garp*. The novel details the misadventures of an eccentric family and it is controversial for its exploration of a consensual incestuous relationship between a sister and brother. Jodie Foster and Rob Lowe starred in the 1984 film version directed by Tony Richardson.

Irving's *The Cider House Rules* (1985) is another story of a boy growing into adulthood. The novel is thoughtfully influenced by the works of Charles Dickens, yet it is thoroughly modern and controversial in its examination of twentieth-century society's treatment of women and children. It is the story of Homer Wells, an orphan who grows up in mid-century New England, tutored (and loved) by the ether-addicted abortionist, Dr. Wilbur Larch. The novel was made into an award-winning film in 1999; Irving also won the Academy Award for the screenplay adaptation of his novel.

A new generation of readers joined Irving's longtime fans when *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) was published. It is a deeply spiritual and moving story of a pint-sized young boy who hits a foul ball that strikes his best friend's mother in the head and kills her. It is a grand tale of friendship and fate.

Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone* (1992) is the funny, heartbreaking coming of age story of Dolores Price. The lovable, pathetic, and overweight Dolores almost buries herself in the guilt and grief of a painful childhood. Lamb has been lauded for his realistic portrayal of an abused young woman and her struggle with mental illness.

One of Irving's favorite authors is Gunter Grass, the German novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999. Grass's best known work is probably *The Tin Drum*. The story of a three-year-old boy who refuses to grow up is a wise and savagely comic depiction of Nazi Germany.

Like Irving, many novels written by Charles Dickens feature children who are orphaned or somehow abandoned by one (or both) of their parents. *Oliver Twist* (1838) is one of these. A gang of child pickpockets led by the sneaky adult, Fagin, takes in young Oliver, one of the most famous orphans from Dickens's works. *David Copperfield* (1850) details the trials and tribulations of the titular character. The boy, like Garp, is born without a father. However, young David loses his mother shortly after she marries and leaves the boy with a wretched stepfather. Both of these novels were tremendously successful in the nineteenth century, and they remain popular today because of the detailed plotting and memorable characters.

In the late 1960s, one of Irving's mentors at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop was the celebrated American novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Although the writers have vastly different styles, they share a penchant for eccentric characters and odd situations. Perhaps Vonnegut's most famous work is *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the story of Billy Pilgrim, a soldier snatched up during World War II by time-travelling aliens. Vonnegut

based some of the scenes on his own experiences as a prisoner in Germany during the World War II firebombing of Dresden. Vonnegut uses dark humor in the novel to attack the barbarity of war.

Further Study

Carton, Evan, "The Politics of Selfhood: Bob Slocum, T. S. Garp, and Auto-American Biography," in *Novel*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Fall 1986, pp. 41-61.

Carton compares and contrasts the main characters of *The World According to Garp* and Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974) in an examination of "the individual's uncertain identity and political complicity."

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*, Norton, 1963.

Friedan's well-known and widely-read book is the acknowledged text that inspired the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

McKay, Kim, "Double Discourses in John Irving's *The World According to Garp*," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 457-75.

In this compelling article, McKay examines the two roles played by the narrator of *The World According to Garp*: the biographer and the fiction writer.

Miller, Gabriel, *John Irving*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1982.

Miller's work is an early biography of John Irving.

Reilly, Edward C., *Understanding John Irving*, University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

This later biography by Reilly not only offers background information on Irving, but also presents critical examination of his work.

Tolman, Rolf, ed., *Vienna: Art and Architecture*, with photos by Gerald Zugmann and Achim Bednorz, Konemann, 1999.

Tolman's book is an excellent coffee table book displaying the art and architecture of the Austrian city.

Zavoral, Nolan, *A Season on the Mat: Dan Gable and the Pursuit of Perfection*, Simon & Schuster, 1998.

Zavoral's book presents the story of the final season of legendary University of Iowa wrestling coach and former Olympic champion, Dan Gable.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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