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"John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and *In One Person* as Portrayals of the Sexual Grotesque in Combination with Sexuality, Gender Fluidity and Sexual Identity"

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1 Introduction

The following thesis will deal with the sexual grotesque, concerning aspects such as bodily features, sexual desires, coitus and sexual repression as well as liberation in selected novels by John Irving. I will demonstrate how the representation of sexuality, gender, gender fluidity and sexual identity is displayed and connected to the grotesque throughout the novels *The World According to Garp* and *In One Person*.

Regarding the history of the word *grotesque*, it first appeared in the fifteenth century and originated from the Italian word *grottesco*, literally *of a cave,* and the French *crotesque* (Online Etymology Dictionary). According to art historian Frances S. Connelly the grotto is strongly connected with fertility and pregnancy, but also with the inevitable nature of death, decay and the final resting place. It is a place in which the imagination can run wild and everything seems possible in some sort of dark hole that almost seems other-worldly and unreal (1).

Another aspect I will explore within this thesis is the impact the American sexual revolution presumably had on Irving's works of fiction. Furthermore, I will explore how cultural change and literary works can form a (co)construction and create an interplay between one other (Tompkins xi-xix). *Garp* was published in 1978, shortly after the heyday of the sexual revolution and the so-called second big wave of feminism. The sexual revolution was characterized by the approval of premarital sex, explicit depictions of pornographic content, homosexual relations and an increase in women's rights (Smith 416-18). Therefore, the general tone and the themes displayed in *Garp*, concerning sexuality, gender and feminism presumably differ from the recently published *In One Person*, released in 2012. Furthermore, the specific ways in which the topics of sexuality, gender, sexual identity and feminism are examined and the way they are dealt with show an undeniable relation to the achievements and the activism of the sexual revolution. The exploration of sexuality in its various forms is one of the central issues in Irving's novels, which include numerous characters belonging to the LGBTQ community who are often struggling to find their gender identity. In this thesis, the alienation and otherness of these characters will be discussed and how their otherness is often regarded as grotesque.

Sexuality in obscure or unusual forms is represented throughout every novel by the American author John Irving, who was born in 1942 in Exeter, New Hampshire (Miller 2). In addition, other popular themes in Irving's books include absent parents, writing protagonists, the city of Vienna, orphans and historical references. Another reoccurring element in Irving's novels relates to the abundance of autobiographical detail such as the setting of New England, the

wrestling or the absent WWII veteran who is present in *Garp* as well as in *In One Person*.[1] Irving's characters often deviate from the *norm* defined by society at a certain time and place, whether through their behavior, physical appearance or the circumstances in which they live. Often there is a direct connection to gender, sex and/or gender identity. In developing his characters, Irving subjects them to extreme situations – "sexual situations or violent ones or whatever" (qtd. in Reilly 6). This quotation by Peter S. Prescott shows that Irving exposes his characters to situations that deviate from the *norm*, often with a sexual focus, which creates a sexually grotesque scene. Furthermore, the characters frequently display physical and psychological impairments that show the blurry concept of *normality*. This leads unquestionably to the various definitions of the term grotesque and the question of whether Irving's writing can indeed be termed grotesque literature.

2 The Grotesque

Strange, peculiar, odd, bizarre and macabre are only a few of the attributes that appear in one's mind when thinking about the term grotesque. However, the OED defines the grotesque to be "characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre." Furthermore, it defines the grotesque to be "comically or repulsively ugly or distorted" and "incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree" (OED). Literary professor Geoffrey Harpham describes the word grotesque as "a condition of being just out of focus, just beyond the reach of language" (3). According to him, the word "requires and defeats definition." Therefore its meaning cannot be fully grasped and is ambivalent and ambiguous by nature (3-4). Although Harpham mentions the difficulties as regards definitions and synonyms for the term grotesque, it remains a concept with arguably various meanings and definitions; however it is still possible to categorize as something deviating the norm and provoking a reaction (4-6).

Having its origins, as previously mentioned, in fifteenth century Italy, the notion of grotesque initially derived from the field of art. The term was originally used for ornaments found in Roman caves that depicted creatures, half-human, half-animal. Furthermore, non-imaginable situations were depicted, defying the laws of gravity, such as elevation and flying. (Kayser 20, Graulund and Edwards 5). Harpham describes the grotesque as the opposite of the round, the opposite of the ideal form (8-9). In the aftermath of the discovery of these images, Italian artists were inspired by the absurdity and implausibility of the pictures and preceded to recreate them and use them as a source of inspiration. One of the first and most famous

[1] This section is based on Reilly 2-4, Campell 2 and Harper and Thompson 12.

representatives of grotesque art is the Renaissance artist Raffael, who painted the ceilings of the pontifical loggias in 1515 (Kayser 21). When observing the works of Raffael's contemporaries, such as copperplate engraver Agostino Veneziano or Luca Signorelli, Raffael's ornaments seem to be tame and harmless. However, Kayser suggests that he consciously left out the most bizarre elements to provide room for the spectator's interpretation (22).

The Renaissance artists did not only link the grotesque ornaments of the classical world to something blithe and buoyant, but were also aware of the uncanny and sinister elements of their art (Kayser 22). According to French professor Virginia E. Swain, the grotesque emerging before the French Revolution "has a carefree, utopian flavor", which changed after the revolts in 1799 (3). Literary theorist Arthur Clayborough points out that the grotesque changes the order of our reality, since everything appears to be possible and there seems to be a "rejection of natural conditions of organization" (3). A similar definition can be found in Graulund and Edwards who claim that the grotesque "violates the laws of nature" and breaks down all categorizations and classifications (4).

Originating in fifteenth century Italy, the grotesque experienced an increase in popularity during the sixteenth century and slowly conquered the countries north of Italy. Furthermore, it entered all fields of art, from drawing and engraving to painting and architecture and even the decorative arts and crafts objects (Kayser 23). At first the grotesque underwent a linear development, which later split into three different kinds. Art history identifies three types of ornamentation: the grotesque, the mauresque, and the arabesque. Albeit the two latter types were primarily associated with ornaments and nonfigurative art, they are often synonymously used for grotesque. The mauresque and the arabesque originated in the Islamic world and reached Europe via Spain as a result of the Venetian trading business (Connelly 54, Kayser 23-24 and Barasch 39).

By the sixteenth century the term grotesque had already been adopted by other languages and henceforth used to describe the combination of human and animal forms and any other bizarre situation (Kayser 25). The first recorded appearance of the word in the English language was in 1561 with an almost identical meaning to the Italian definition. Only a few decades later, however, the term was used in new fields, concerning various domains, such as art and sculpture (Goodwin 7-8). However, according to Kayser, the word grotesque lost its sinister and uncanny essence and in 1694 was used synonymously for *ridicule, comique* and *burlesque*. Throughout Europe, the word grotesque experienced a diminishment from its original meaning, which first changed in the German language (Kayser 28-29). The early

grotesque, as stated by Swain, had "a carefree, utopian humor" and was not comparable to the later use of the word grotesque (3, cf. Clayborough 6). Nevertheless, even if such a change from an optimistic grotesque to a darker one took place, both forms of the grotesque were present (Gentry 12).

After the French Revolution the tone of the grotesque in all areas changed to a darker more negative and scary vibe (Swain 3). Swain argues that the "post- Revolutionary grotesque, then, is not an extension of the carnival spirit; it does not evoke feelings of freedom and the possibility of change" (3-4). Her view coincides with Wolfgang Kayser's theory on the development of the grotesque, however critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin argue, that although the grotesque images of the Romantic period lost some of their free-spirited and carnivalesque notion, carnival and folk humor never fully left the grotesque (47).

Bakhtin's main emphasis is on the carnival and the carnivalesque[2] aspect of the grotesque. In his introduction to *Rabelais and his world*, Bakhtin describes the carnival as a spectacle beyond the law, or rather as only restricted by its own laws, where almost anything seems possible (7-12). Having its origins in the seventeenth century, the culture of humor, carnival and further folk movements were excluded from literature. Those festive activities, the carnivalesque spirit and the freedom connected to it were banished and only existed in the private sphere. The carnivalesque was a secret second life for the people (Bakhtin 33-34). Later, the modern era also used the element of carnival, the disruption of the natural boundaries and the sanction of social and political hierarchies as a weapon, a means to protest the current situation and a new way to give power back to the people. The grotesque was instrumentalized to ring in a cultural change in an era calling for progress (Connelly 18).

Closely related to both the carnival and the carnivalesque is the concept of the *freak* whose role, although they share the performance aspect, differs slightly from the role of the audience. Being a freak – "an individual choice for some and an oppressive assignment for others,"- is another element, which is closely related to the grotesque and described by Russo as distinctive for the American culture and as a category open to all classes, ages, sexualities, races and genders (Russo 75). The revolution in the 1960s in America opened a space on the public radar for minorities and marginal groups that previously lived a life behind closed doors and were invisible. Being a self-proclaimed freak required an individual to accept one's flaws and one's otherness. Being a freak was not restricted to a certain class, gender or

[2] Carnival and carnivalesque according to Daniel Danow are "twin concepts that represent two distinct but interrelated considerations". Carnival is described as cultural happening deriving from ancient cultures, a celebration in which many of a community's values and rules are invalid and reversed. Political dignitaries do not hold any power and the spirit of Carnival reigns, at least for a brief period of time, over the town and its people. This spirit can also be observed in works of literature, it is regarded as carnivalesque (2-3).

occupation, there was no exclusion. The increasing acceptance and use of the term in popular culture in the U.S. of the 1960's showed that the word *freak* experienced a development akin to the words *black* or *queer*, which gradually lost their coat of shame and are, by now, used rather with pride than with repugnance. The relationship between the grotesque and the concept of the freak is not entirely aligned and there is, according to Bakhtin, a clear distinction between them; while a freak performs for his audience, the grotesque carnival requires audience and performers to act with each other and to be interchangeable. This results in an incomplete image in which boundaries regarding class, gender and individuals are tarnished. Grotesque realism is a cover term for an ever changing and a fluid bodily image. Regarding outer appearance and the body, the freak and the grotesque cannot be separated as they share various characteristics.

However, the physiological freak is a cultural phenomenon; a freak of culture. The difference lies in the presentation of the dehumanized humans, as they were presented as exotic monsters. The perception of the freak is dependent on his audience - he is a spectacle and the existence of a *cultural other* is evident, making the freak interesting to the viewer (Russo 75-80). While writing about the carnivalesque grotesque, Bakhtin did not take into consideration the possibilities presented by the media and advertising of the twentieth century. With this in mind, the question Mary Russo poses, is whether the twentieth century freak can be regarded as the successor of grotesque characters from the Middle Ages onwards (Russo 84).

The grotesque originated in the art movement and therefore, painters were the first to transcend the borders created by themselves and by their predecessors. In addition to these borders, the art movement responded to the *forbidden*. Hedinger, Farguell and Sorg propose that grotesque art, whilst breaking the rules, is additionally concerned with breaking taboos (12). This illustrates the purpose of grotesque art as crossing borders that declare the norm and questioning normality as such. Furthermore, Hedinger, Farguell and Sorg suggest that this might be the reason for the ambivalent feeling a spectator experiences while observing grotesque art in all its forms (12). Connelly argues that the grotesque is not a style, it is a "cultural action". The grotesque is deeply rooted in historical times, but nevertheless has outlasted many periods without following strict historical narratives. The grotesque does not follow the rules concerning traditional structures of historical narratives: it takes shortcuts and crossways and, as Connelly describes it, "it cannot be characterized as a style, but it is an interrogation of style", therefore it constantly questions the borders and limits of normality set by society and culture (13).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the term grotesque still included the grotesque in all its forms, including art. Furthermore, it was the subject of comedies and plays (Barasch 152). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term grotesque experienced a form of belittlement and lost the darker tone once attached to the word (Kayser 113). Furthermore, the second half of the nineteenth century marked a significant decrease in grotesque images in literature and literary studies. This recession was an immediate reaction to the end of the romantic period (Bakhtin 47). With the beginning of the twentieth century, the grotesque became part of the modern era and its influences can still be found in drama, poetry and art (Kayser 162-83).

Having peaked in popularity various times, first during the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the grotesque has never before experienced such omnipresence as it experiences today. Never has it been easier to create grotesque figures and elements through technical aids, such as image-editing programs as well as green screens and filters and never has it been more conventional to show otherness and be different. Films, fashion and music have all adopted grotesque elements, but due to their ubiquity the viewer is not shocked anymore. The grotesque is slowly transforming into the norm. This leads naturally to a competition between content creators and artist across all fields, who constantly try to create bigger and more shocking elements, to challenge the already established *grotesque* norm. Furthermore, Hedinger, Farguell and Sorg argue that the creation of *grotesque* hybrids in the form of half-human, half-animal creatures, or in modern days half-robot, seems more and more realistic due to modern day practices, such as cloning and transplantations

2.1 The Grotesque in Literature

According to Dieter Meindl, the grotesque is less of a literary genre and rather more a literary mode, since the grotesque does not carry the entire novel, but appears occasionally. According to Meindl there currently exists a certain consensus amongst scholars that the grotesque is an amalgamation of humor and horror, a concept Bakhtin explored, and that is concerned with the contrast of fear and laughter (Meindl 3-6).

The origins of the grotesque in literature are in Europe and up until the twentieth century there is almost no proof of a tradition in the United States. The literary development of the modern grotesque was strongly influenced by the German literary theorist Wolfgang Kayser and the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

2.1.1 The Beginnings of the Modern Grotesque: Kayser's and Bakhtin's 20th-Century Perspectives and the Grotesque as an American Genre

The beginnings of the modern grotesque in literature can be observed in the late nineteenth century in Germany (Kayser 140). Literary theorist Wolfgang Kayser introduces his own theory on the grotesque in his book, *Das Groteske*, summarizing a historical development of the word grotesque and tracing the term back through numerous historical periods. Kayser depicts the origins of the grotesque and moves to the middle of the last century, stating his own definition of the term grotesque.

Regarding the chronological development of the grotesque in literature throughout the last centuries, Kayser discovers elements of the grotesque in the eighteenth century's *Commedia Dell' Arte*, as well as in the *Sturm und Drang* period (Kayser 39-43). Furthermore, grotesque elements are represented in the Romantic period, primarily through French novelist and poet Victor Hugo, who extended the term and added the layer of monstrosity and horror (Kayser 50-82 and O'Connor, *American Genre* 6). Upon a close examination of the origins of the grotesque, one has to consider the works of both E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe. Especially Poe, with his fusion of elements and the simultaneous occurrence of beauty and horror and the world of the fantastic, is an important writer in regard to the grotesque (Kayser 50-107 and O'Connor*, American Genre* 6). According to Kayser, the development of the grotesque in literature in the nineteenth century is, in spite of a few exceptions, very unremarkable and monotonous.

Kayser regards the grotesque as something paradox and describes it as being simultaneously part of the real world of the reader and part of an opposite world. Even though Kayser argues that the grotesque is something fluid and unstable he does not abandon the basic binary principle of unity and disunity and moves towards a psychological explanation (cf. Edwards and Graulund 11).

When speaking of Bakhtin and his contribution to the theory of the grotesque in modern literature, the sole focus often lies on his work *Rabelais and his World*, an analysis of the text *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by the French writer François Rabelais. However, Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque contains important elements regarding the post-modern grotesque and is vital for the interpretation of later grotesque works. Renate Lachmann describes Bakhtin's work as not only "text about a text", but as "an interpretive text about a literary text" (117). Lachmann adds that the understanding between Bakhtin and Rabelais lies in the necessity of reading grotesque aspects as part of the social and political time in which they have been produced (cf. Edwards and Graulund 11-12). Both Bakhtin and Rabelais wrote in a time of

political uprise and revolution, and as a result, Bakhtin recognizes Rabelais' focal point and his motivation behind the text (Lachmann 117). Similar to Bakhtin, John Irving also wrote especially *The World According to Garp* during revolutionary times; the American sexual revolution.

In the introduction, Bakhtin presents the reader with three forms of carnival folk culture. Firstly, he talks about the festivities; the spectacles that included almost the entire community. Secondly, he mentions comic speeches, presented in spoken or written form, and lastly he writes about, vituperations and swearing (Russo 61).

Literary critic Mary Russo argues that Bakhtin's interest in the carnivalesque culture of early modern Europe is a critique on the rapidly growing modernization of the world. He voices concerns on the decline of culture and opposes the modern isolated world to the joyous life of the Middle Ages (61).

During the Romantic period, the grotesque underwent a change in tone and themes. The uplifting carnivalesque grotesque almost vanished and was substituted with darker, more tragic elements. Furthermore, the theme of madness, iconic to the grotesque, since madness shifts one's point of view and stands as firm opposite to the normal, experienced a change in meaning in the romantic grotesque. Whereas madness is regarded as parody of the normal and serious life, the romantic grotesque reduces it to something dreadful and the remoteness of a poor individual. Another aspect of the romantic grotesque is the element of darkness, compared to the folk or carnivalesque grotesque, the romantic grotesque regards everything as dark, opposed to light (Bakhtin 39-47).

Kayser's theory on romantic horror is heavily criticized by Bakhtin, who argues that Kayser completely ignores one of the most important aspects of the grotesque; the element of laughter (Lachmann 120). Bakhtin in fact is critical of Kayser's perspective on the entire development of the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, Kayser produced a great work concerning the grotesque in literature, but failed to give an objective overview and only viewed the grotesque in its own time and space (46-47). Therefore, "'the grotesque' cannot be defined in ahistorical isolation." (Bakhtin 23). To be more precise, Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque is situated in the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, whereas Kayser's theory is concentrated almost solely on the romantic period (Meindl 18).

Leaving behind the history of the grotesque and turning towards the American novel, literary critic Leslie Fiedler proclaims, the beginning of the American novel can be traced back to the beginning of modern times, respectively the nineteenth and twentieth century (23). The new-found popularity of the American novel also marked a new, second wave of grotesque

elements in American fiction that happened according to Meindl, due to resentment of the existing culture and a desire for the primitive and the primal state. Meindl explains the modern grotesque as relying on "the conjunction, in modernism, of an austere cult of art and an apprehension of the primitive and elemental involves primitivism and anti-intellectualism as well as a very intelligent and sophisticated awareness of the difference and interdependence between life and art" (133-34).

According to Goodwin, the grotesque in the American literary tradition first surfaced in the 1730s and regularly appeared throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century in literary works. An early display of the grotesque can be found in the comedy of manners and social satire, in which the word was still strongly connected to dark settings as well as horror and fear. The grotesque played a vital part during the last decades of the eighteenth century in gothic literature, which used the grotesque to describe mental states and social interactions (Goodwin 17). According to literary critic William Van O'Connor, the modern grotesque appears to a great extent in American literature. Much American literature of the twentieth century is marked by chaos and irrationality, and a mixture of comedy, tragedy and drama. O'Connor regards the American grotesque as a protest against the moral system and the contemporary worldview. The grotesque in American literature often presents the reader with an exaggerated image of life. Therefore, it mirrors current affairs and shows the absurdity of the rapidly growing and changing industry and technology (O'Connor, *Grotesque American Genre* 3-6). The American grotesque, according to O'Connor, is more prominent in the South due to its rural lifestyle. Simple and rural lives are prominent features in the modern and postmodern grotesque. . However, all American writers of the grotesque set their literary works in small towns across the country (O'Connor, *Modern American Fiction* 343). At the beginning of the nineteenth century typical stylistic features of the American grotesque were introduced, such as strange misshaped characters, threatening forms, the fear of the unknown and alienation. These attributes are embodied in various figures, ranging from Native Americans, Dutch, African Americans or simply mysterious strangers (Goodwin 18).

Meindl argues that in literature, the "totality of life cannot be directly conveyed" and therefore a move in modernist literature towards a "linear narrative structure" seems inevitable (136). Grotesque modernist fiction possesses a wide array of examples due to the popularity of the grotesque during that time. Two influential modernist grotesque writers, Sherwood Anderson and William Faulkner to a great extent, shaped modernist grotesque fiction. Faulkner's works, for example, contain the element of gender-blending; the creation

of new genders (Meindl 136-45). This element is present in both of Irving's novels to various extents.

Akin to Faulkner's fiction, Irving's novels are also set in provincial small towns, characterized by rural and simple values. This ties in with the modernist view of the grotesque as something alienated, and lost or even abandoned. Furthermore, in the modernist grotesque the emphasis lies on the private sphere in a provincial setting and the grotesque elements are implied in the smaller details (Meindl 153-64).

The American grotesque experienced constant popularity from the nineteenth century onwards and tackled social and cultural problems related to issues of race, gender and class (Edwards and Graulund 13).

2.1.2 The Grotesque in Contemporary Literature

A very on point definition of grotesque literature was formulated by literary critic Philip Thomson, who regards the grotesque as "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" and furthermore claims that "it is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque" (Thomson's italics, 27). Ambiguity and juxtaposition, according to Thomson, are strongly connected with the word grotesque. However, Edwards and Graulund propose that this does not indicate that there is a "conceptual dead end" with no meaning (3). Moreover, according to them, the bizarre formations and combinations at the essence of the grotesque movement in art and literature are capable of producing an undetermined space of "conflicting possibilities, images and figures" (3). Furthermore, the term grotesque is interpreted by various readers over different time periods and in different geographical regions. Therefore, each work has to be placed within the socio-historical context from which it has emerged. This suggests that although a grotesque work is a work of fantasy, the real world in which it exists is influenced by it and vice versa. Both depend on each other, influence each other and even create a collective consciousness (Edwards and Graulund 11-12, Connelly 4). Furthermore, the grotesque is a movement that is constantly developing, a continuous change is inevitable and there is a constant shift from the known to the unknown (Connelly 5).

Postmodernism is regarded in the United States and Canada as the descendant of the transformations taking place during the middle of the twentieth century, which influenced science, art and literature (Lyotard xxiii). According to literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism is an annihilation of the metanarratives of humankind, which incorporate the discourses of enlightenment, progress and idealism. In Lyotard's theory, these

frameworks have lost their purpose and have been split up and divided into various areas of knowledge (xxiv).

The American grotesque of the postmodernist era is defined by several critics as the experience of loneliness, alienation and loss and is placed in opposition to the American Dream. The scenery consists of wide "depressing landscapes, populated by deformed characters, the inhuman and inhumane racial grotesque, the outcasts in a community of rugged individualism, grotesque versions of evangelical Christianity, and the excessive consumption associated with material success" (Edwards and Graulund 12).

According to Meindl, the postmodern grotesque is firmly grounded in the twentieth century and represents a shift from the "existential grotesque" to the "linguistic grotesque" which resulted in the "play of language, in the enactment of linguistic games and in the collision and superposition of incongruous discursive patterns".

Therefore, in the postmodern grotesque, reality loses significance and the textual sphere experiences continuous deconstruction (172). Brian Crews differentiates the postmodern grotesque from the modern grotesque in terms of the comparison to a normal form. The normal form, usually absent in grotesque literature, seems unable to see the change the grotesque provokes. The grotesque has established itself as the norm, in fact it seems as if a new norm has emerged and turned social hierarchies upside down (Crews 641). Irving, however, tries to exceed this recently established grotesque norm, by creating sexually grotesque scenes and characters that are shocking and grotesque to the majority of readers. The grotesque in postmodernism is both a ubiquitous phenomenon and difficult to grasp, since it is often subtle. Furthermore, the grotesque in postmodern literature can be defined through intertextuality and references to other genres. Therefore, a merging of various literary modes and genres is observable (Meindl 174).

Harpham claims that "the sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else". The sense of the grotesque is embodied in this quote by the fact that when speaking of the grotesque, things that should not be combined are merged together (11). This quote calls to mind Edward's and Graulund's concept of the interrelation of the grotesque and the uncanny.[3] According to these two scholars, the root of both lies within a human being and a feeling of uncertainty, estrangement, hilarity and fear is created. They regard the grotesque as something non-concrete and abstract that mixes the boundaries

[3] The term uncanny derives from Sigmund Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)*, which was published in 1919. The uncanny is defined as "that particular variety of terror that relates to what has been known for a long time, has been familiar for a long time." It is the antonym to the homely and familiar and therefore horrible (International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis).

of reality and fiction, the real world and the mystic. Hybridization is responsible for the creation of new forms without logical oppositions (6).

Furthermore, Edwards and Graulund examine the concepts of transgression and disharmony, which are vital parts of grotesque literature and can be further divided into three components: exaggeration, extravagance and excess. Disharmony, however, depends on the existence of a homogeneous conception of balance and harmony and can, for example, be disrupted by the viewer's reaction to art. Transgression is seen as going beyond aesthetics, violating the rules of the common and establishing new boundaries. By exaggerating certain body parts, character traits, storylines or other elements, harmony is disrupted and therefore our sense of the *normal* is dismantled. The term extravagance defines a spoiled way of living and a lifestyle that lacks moderation and can be regarded either in a critical or in a sophisticated, glamorous way. The exceeding of limits and the overflow of influences and material goods is characteristic of the excess the modern western world has experienced every day since the last century (Edwards and Graulund 65-71). The grotesque has established itself almost as a normal part of contemporary literature. However, this prompts writers, as previously mentioned, to add grotesque elements which exceed the previously known bizarreness. The shocking reality of one's daily life transmitted through the media is portrayed in the postmodern fiction that, according to Meindl, merges with black humor (174). Irving makes great use of the element of black humor, especially in the numerous tragicomic deaths depicted in his novels.

One important question that arises, according to several critics, when talking about the grotesque is the problematic distinction between the *normal* and the *abnormal* and how they define each other. However, it is important to note that there is no binary structure when it comes to answering the question of what is (ab)normal. An important issue when talking about abnormality in this regard is the concept of inversion and double inversion. According to Edwards and Graulund, the first inversion can cancel out the second, so there is a return to the initial position, which leads to the conclusion that the grotesque is something fluid and complex, able to transgress borders and boundaries. Furthermore, Edwards' and Graulund's concept illustrates how the line between the normal and the abnormal is something transitional, unstable and blurry (Edwards and Graulund 8-9).

Grotesque literature and queerness are an offensive combination to the twenty-first century reader. However, homosexuality was, and still is regarded as grotesque and absurd by many - for example, by various organizations often with a religious background. Edwards and Graulund propose, in reference to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel,*

that homosexuality and identity crises portray the loneliness and alienation of a character and therefore serve as grotesque elements. Queer people often feel misunderstood and alienated from the world, as they do not meet the norm set by society. Queerness and homosexuality is defined by various scholars with regard to American novels of the last century as a contrast to *normal* perceptions of gender, sexuality and sexual identity. Furthermore, the queer grotesque allows for a reinvention of queer sexuality and the queer body as well as the crossing of socially constructed borders. The queer grotesque is generally not used as means to convey a homophobic message, but rather to depict differences imposed by society and in order to analyze bodies as works of art (Edwards and Graulund 110-22).

To conclude this chapter, the fluidity and heterogeneity of the word grotesque should be emphasized, since it is almost impossible to define the concept of the grotesque. Goodwin concludes that the grotesque in literature and art was, and always will be, part of American cultural life, however he also addresses the question of how to grasp the grotesque conceptually (Goodwin 172). Additionally, Edwards and Graulund state that it is not possible to capture the grotesque in one definition, only in its multiplicity can the grotesque be applied to various works of art and literature. Furthermore, they argue that we might be in a time of the *post-grotesque.* This state of post-grotesqueness defines itself through the indistinguishability of normal and abnormal, of the common and the extraordinary. The "realistic framework" described by Thomson has been exceeded by reality. As previously mentioned, the norm is not the same for everyone, therefore, the grotesque will always have an audience, since the referential frames are fluid and the circular nature of the grotesque will start again when something becomes the norm (135-41). The grotesque in the following analysis will be defined through the normal/abnormal dichotomy, Edwards' and Graulund's three categories; namely exaggeration, extravagance and excess, Thomson's concepts of the transgression of boundaries as well as the merging of heterogeneous forms. Furthermore, Thomson's definition of the grotesque as "*ambivalently abnormal*" will be of great interest to this thesis (Edwards and Graulund 65-71, 20-27, Thomson's italics).

2.2 The Grotesque Body

"A grotesque body that is incomplete or deformed forces us to question what it means to be human." In this quote, Edwards and Graulund argue that with the acknowledgment of the uncertain and the incomplete, we have to avoid one single reading and thus welcome multiple readings (3).

Deformed and dehumanized figures are a central aspect of the grotesque and appear in almost every work that deals with the grotesque in all its forms. Edwards and Graulund propose that

the body and its grotesque elements must be put into the historical context in which it was produced. One of the main arguments of Edwards and Graulund is that the grotesque body cannot be isolated from its surroundings and the world it belongs to. The body, in a way, becomes the world and is its own universe (24). Bakhtin first mentions the grotesque and, to be more precise, the grotesque body, in his introductory chapter on Rabelais' corporeal poetics. In this section he familiarizes the reader with the concept of *grotesque realism.* Grotesque realism describes the human body in all its naked glory, with food, drinks, defecation and sexuality. There is no extenuation or masking of what they really are (18-19). In grotesque realism, the body, generally has positive connotations and is part of the public sphere, however in grotesque realism there is a degradation of the body, the outer shell, a "transfer to the material level, the earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 19-20). Degradation in this context serves different purposes; firstly, to kill and to bury in order to produce something better; secondly, the concentration on the lower body, containing the reproductive organs, and being associated with defecation and coitus. Degradation in grotesque realism is seen in the light of a regenerative aspect, able to change the negative into something new and fresh (Bakhtin 21).

John Ruskin's texts evolve around symbolic representations of the world and, according to Edwards and Graulund, Ruskin argues "that the grotesque involves a creativity that invokes imaginative depictions of tangible things to reveal that which has been concealed." (17) Ruskin depicts hybrid forms of humans with animals or plants which, as mixed forms, have an impact on humanity. These grotesque bodies change the audience's viewpoint and empower the reader to see one's own life from a new perspective (Ruskin 241-74). Furthermore, Edwards and Graulund argue that for Ruskin, the grotesque figures are by no means meant to be a realistic reflection of the physically possible or reality, but are there to serve as connections between symbolism and the preposterous in the world of imagination (17). Akin to Ruskin's denial of the physically possible are Irving's descriptions of characters and what happens to their bodies. Often Irving's plotlines and the coincidences rooted in them seem almost too absurd to be feasible and a notion of the grotesque is evoked.

As already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the grotesque body in grotesque realism is a body of degradation and transition. Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as something fluid, constantly transitioning and growing. The emphasis is on the orifices that serve as portals to the outer world. One major image is the combination of two bodies that slowly become one (Bakhtin 26-29). The image of two becoming one can be related to the gender identity issues Roberta experiences in *Garp*, when she finally becomes a woman, the

male and female sides merge into one. Furthermore, her body, and for that matter, her mind, never stop growing and changing; a fact that can be observed throughout the novel.

Regarding the outer appearance of grotesque figures, the monstrous plays a crucial role. Edwards and Graulund propose that in literature, monstrosity and grotesquerie are often used synonymously, even though the monstrous is only part of the grotesque and grotesque creatures often are identified by their monstrous bodies (40). Furthermore, the monstrous has a strong connection to the ugly, but they do not oppose each other, they rather exist on a cline. They sometimes overlap, causing a shift from displeasure to repugnance. The ugly can be laughed at, but the monstrous is frightening (Connelly 118). Additionally, Goodwin states that the literary works that show the influence the monstrous had on society ridicule the concept of the monstrous. The postmodern understanding of the monstrous is that monstrosity is trivial and ridiculous (182). Edwards and Graulund differentiate three types of grotesque monsters: the monsters of excess, defined through their abnormal height and excessive and large anatomic features the monsters of lack, which do not possess all aspects of the human anatomy as they are missing vital body parts. Lastly, there are hybrid monsters, a category which also includes gender hybrids, but primarily the monsters that combine human and animal forms. Furthermore, hybrid monsters and their attributes blur the lines between inanimate and animate objects and therefore they create a world of possibilities by overcoming conventional forms of thinking (Edwards and Graulund 36-47). Monstrous characteristics and connotations are largely toned-down and often presented in a satirical manner in Irving's novels. Regarding the grotesque, there are no clear categories or classifications on what defines a grotesque body or a grotesque element; the grotesque stays a fuzzy concept in which almost anything is possible (Edwards and Graulund 40 and O'Connor 19). In his work *On the Grotesque*, Harpham discusses Bakhtin's observations of ancient terracotta figurines with hideous faces and hybrid forms, half-human, half-animal, which exist in a constant state of transmission. For him, the figurines are stuck in a process, they are not finished and never will be. Deriving from the process of incompleteness, he draws a connection to our modern day world in which everything happens fast and shortcuts and abbreviations are found everywhere (11).

Furthermore, Bakhtin defines the grotesque body primarily through exaggeration and hyperbole. He mentions the combination of various images, containing positive and negative elements and the borders of logic are blurry in the grotesque. Moreover, Bakhtin describes the grotesque body as being turned upside down, so for example the spoken word is pushed out through the anus and not the mouth – "the logic of opposites" (309). The disproportioned and

exaggerated characters, which are almost all defined through phallic symbols, defecation, urination and vomiting, bodily fluids that play a major role within the grotesque, are represented in various other grotesque works, including Irving's novels (305-13).

The French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's theory of the female grotesque body derives from the construction of the female body through the male gaze. She states that the grotesque body is a means to fight patriarchal power relations and therefore, serves to create a positive body image. Kristeva researches the abjection of women and how this is achieved through images of the grotesque. She illustrates the process of abjection through bodily fluids, deformed bodies and the separation of the body and the mind. In her theory, the female body is monstrous and full of horror, which originates in psychoanalysis and in the unconscious. The use of abjection theory breaks the binary construction of virgin/whore, with the concentration on bodily fluids and the lower sternum, she references Bakhtin's theory and portrayal of grotesque figures (Kristeva 2-9).

Concerning the female grotesque and the female body, Mary Russo mentions the figure of the big woman. The big non-white woman is presented as a representation of the modern grotesque. Furthermore, female bodies, of various classes and races have historically always been connected to the grotesque and are often portrayed as passive and descriptive. However, one has to take into consideration that the social attributes western societies have regarding fatness, such as laziness and a lack of discipline, differ greatly from those of other societies (Russo 23-24).

In their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White concern themselves with the human form and the grotesque body. They suggest that the physical body and the geographical space are not entirely separable and in combination with psychic forms and social formations, are constructed within a cultural process (2). According to them, the grotesqueness of a body depends on the cultural environment and assumptions shaped by a society. With regard to the classical statue, for example, there are no openings; in contrast, grotesque images accentuate the open mouth, the anus and the genitals. The grotesque body stands in opposition to the distant bourgeois concept of the body (Stallybrass and White 22).

For the following analysis of Irving's novels the theories postulated by Bakhtin, Kristeva as well as Edwards and Graulund will be crucial to how grotesque elements are interpreted. However, Bakhtin's theory is often the basis for various theorists, and the elements of bodily fluids, the fluidity and fuzziness of grotesque notions and incompleteness will be present in

the analysis. All of the approaches are postulated by theorists who are concerned with the grotesque and its relation with sexuality.

2.3 The Sexual Grotesque

The grotesque and the sexual have a strong connection in regard to the relation between the grotesque, the body, the libido and procreation. However, it is rather difficult to pinpoint the sexual grotesque and give a precise definition, since akin to many genres, its typical characteristics are ever-changing and it has a strong connection to the circumstances of the historical time in which it was created. Philip Thomson defines the grotesque as a "fundamentally ambivalent thing" and "as a violent clash of opposites" (11). Furthermore, Thomson describes the disharmony, the amalgamation of opposites, as central aspect of the grotesque. Lastly, the definition of the grotesque that will be of great use for the definition and the analysis of the sexual grotesque is "*the ambivalently abnormal*."(20-27, Thomson's italics) The *sexual* is defined by the OED as "relating to the instincts, physiological processes, and activities connected with physical attraction or intimate physical contact between individuals and or relating to the two sexes or to gender". The sexual grotesque in literature in this thesis, is defined as the nature of transgressing boundaries, the clash of opposites and especially as an ambivalence of the abnormal in combination with sexual activities and gender. Furthermore, the grotesquerie of the sexual situation is always dependent on the historical context. There are a few examples of the sexual grotesque that will be discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, while researching the grotesque and grotesque notions, it is striking that in almost every work that deals with grotesquerie and sexuality, sexuality is represented by a female form. As a consequence, grotesque sexuality seems to be solely concentrated on female sexuality.

The grotesque is represented as feminine. In western culture, it is usually attributed to fertility and the body and it is almost entirely feminine. Furthermore, the female as grotesque poses a threat to the male-dominated world, in example, the patriarchy that has dominated Western culture for centuries. The grotesque, as a cultural phenomenon, highlights a gap in our knowledge and our conceptions (Connelly 2). The grotesque conception of the female body can be traced back to ancient Greece and Aristotle, who was one of the first prominent figures who remarked upon the monstrosity of a woman's body in his view. He argued that a female's body has grotesque attributes by nature, since it digresses from the norm, the norm being the male body (Aristotle).

As previously mentioned, the grotesque derived from the word *grotto-esque*, which can be traced back to the Italian word for cave. Putting caves in relation to the body, the dark, earthly

and hidden attributes are part of the female body. Furthermore, Bakhtin's elements of grotesque realism, defecation, pregnancy and coitus are connected to the female body rather than the male in grotesque literature (Russo 1-2). With regard to Bakhtin's theory on the female grotesque body, he depicts females as "pregnant old hags," Russo argues that this image is much more than Bakhtin intended it to be. She proposes that from a feminist viewpoint, this image is an equivocal one, since it illustrates pregnancy and maturation as something grotesque. However, one has to take into consideration that the social relations of gender, the role gender plays in society and the female grotesque are not considered in Bakhtin's work (Russo 63).

Prostitutes and various other sex workers are a reoccurring image in Irving's works. Concerning grotesque literature, the portrayal of the prostitute and her lifestyle, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, serves as an example for the fear of sexuality. Frances Connelly states that prostitutes were not necessarily regarded as grotesque, but fuelled by social anxiety concerning their lifestyle and everything that was connected to it, they were portrayed as monstrous and disease-ridden (14). During the fin-de-siècle, viciousness and maleficence were almost exclusively female. The industrialized Western World was marked by uproar and change, traditional gender roles were shaken and the newly found freedom for women caused a rising fear of loose women and female sexuality. The prostitute emerged as the vicious symbol for female sexuality and factors such as crime and disease added to her unwanted presence. Although disgust and hatred towards prostitutes were overly present in nineteenth century literature, even today there are still reservations towards sex workers (Connelly 136-38).

The World According to Garp and *In One Person*, both feature numerous characters that for various reasons choose to disguise their masculinity. Cross-dressing is a tactic used by males and females for entirely different motives. Russo states in her book on the female grotesque that femininity is a mask, not a mask to cover female identity, but a mask to conceal non-identity. Transvestism has always been a necessity for women to take an active role in a male-dominated world. This tactic, by some regarded as a *cultural necessity* was not per se accepted, but understood. In regard to men dressing and *acting like a woman*, explanations and understanding was critical (Russo 69-70). The cross-dressers in Irving's novels are exclusively male born individuals, who want to or have to become women. Regarding the male cross-dresser, a distinction took place whether they did it to ridicule women, such as during the *Lady Skimmington* movement in 1641, in which male cross-dressers led a mob of rioting men through the streets, mocking a wife ridden-husband or dressing as women for

their own pleasure. In the first image not only the husband but also the dominant wife is mocked. This image represents the subsidiary role women were supposed to fulfill in society. This male cross-dressing can be compared to the *strictly heterosexual* cross-dressing of college boys accompanied by a *no homo* attitude (Russo 58-59).

3 Gender Identity

The sexual grotesque and the sexual revolution are both strongly connected to gender identity and identification of an individual. Grotesque figures and bodies are often of indifferent sex, do not act according to a specific gender and/or additionally possess exaggerated sexual organs. With regard to the present day, the fluidity of gender and the interchangeability of assigned sexes can be considered grotesque. Judith Butler divides sex and gender as sex referring to the biological, reproductive organs someone is born with. In earlier times, one was restrictively regarded as either male or female, or as the Butler puts it, the "biology-is-destiny formulation" (9). The concept of gender is, however, a social construct and is naturally not connected to any specific sex. Sex refers to the sole possibility of being able to produce eggs or sperm, an ability that is vital for humanity in order to reproduce. Gender is a cultural construct and differs from cultural group to cultural group and from person to person (Stryker 7-9). The distinction between sex and gender is crucial, since with the assumption of the existence of a binary concept of sexes, the construction of *men* does not automatically coincide with the male sex. If someone self-categorizes as belonging to the male gender, he is not automatically born with male genitals. This distinction is furthermore problematic, since the concept of gender seems arbitrary and independent of sex. The discourse around sex and gender is complex and illustrated in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Gender is primarily concerned with the normative system that defines the positions and roles that are stereotypically assigned to men and women (Frey 11).

Sociologist Charlotte Tate argues that gender identity is part of the field of psychology and psychiatry and goes beyond an individual's anatomical awareness. She suggests, that gender identity is based on two basic traits; the awareness of anatomy and adoption of characteristics that are stereotypical for a specific gender (1-2). In the 1960's, sexual preferences became irrelevant for the psychological adjustment of one's gender. Gender identity is variable, and one does not have to identify as solely female or solely male, but everyone decides for himself or herself. Gender identity is different for every individual, which is illustrated in detail by Irving's character Roberta, who albeit being thankful for some of her male attributes becomes a woman (Tate 3-6).

Latest approaches to gender identity focus on children and how they perceive their gender. These steps are akin to the stages many transgender people in Irving undergo when trying to place themselves on the transgender spectrum. Egan and Perry state that five factors are relevant when researching how children experience gender. Firstly, membership knowledge, the knowledge that oneself is part of a pre-categorized group. Secondly, they should feel content with one's gender assignment. Thirdly, a sense that they are akin to children who categorize as the same gender. Fourthly, children experience a certain pressure to fit one of the given gender roles. Lastly, there is an intergroup bias, children feel superior towards gender marginal groups. As a result, this study shows that gender experience is a complex and layered process and a social psychological approach. However, this approach is not solely focussed on self-categorization but towards judgment by others and based on the attitudes and opinions of others towards oneself (Tate 8). Tate argues that gender identity is also part of a self-categorization process. Gender identity is highly personal and adapts to everyone but is in detail very different for each individual. Furthermore, Tate states that whether a person's perceived gender and the birth-assigned gender coincide or differ, there is a common source that does not have any connection to the genitals. Additionally, the gender one personally assigns to oneself does not have to coincide 100% with a gender already pre-identified by society (8).

Concerning *labels* - a term used in *Garp* to have rather negative connotations - there are numerous genders that one can identify with. The most common genders people identify with are female, male, trans female, trans male, intersex and nonbinary/genderqueer. The last category can be further divided into genderblended (self-categorized as being male as well as female) and post-gender (self-categorized as being neither male nor female). These two genders experience even further specification, however this would exceed the limit of this study (Tate 9).

The term commonly used to describe people of various sexual orientations and sexual identities, is the umbrella term *transgender*. Transgender people live their entire lives or part of their lives with a self-acquired gender that differs from their birth sex. The term transgender includes individuals who identify as transsexuals (identify with a gender different to their birth sex), cross-dressers, and the previously mentioned genderblenders (Grossman and D'Augelli 528). The transgender group is, albeit being regarded as a marginal group of society, omnipresent especially in *In One Person*. In the following thesis, an analysis concerning the representation of gender and gender identity of a variety of Irving's characters will be conducted.

4 The American Sexual Revolution

Sexual revolutions are more influential than any political change will ever be. They change the relationships between people and how gender is perceived (Pálóczi-Horváth 5). As any revolution, they question the momentary status quo and evoke change. Allyn describes a fundamental problem in the definition of the word *revolution*. Revolution can mean two things; either it is a planned action against the status quo, or an impetuous, unforeseen transformation. According to Allyn, the sexual revolution included both elements, since there was a direct attack on the political system and the regime, but there was also a sudden change in American culture, due to technological progress. However, these two strands of revolutions sometimes worked together and at other times pulled in different directions. Despite these difficulties they nevertheless brought about significant change. The sexual revolution was a necessary cultural change, a change in direction of a secular worldview driven by scientific progress. Allyn regards the sexual revolution as an almost American phenomenon, since he describes the ambivalent relationships the majority of the American population still have with topics such as gender roles, the institution of marriage, sexual education, teenagers discovering their sexual identity and many more. According to him, there still is a difficult relationship between American society and everything surrounding sex, gender and private life. Therefore, it is almost impossible to render a consistent political view on the topic due to the complexity of sex. The relationship between Americans and sex is therefore still a critical one (Allyn 4-9). As previously mentioned, the American sexual revolution cannot be pinpointed to one single event, but is a combination of various incidents and beliefs.

Over the course of the last 120 years, two sexual revolutions of greater significance have been observed. The first happened at the beginning of the twentieth century and focused on the freeing of strict Victorian values concerning sexual relationships and the designated roles of males and females. The term sexual revolution was first introduced in the 1920's by the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (Allyn 4). The second, and arguably more popular sexual revolution, took place in the 1960's and revolved around the invention of the birth control pill and how the first contraception solely controlled by the woman herself became a tool of empowerment for women, paving the way for gender equality.

4.1 Before the Sexual Revolution

Sexuality, in particular controversies concerning sexual behavior and the expression of sexuality, date far back and were a topic of discussion usually among the judgmental elder generation who were unable or unwilling to see their children's way of finding their place in

the world. Sexuality and the influence of secular or religious power and dignitaries experienced an uneasy relationship, from legal prostitution in English colonies in seventeenth century America to the strict anti-contraceptive and anti-premarital sex program proposed by the church (Godbeer 1-7). Relevant for this thesis is, however, besides the revolution of the sixties, only an overview of the first sexual revolution and the developments of the nineteenth century – the so-called first sexual revolution. Even though Irving's books were published after the second sexual revolution, the beginnings of both stories are set prior the revolution of the sixties.

Historians and researchers of sexual conduct in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were confronted with various problems, the first being: nobody talked about sex. In the Victorian era it was improper for especially white women to talk about sex or sexual longings. Therefore, a complete reconstruction of America's sexual past is an impossible task, however some traces are left and at least provide historians with an arguably incomplete, but nevertheless useful picture (Reis 2).

The beginning of the first sexual revolution cannot be pinpointed to a specific date. Regarding its effects, "a shift in the dominant codes of sexual conduct" was, according to historians, established around 1890 with the liberalization of divorce laws (Edmunds 29). This was a major step in terms of achieving sexual freedom at the time and can be seen as the beginning of a rising awareness towards sexual liberation.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the first public education methods on sexual matters emerged. However, public education was almost always rather conservative and sexuality was not sufficiently thematized. Nevertheless, these early attempts at sexual education were regarded as obscene, books on the topic were prohibited and lecturers were tried in court (Haynes 166-67).

As previously mentioned, the term sexual revolution emerged initially in early twentieth century Germany as a general term for the sexual movement that was spreading across Europe. However, this movement was cut short due to political uprisings during the 1930's, but this was not the end for sexual freedom (Allyn 4-5). The war brought certain perks regarding gender roles and sexual identities that were terminated as soon as the soldiers returned home. Women working and fulfilling an active role in the previously male-dominated public sphere, had to return to their designated roles behind the stove in the family kitchen (Hekma and Giami 9). Nevertheless, sexual liberation could not be stopped and advertisements, commercials, and magazines became more and more sexualized. In 1954, the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin therefore proclaimed *the sex revolution* in America and warned

the population. As evidence for the approaching evil, he blamed the growing number of divorced couples, the decline of big families and the popularity of jazz music and expressive dancing (Allyn 4-5).

4.2 The 60s: Love, Peace and Sexual Freedom – Sexuality as Empowerment for Women and the LGBTQ Community

The Sixties – a decade associated with long hair, free love, peace and the Woodstock Festival. However, this widely popular image of this significant decade is only a glimpse as regards the importance of this time span. According to Hekma and Giami, the sexual revolution might evoke the notion of a sudden reaction from society, but as previously mentioned, the path for the revolution was laid earlier on. The sexual revolution was a revolt against sexual norms and advocated sexuality in all its forms to be free of any judgment. However, the main goal was to free oneself from the constraints of society, religion and the government (8-9). The term sexual revolution gained and lost meaning especially during the Sixties and Seventies. In the early stages of the sexual revolution, the term was diabolized by young feminists, who saw the movement as leading to the objectification and oppression of women (Allyn 4-5).

One major issue of the sexual revolution was the role of women. Whether, through the new gender roles that slowly took form, the large-scale distribution of the birth control pill or pre-marital sex and feminist issue, women became more present during this era.

Rooted in the beginning of modern civilization is the notion of a double standard regarding men and women. Almost every religion allowed their male followers to have one of the following; various wives, intercourse with various women or pre-marital sex. Women, on the other hand, were regarded as the property of their husbands, they could be sentenced to death for infidelity and their lives were lived almost entirely behind closed doors. Even if these rituals seem barbaric and out-dated to the western world, some are still practiced today. Resulting from this double standard was also the establishment of strict laws concerning the prohibition of birth control and abortion. However, the twentieth century brought a change concerning this degradation of women. The discovery of old indigenous cultures practicing pre-marital sex and the invention of condoms changed America's sex life. Married women's sexual pleasure was addressed and encouraged in the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the double standard did not vanish and women were still told to repress their sexual longings and to protect their virginity as their most precious gift. Being caught as fooling around with men in the Forties and Fifties was still considered an affront towards one's family and friends and was regarded as social suicide. This affront towards women's rights experienced support through psychoanalysis, a new social science that emerged after

the war and proclaimed that women enjoyed pain and could only enjoy sex while being dominated and humiliated. Furthermore, psychoanalysts of the post-war era claimed that females possess less sexual drive and longing than males. As a result many women and girls felt insufficient and faulty. During this time a "war of the sexes" could be observed, boys trying to coax girls into sex, but avoiding marriage and girls being overly suspicious and cautious towards boys. Girls who agreed to pre-marital sex were simultaneously resented and admired by their fellow females and felt terrible guilt for their behaviour. Everyone questioning this double standard was heavily criticized and publicly humiliated. With the growing number of working women and rebellious teenagers these two sets of rules started to fade and pre-marital sex became more and more accepted (Allyn 12-19).

Concerning Irving's works, both novels start pre-sexual revolution, at a time in which the double standard was still present. However, the only people concerned with these restrictions on pre-marital sex were the older generation, and the main protagonists were not severely affected by the notion of a double standard.

According to historian Hera Cook, the invention of the birth control pill was one of the major pillars carrying the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The pill allowed women to control their own sexuality and rediscover their sexual identity (3). The use of contraceptives dates back to as early as Ancient Greece and only experienced a ban in the Middle Ages. Throughout the twentieth century the ban on birth control was slowly lifted and the invention of the pill improved the sex lives of numerous Americans and provided women with greater freedom regarding their sexuality (Allyn 30-33). However, the distribution of oral birth control was regulated by medical doctors who did not all act in the spirit of the sexual revolution. Many doctors refused to prescribe the pill to unmarried single women and therefore the liberation concerning free sex was still heavily regulated in the Sixties (Bailey 1-2).

In 1968 the first radical feminist movement was founded by a group of young women in New York, in order to discuss sex and gender-related issues they encountered. This organisation tackled sexual oppression and advocated for the right to speak about issues such as faking an orgasm, bisexuality, abortion and many more. They presented the world with a *new woman* - one who could wear jeans and did not depend on a man (Allyn 104-5). In *The World According to Garp*, Irving presents his audience with a fictive pioneer of this first feminist movement, Jenny Fields. The goals of this first women's movement were partly reached, when women were considerably less discriminated against and shamed for premarital sex, abortion and single motherhood after the sexual revolution (Hekma and Giami 10-11).

The first wave of feminism occurred in the late 1800s and early 1900 and was concerned with access to education, dress reforms and suffrage. The second wave of feminism started in the early Seventies as a reaction to the sexual revolution (Stryker 3). It was a reaction out of frustration and criticism of the Sixties and the male-dominated sexual revolution. Female activists argued that female desires and propositions for change had been ignored and that the main goal of the sexual revolution had been male dominance over women. The sexual revolution was not only defined by the sexual liberation of both genders but was accompanied by a female struggle for independence. The liberation movement often sexualized women and their voices remained unheard in many historical tracts. The historian Massimo Perinelli regards the SFL, the Sexual Freedom League, as a source of the struggle between the genders. The sex parties and orgies organized by this group often preceded their political engagement, that did not limit itself to a particular cause but was concerned with rights for blacks, gays, women, and so on. This was, according to Perinelli, the zeitgeist of the year 1968, a radical new view that demanded a radical sudden change. Women and men who were part of this and other movements with similar agendas tried to change society and fought for sexual liberation for all sexes and against sexism (Perinelli 219-33).

Abortion was and still is a frightening option for many women, surrounded by numerous stigmas and negative associations. Abortion at the same time is a poster issue for a state interfering with an individual's private life. In early America, abortion was less stigmatized and legal up until a woman could feel the fetus move for the first time. In 1873 abortion was banned in the same instance as birth control and at the turn of the century, it was illegal in every state until after the sexual revolution in 1973 (Reis 6 and Reagan 231-32).

Even though the main focus of the sexual revolution lay on heterosexual love and empowerment of *free love*, the LGBT community also initiated changes and benefitted from the revolution. The Sixties were not only revolutionary with regard to feminist issues, but also provided a platform for gays to gain acceptance amongst their peers. The gay liberation started in 1969 with riots in a gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York (Allyn 145). According to gender studies professor Elizabeth Reis, throughout the history of the United States, heterosexual monogamous sex between a man and a woman was regarded as the norm. Everything that exceeded the limits of such a relationship was classified as *abnormal* and was legally punishable. In the nineteenth century same-sex relationships were seen as a mental illness. Previous to the sexual revolution, homosexuality was regarded as a psychological problem (Reis 4). Often homosexuals posed as straight in order to keep their jobs and reputation, some even lived their entire lives as a lie. Before the 1950's, gay rights

movements already existed, but only in the late Sixties - as a reaction to the sexual revolution - did students first start to speak openly about gay rights and public acceptance. This *visibility* of gays and lesbians evoked negative and homophobic reactions and until 1973 homosexuality was still listed as a psychological illness. Reactions towards this gay activism were often negative and their wish to be accepted and to love whomever they wanted to was ignored and ridiculed. Gay activism continued, but to what extent it was part of the sexual revolution or a parallel revolution is difficult to answer. Gays and straights lived separate social lives, in different bars, in different clubs, looking at different pornography etc. Sexual liberation for a homosexual person would mean more than just liberation from one's parents restricted and conservative views; it would result in a social and cultural change. The homosexual movement and the heterosexual revolution happened simultaneously and had the goal of sexual freedom. Although these revolutions did not unitedly fight against the outdated views of society, without the climate of revolution the gay movement could never have gained the popularity it did (Allyn 151-61).

Another topic with regard to gender and Irving's numerous transgender characters is the role transgender people played during the Sixties and how the sexual revolution affected their lives. The word transgender refers to somebody who was born in the wrong body and then decides to live as another gender, the one he or she feels the most connected to. It refers to a shift away from the initially assigned gender. The transgender movement has its origins in the feminist movement of the Sixties and can be described as the third wave of feminism. This third wave started to question the definition of *woman* and concentrated on the aspects of class, race and sexuality within gender (Stryker 1-5). Change for transgender people in America began in the middle of the nineteenth century when a law was passed concerning the prohibition of cross-dressing. After transgender people received support from medical professionals in the early twentieth century, sex changes were conducted in absolute secrecy during the Forties and Fifties. The first transgender organization, the Foundation for Personality Expression (FPE), was founded in 1961 by the male-born Virginia Prince. However, the organization was primarily concerned with creating a safe haven for white middle class men (Stryker 31-55). In the mid-Sixties, the sexual revolution set foot in the United States and change became visible almost immediately. In 1966 riots at the Compton Cafeteria in San Francisco proved to have a lasting effect for transgender people, who were still heavily discriminated against throughout the Sixties. This riot demonstrated the discrimination still faced today by many transgender people and the riot created a space for political action. The city of San Francisco had to acknowledge transgender people as citizens

and political actions such as healthcare were initiated. Directly after the Compton incident, many groups concerned with transgender issues were formed. In the early 1970's, transgender movements took an important step towards independence and recognition. Despite the critical voices of many other minority groups and organizations, the LGBT community created political activism and influence that could not have been imagined at the beginning of the Sixties. Even if there was the possibility of a sex change in the United States, the Seventies created a backlash especially against transgender people and murder and discrimination by state officials became part of the daily lives of transsexuals (Stryker 63-94). Despite numerous educational efforts from the LGBTQ community, homophobia is still present, which is also represented in both of Irving's works. However, throughout the last few decades, homosexuals have gained more and more rights such as adoptive and marital rights. Still, there is a long way to go until total equality will be achieved (Reis 4-5).

The American sexual revolution derived from various different processes, and, according to university scholar Jeffrey Escoffier, the "freedom of sexual expression was *the necessary condition* for the later emergence of sexual liberation, identity politics and social acceptance of sexual difference." There was not a single fight that led the revolution, but a combination of various battles that initiated cultural and social change (211, Escoffier's italics). The Sixties paved the way for many changes in society and culture and gave a voice to marginalised people. The movement distanced itself from traditional institutions, traditional gender roles and questioned the influence of the church – a counter-culture developed. New divorce laws, effective contraception and the possibility of abortion empowered a new generation to distance itself from its conservative parents. Gays and lesbians came out of the closet and celebrated their sexuality. The sexual revolution was a complex movement with many parallel developments that did not always harmonise, but nevertheless created social change that lasted (Hekma and Giami 10-13).

The revolution of the Sixties, despite being significantly smaller than the media and popular culture have claimed, has had an enormous impact on our everyday lives. The real revolution, however, did not happen by putting flowers in one's hair or taking drugs, but happened in people's minds. The Sixties changed the thoughts and perspectives of many and it is this sexual freedom - or the previous lack of it - which is reflected, co-constructed and maybe even foreshadowed in the works of John Irving.

5 *The World According to Garp* – Empowered Women and Reversed Gender Roles

Being responsible for Irving's breakthrough as an author, *The World According to Garp* tackled many subjects previously regarded as social taboos. Being published in 1978 the literary world was still shocked by penis-biting women and transsexual NFL players, despite the book having been written in the late Sixties; a time of sexual change and uproar. The novel explores various aspects of the life of marginal groups and presents the reader, arguably with a rather abstract and grotesque world, but at the same time shows the audience a plot that is still highly relevant and plausible today.

The novel is written in the first-person narrative and the narrator frequently makes references to Garp's and Jenny's autobiographies. Garp was raised by a single mother, who was impregnated by a dying World War II pilot and determined to raise the child on her own. Garp experienced various tragedies throughout his life, including the death of his youngest son and the assassination of his mother by an anti-feminist. The entire book is heavily influenced by the emerging women's movement and while Jenny Fields is chosen by the public to be the first feminist, Garp's role in the feminist movement stays ambiguous. Even though he sympathizes partly with the women's movement, he is ultimately killed at a young age by a self-proclaimed die-hard feminist.

5.1 Images of the Sexual Grotesque

As previously mentioned, the grotesque, especially in Bakhtin's definition, is strongly connected to everything that comes out of a creature and everything that is produced by humans or any living thing (Bakhtin 18-19). In the following passage this grotesque realism is presented to the reader in the form of the circumstances of Garp's conception. Human beings are reduced to their primal instincts, their bodies are almost beyond human recognition and their defecation and urination is out of control.

> On one side of Garp was an External – a flame-thrower victim, slippery with salve, swaddled in gauze. He had no eyelids, so it appeared he was always watching, but he was blind. Jenny took off her sturdy nurse's shoes, unfastened her white stockings, stepped out of her dress. She touched her finger to Garp's lips. On the other side of Garp's white-shrouded bed was a Vital Organ patient on his way to becoming an Absentee. He had lost most of his lower intestine and his rectum; now a kidney was giving him trouble and his liver was driving him crazy. He had terrible nightmares that he was being forced to urinate and defecate, though this was ancient history for him. He was actually quite unaware when he did those things, and he did them through tubes into rubber bags. He groaned frequently and, unlike Garp, he groaned in whole words. (Irving, *Garp* 27)

The two victims are classified by the attributes that make them grotesque; their uncontrollable defecation, salivation, the missing intestines, as well as Sergeant Garp's sperm. Edwards and Graulund classified three categories of monsters and in this excerpt the monsters of lack would apply to the second roommate (36-47). He lacks vital body parts and his survival is dependent on technology and hospital care. The missing organs and body parts are a disruption of harmony and transgresses the boundaries of nature. Although, they are severely injured, they still are alive. Throughout the book, mutilation is an almost ubiquitous element that strikes almost every family at least once. Garp experiences this mutilation at the age of five, losing part of his ear through the bite of a Newfoundland retriever named Bonkers.

> Bonkers broke up a touch football game by hurling his one hundred and seventy pounds on five-year-old Garp's back and biting off the child's left earlobe – and part of the rest of Garp's ear, as well. […] 'Bonkie bit someone.' […] 'Bonkie bit Garp,' said little Cushie Percy. Neither Stewart nor Midge noticed that Garp was there, in the doorway, the whole side of his head bloody and chewed. (Irving, *Garp* 60-61)

Garp experienced this mutilation as a five-year-old boy by playing with his friends outside. However, in the mind of child the incident was memorable because of the naked body of Cushie's dad, the history teacher Stewart Percy. "For years Garp would mistakenly interpret Cushie Percy's outcry of 'Oh, gross!' He thought she was *not* referring to his gnawed and messy ear but to her father's great gray nakedness, which filled the hall. *That* was what was gross to Garp: the silver, barrel-bellied navy man approaching him in the nude from the well of the Percys' towering spiral staircase." (*Garp* 61-62, Irving's italics) The colossal body of Stewart Percy and his colorless nakedness made a lasting impression on Garp and are akin to the descriptions of the grotesque images of women by Mary Russo. Russo, even though dealing almost entirely with the female grotesque, depicts the ageing body, also mentioned in Bakhtin's carnivalesque images, as a body that is usually of enormous size and grayness (53-55). However, the naked body of Stewart Percy might not be classified as grotesque by everyone, but it is clearly regarded as something on the grotesque spectrum by the five-year-old Garp. This poses the question, to what extent is the grotesque dependent on the spectator and the historical context? According to Edwards and Graulund, the grotesque only functions with regard to the historical context in which it was produced (24).

> 'Garp,' said Jenny Fields. She took hold of his erection and straddled him. 'Aaa,' said Garp. Even the r was gone. He was reduced to a vowel sound to express his joy or his sadness. 'Aaa,' he said, as Jenny drew him inside her and sat on him with all her weight. 'Garp?' she asked. 'Okay? Is that good, Garp?' 'Good,' he agreed, distinctly. But it was only a word from his wrecked memory, thrown clear for a moment when he came inside her. (Irving, *Garp* 28)

The sexual grotesque is, as previously stated, almost always female. In this quote from Irving's book the entire sexual act can be classified as grotesque. Jenny, a woman with a will of her own, is having sex with a barely-responding childlike intensive care patient. The emphasis is on what comes out through his penis rather than his mouth, akin to Bakhtin's illustration of the word coming out of the anus rather than the mouth (305-13). What comes out of the soldier's penis is much more important and telling than what comes out of his mouth. Jenny's son's first sexual experience can be compared to Jenny's, however both participants play an active role in Garp's story. He and Cushie Percy, an old friend, have sex in the Steering academy's infirmary. The same minimalist and sterile environment where Jenny lost her virginity. With regard to their experiences Garp's and Jenny's stories differ widely, since Garp enjoyed his first sexual encounter with a girl, despite his naïvety concerning sexuality. Furthermore, his memories of the act are almost solely reduced to the sparse surroundings and the smell of disinfection spray and cleaning products. Rather grotesque elements to remember from one's first sexual experience and an even more grotesque environment in which to experience sex for the first time.

Another element qualifying as grotesque is the relationship between Garp and his mother, Jenny. The moment Jenny was impregnated, she devoted her life to her son Garp and she did everything, in her opinion, necessary to provide Garp with best possible childhood and young adult experience. Throughout Garp's childhood Jenny is always present and a father figure is, despite them living at an all-boys' school, absent. Jenny smothers Garp and regards her presence in her son's life as central. This is demonstrated by Garp's wish to explore Europe during his gap year after graduation from Steering.

> Helen wrote him that he should go to Europe, and Garp discussed this idea with Jenny. To his surprise, Jenny had never thought he *would* go to college; she did not accept that this was what prep schools were *for*. […] As for Europe, Jenny was interested. 'Well, I'd certainly like to try that,' she said. 'It beats staying here.' It was then that Garp realized his mother meant to stay *with* him. Garp felt so awful he went to bed. When he got up, he wrote Helen that he was doomed to be followed by his mother the rest of his life. 'How can I write,' he wrote to Helen, 'with my mom looking over my shoulder?' (*Garp* 106-7 Irving's italics)

This is the first time Garp mentions his feelings towards the figurative suffocation his mother imposes on him. Their relationship has a grotesque character, however the sexual tension is very covert. Another example of the strange relationship between Garp and his mother is on graduation day when Jenny buys beer to celebrate alone with him and not have Garp and his friends celebrate together. "'Look,' said Jenny. 'I bought some beer. Go ahead and get drunk, if you want to.' 'Jesus, Mom,' Garp said, but drank a few with her. They sat by themselves on

his graduation night, the infirmary empty beside them." (Irving, *Garp* 110) Only after Jenny falls asleep Garp gets to visit his friend's house.

After spending some time in Vienna, Jenny and Garp encounter three prostitutes and Jenny decides to pay one of them to talk to her about male lust.

> 'Mom, *she* doesn't know anything about lust. They probably don't feel anything very much like that.' 'I want to know about *male* lust,' Jenny said. 'About *your* lust. She must know something about *that*.' […] 'What's the matter?' she [the prostitute] asked him. […] 'She [Jenny Fields] wants to buy *you.'* The older whore looked stunned; the whore with the pockmark laughed. 'No, no,' Garp explained. 'Just to *talk*. My mother wants to ask you some questions.' (*Garp* 133, Irving's italics)

After this conversation, they go to a tiny café and Jenny asks the prostitute various questions concerning her personal and professional life and if she regards herself superior or inferior to the men she sleeps with. This situation represents the grotesque in the way that the things regarded as private are now openly discussed. Sexuality and desire are things that do not belong in the public sphere and especially not in the sphere of women (cf. Bakhtin 305-13). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the image of the prostitute is, and primarily was, considered grotesque. Prostitution in the nineteenth century was regarded as something dirty and embodied female sexuality in a way that caused many to be shocked. Prostitutes present the world openly with their sexuality; an element that should, according to contemporaries of the nineteenth and also the twentieth century, be best kept secret behind closed doors (Connelly 136-38). In *Garp*, the grotesque shows its ever-progressing nature by Jenny Fields having the desire to talk to one of the prostitutes about sexuality and lust. Prostitution, albeit being regarded as a profession with a low status, was not grotesque as far as their occupation went, however, only as long as the details concerning this job stayed in the dark. The sexual act, the bodily fluids and sexually transmitted diseases should be kept secret, talking about these elements was grotesque.

Another aspect of the sexual grotesque in the book relates to the monsters of lack. The Ellen James movement, a group of women who cut out their tongues in an act of self-mutilation, fulfill a controversial role within the story. Despite their claims to fight for women's rights and sympathize with the real Ellen James, a twelve-year-old rape victim who was mutilated by her attackers, they are primarily regarded as curiosities. Their monstrosity is self-induced and their apparent perception of themselves as outsiders can be compared to Russo's definition of a freak. Albeit, their *freakishness* derives not out of higher, uncontrollable circumstances, they are as Russo states, 'self-proclaimed' and not only accept, but glorify their otherness (Russo 75-80). However, the distinction between freak and grotesque is the presence of an audience. Freaks need an audience to perform, and although the Ellen

Jamesians see their mutilating act as a protest against the rape of a child, they need an audience that does not only watch but interacts with them. If the reactions of the spectators were absent, the protest would not be successful. Therefore, the concept of the Ellen James Society is definitely bordering the notion of a freak but correlates with the concept of the grotesque. Their lack of one body part is irrefutably a sign of the modern grotesque, where there is no extreme exaggeration regarding enormous body parts or hybrids between animals and humans, but there is a slightly odd component in what seems a relatively coherent picture.

> 'Is there something the matter with that woman's *tongue*, Mom?' Garp whispered to Jenny. The superiority of the big woman's silence outraged him; […] Jenny quietly informed Garp that the woman wasn't talking because the woman was without a tongue. Literally. 'It was cut off,' Jenny said. 'Jesus,' Garp whispered. 'How'd it happen?' Jenny rolled her eyes; […] 'This is *news*, you mean?' Garp said. 'It's such a famous tongue accident that I should have heard about it?' 'Oh God,' Jenny said wearily. 'Not a famous accident. Very deliberate.' 'Mother, did someone cut her tongue off?' 'Precisely,' Jenny said. (*Garp* 190, Irving's italics)

This mutilation of a female is grotesque in terms of her lack of a body part necessary to communicate and to perform a basic concept of what differentiates humans from animals. Their inability to speak has degraded them, and according to Mary Catanzaro, has made them grotesque since the failure of speech has isolated them and segregated them to grotesque selves (31). The inability to speak is not only restricted to the Ellen James Society, but a speech impairment also affects Alice Fletcher, the wife of Helen's faculty friend Harrison Fletcher, whose speech impairment was innate and varies in degree but was also affected by her husband's affair.

After Garp experiences a jaw injury he, akin to the Ellen Jamesians has to pass around notes. However, even though this way of communicating was accepted by his family he was ridiculed by the also speech-impaired Alice Fletcher. "Alice encouraged Garp to stop the silly notes. He could talk if he tried, if he wasn't so vain about how he sounded. If *she* could talk, certainly he could spit the words out, Alice reasoned – teeth wired together, delicate tongue, and all; he could at least try. (*Garp* 395, Irving's italics)

Therefore, Garp also experienced the lack of something, not necessarily a body part, but the lack of speech. Garp himself becomes grotesque and although he does not acquire this new state voluntarily, he is placed within the context of the novel, at the same position as the Ellen Jamesians. His grotesqueness is not sexual on its own, but gains significance in terms of sexual behavior and meaning in relation to the highly political aggregation of the Ellen Jamesians. This women's movement makes the female sexuality a political issue and Garp becomes involuntarily part of it, by simply having the same symptoms.

The sexual aspect regarding the Ellen James incident is illustrated in the following quote, where it becomes clear that the reasons for this self-mutilation are governed by sexual injustice.

> 'What happened to her?' Garp asked. 'Two men raped her when she was eleven years old,' Jenny said. 'Then they cut her tongue off so she couldn't tell anyone who they were or what they looked like. They were so stupid that they didn't know an eleven-ear-old could *write*. […] 'Wow,' Garp said. 'So *that's* Ellen James?' he whispered, indicating the big quiet woman with new respect. Jenny rolled her eyes again. 'No,' she said. 'That is someone from the Ellen James *Society*. Ellen James is still a child. […] 'You mean this Ellen James Society goes around not talking,' Garp said, 'as if *they* didn't have any tongues?' 'No, I mean they *don't* have any tongues,' Jenny said. 'People in the Ellen James Society have their tongues cut off. To protest what happened to Ellen James.' […] 'They call themselves Ellen Jamesians,' Jenny said. (*Garp* 190-92, Irving's italics)

The previous quote illustrates another grotesque aspect mentioned by Bakhtin, the concentration on bodily holes. Cutting out the tongue does not only impair the speech of the speaker, it also affects the food intake, the ability to swallow and taste and also the ability to perform oral sex. Bodily holes are regarded as caves and the mouth is the only cave visible from an outside perspective (cf. Russo 1-2). Furthermore, the sexual grotesque is almost always female. In this case, the act of self-mutilation is solely performed by females and the rape was also conducted on a female child. The two rapists are not considered grotesque they are not even regarded as overly important to the case. They are just the initial reason for the grotesque element to happen.

The sexual grotesque in historical times concentrated almost solely on aspects visible to the naked eye – physical impairments and abnormalities. In modern times *abnormal* sex has become more and more accepted in society. Additionally, a definition of *normal* is impossible to conduct and varies not only from culture to culture but also from individual to individual. Although what is sexually normal varies from person to person, it is possible to depict what is relatively normal for a certain culture at a certain time. In *The World According to Garp*, the sexual grotesque concerning sexual acts is portrayed in the relationship between the Garps and the Fletchers. After Harrison and Garp both admitted to their affairs with younger women, Helen, who had accepted the fact that men are governed by lust, offers to help the Fletchers and the obviously suffering Alice.

> 'You have a lovely voice, Alice,' he told her, and she cried. And they made love, of course, and despite what everyone knows about such things, it *was* special. […] Now, he thought, *here* is trouble. 'What can we do?' Helen asked Garp. She had made Harrison Fletcher forget his 'special' student; Harrison now though *that* Helen was the most special thing in his life. […] 'Oh boy,' Helen said. 'So we all like each other,

> except that I don't care that much for sleeping with Harrison.' (*Garp* 219, Irving's italics)

As a result, Alice becomes obsessed with Garp, and both of them enjoy their sexual relationship. However, Helen, who was in charge of taking Harrison's mind off his student, has slept with Harrison and now he thinks of her as being special and wants more sex with her. This foursome is therefore grotesque as it deviates from the norm of a traditional marriage. The concept of the group marriage is discussed in Allyn and was a short-lived concept at the margins of the sexual revolution (Allyn 72-83). However, as Edwards and Graulund propose that the grotesque is obedient to the disruption of harmony and transgression (65-69). A foursome therefore would be both as the balance of a marriage between man and woman, between two people, is disrupted by the presence of two other people. The natural balance is demolished. Furthermore, there is a violation of the boundaries that are set up by a society. Within the story, the cultural notion of a marriage between two people of opposite sexes is disregarded. The borders of the *good* and *normal* are crossed. This experience is processed by Garp in form of his second book, which deals with four people having an affair on a solemnly physical basis. Furthermore, all of the four people in Garp's book have physical impairments, which adds another layer of grotesque, a layer that is visible for the world. An observable grotesque that mirrors the grotesque element of the relationship they share.

Another aspect that ties in with the affair-ridden life of T.S. Garp is the acquaintanceship with his son's friend Ralph's mother. Ralph's mother is the epitome of a *hot mess*. She sleeps with various men, cannot cook, does not look after her house and is in tears when Garp encounters her. Furthermore, she simply abandoned a lover - a young boy of about eighteen who is dressed in nothing except a purple caftan and who claims to live nowhere.

However, this scene is set in the suburbs of a small town, a safe environment, which does not seem strange or peculiar in any way. As previously mentioned, the grotesque in modern literature lies in the details and albeit nothing seems too strange, odd coincidences happen. For instance when Garp finds a deranged and naked Mrs. Ralph on the floor of her house and has to get rid of her teenage lover.

> 'I find you very attractive,' he [Garp] mumbles to Mrs. Ralph, but he's facing Bill [the dog]. 'Really I do.' 'Prove it,' Mrs. Ralph says. 'You goddamn liar. Show me.' 'I can't show you, ' Garp says, 'but it's not because I don't find you attractive.' 'I don't even give you an erection!' Mrs. Ralph shouts. 'Here I am half-naked, and when you're beside me – on my goddamn bed – you don't even have a respectable hard-on.' (Irving, *Garp* 289)

The grotesquerie of this rather normal circumstance is reached through the rather unusual behavior of the characters. Garp is almost pressured into showing that he is attracted by getting an erection at the pure sight of a naked woman.

After Garp discovers Helen's affair, his habit of driving the car almost blind into the garage causes him to crash into the car of Helen's lover that is parked in front of the house. While Helen is performing oral sex, the two cars crash. The crash left Duncan Garp blind on one eye, Garp himself broke his jaw and their youngest son Walt was killed in the accident. Inside Michael's car, Helen, who was performing fellatio on Michael, injured her neck and bit off the tip of Michael's penis. "At first she thought she had bitten her tongue off, because she could feel it swimming her mouth, which was full of blood; […] She spat what she thought was her tongue into the palm of her left hand. It wasn't her tongue, of course. It was what amounted to three quarters of Michel Milton's penis." (Irving, *Garp* 376) This is another grotesque image that can be classified as belonging to the category of the monsters of lack. Furthermore, it is a woman, who is taking away not only a body part, but a sexual organ that has an enormous mental and cultural value. A man's penis is not solely a reproductive organ, it is a means for a man to define himself and to present his masculinity. Therefore, the lack of the penis is not only a mere physical lack, it is also accompanied by a mental change. Additionally, his manhood was taken away by a woman, the supposedly inferior sex, which adds emphasis to the fact that he has been emasculated. He has changed into a grotesque creature, physically and psychologically. "Michael Milton was released from a hospital, walking with a post-surgical stoop and a woebegone face. Due to an infection, the result of improper drainage – and aggravated by a common urological problem – he had to have the remaining quarter of his penis removed in an operation." (Irving, *Garp* 390) To emphasize the image of lack, Michael Milton's penis had to be fully removed. The complete removal of his penis, deprives Milton from a normal sex life; he is a sexual outsider.

The long tradition of cross-dressing as part of the sexual grotesque has already been discussed and is also visible in *The World According to Garp.* In the novel, cross-dressing appears in various forms and is solely conducted by men.

> *Robert* Muldoon, Garp knew, had spent several months in drag before his actual operation. He'd go off in the morning dressed as Robert Muldoon; he went out shopping for women's clothes, […] In the evenings, at Dog's Head Harbor, Robert Muldoon would model his new clothes for Jenny and the critical women. […] When the estrogen hormones began to enlarge his breasts and shift the former tight end's shape around, Robert gave up the banquet circuit and marched forth from the Dog's Head Harbor house in mannish women's suits and rather conservative wigs; he tried *being* Roberta long before he had the surgery. (*Garp* 383, Irving's italics)

Roberta obviously fits in the category of cross-dressing for her own pleasure. She feels born in the wrong body and does not, compared to Garp, cross-dress to ridicule or benefit. During Jenny's funeral the presence of men is forbidden, which causes Garp to dress in drag. This is the first time Garp, who often ridiculed and derided outraged woman and who denounced how women are treated in society, understands feminist viewpoints. Garp, dressed as a woman, does correlate with the grotesque image of the male cross-dresser.

> Roberta had dressed Garp in a cheap turquoise jump suit, the color of Oren Rath's pick up truck. The jump suit had a gold zipper that ran from Garp's crotch to Garp's throat. Garp did not adequately fill the hips of the suit, but his breasts – or, rather, the falsies Roberta had fashioned for him – strained against the snap-flap pockets and twisted the vulnerable zipper askew. […] The shoulder straps of the huge, hideous bra dug into his shoulders. […] He was less sure of the wig. A tousled whore's head of honey-blond hair, under which his own scalp itched. A pretty green silk scarf was at his throat. His dark face was powdered a sickly gray, but this concealed, Roberta said, his stubble of beard. (Irving, *Garp* 495-96)

Although, he does not primarily cross-dress to ridicule women, his disguise is regarded by many as means to belittle them. This ties in with Russo's cross-dressers, who did not do it for their own pleasure but to humor females who do not have a choice. Even though Garp does not initially regard himself as offensive to women, he soon begins to realize the comicality of his outfit. "Garp had seen himself reflected in a storefront window and he'd told Roberta that he thought he looked like a teen-age prostitute. 'An *aging* teen-age prostitute,' Roberta had corrected him. 'A faggot parachutist,' Garp had said." (*Garp* 496, Irving's italics) Furthermore, Garp realizes that he cross-dresses to mask an unwelcomed identity, a male identity. In the eyes of feminists he is masking his non-identity (cf. Russo 69-70).

5.2 The Role of Women and Feminism

Literary scholar Mary Russo identifies the 1990's as the first time in which feminism was regarded as the norm, as the morally and politically correct behavior. Traces for the normalization of feminism can be found in large media campaigns and mainstream popular culture. However, one has to take into consideration that normal and ordinary are not the same. The norm is only the current standard (Russo vii). Irving however, not without exception, puts women already in a position equal to men. Various women in Irving's novel are determined in their sexual desires and longings and demand from men what they want without acting overly sensitive or displaying any other actions attributed to females.

Having numerous female protagonists and heroines in his books, Irving shows that heroism is by no means exclusively male. In *Garp*, Jenny Fields experiences belittlement and dominance in a patriarchal society from early on. As the only girl of four children, her family's sole goal

was to find her a suitable husband. Another example of a strong independent woman is Garp's wife, Helen. However, Irving did not only portray strong females but also shows the opposite; wives who depend or depended on their husbands instructions, for example Jenny's brother's widow who asked Jenny for advice after her husband had died in a sailing accident.

> It was to Jenny that her brother's widow eventually spoke, almost a year after the drowning. She asked Jenny if she thought a 'decent time' had passed and she could begin whatever had to be begun 'to find someone else.' […] In her autobiography, Jenny wrote: 'That poor woman needed to be told what to *feel*.'
> 'That was the stupidest woman my mother said she ever met,' Garp wrote. (*Garp*, 11-12 Irving's italics)

This quote illustrates one of the first instances in the book where women are portrayed as the inferior party and in contrast to the feminist and progressive standpoint Jenny Fields advocates. Jenny Fields despises being told what to do and doing what seems to be correct for a woman at the time. The following quote displays what Jenny ought to believe was the common consensus amongst her contemporaries and shows how women in the book were displayed. "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." (Irving, *Garp* 13) As previously mentioned, being different and flaunting your otherness as a way of expressing one's identity and this was a major topic within the sexual revolution. In the 1940's, where the story of Garp's mother Jenny begins, women's roles were very restricted. Furthermore, Jenny, a single working woman in her thirties, was regarded as being vulgar and promiscuous. Albeit, one of the perks of the war was the fact that women in the workplace gained more and more acceptance and were regarded as a necessity rather than impudent, Jenny stilled raised eyebrows when she refused to get married and got pregnant by *raping* a dying soldier. Technical Sergeant Garp was brought to the hospital where Jenny worked as a nurse, with severe brain damage, which left him at the same developmental stage as a child with the only exception of the countless erections he had. One night close to the death of the soldier Jenny not only relieved him with her hand but actually let him come inside her. Although, this scenario did not strike Jenny as wrong, it can be considered rape, since the soldier was clearly in a position where he could not defend himself and was at the mercy of the medical staff. Remarkable, is that the act of rape was not performed by a man but by a woman, which shows a double standard in society. Rape is a repeating theme of the book but happens, after this initial incident, exclusively to females. Ellen James, the twelve-year-old, whose tongue was cut out in order to keep her from describing the molesters, as well as a girl who was raped in a park, are the stories that

have Garp doubt the male species. Additionally, he betrays his wife with the baby sitter and this incident prompts him to make the following statement. “Garp didn’t want a daughter because of *men*, Because of *bad* men, certainly; but even, he thought, because of men like *me*. (*Garp* 212, Irving’s italics)

Another feminist issue concerning the topic of rape is the legalization of abortion. As previously mentioned, abortion was the cause of a lengthy discussion during the sexual revolution and still is controversial today. Furthermore, primarily male politicians are advocates for anti-abortion laws and pro-life activists. They generally ignore the female perspective regarding this topic. In *The World According to Garp*, Jenny is suddenly preoccupied with New Hampshire politics. “There was, apparently, some feminist issue at stake, and some generally illiberal nonsense and crimes the incumbent governor was actually proud of. The administration boasted that a raped fourteen-year-old had been denied an abortion, thus stemming the tide of nationwide degeneracy. The governor truly *was* a crowing, reactionary moron.” (*Garp* 477, Irving’s italics) Albeit the book being written in the late Seventies after the sexual revolution, the issue is still present in the United States. Statistics prove that national rape-related pregnancies are up to 5.0% and about 50% choose to abort the child, although a vast majority of the pregnancies were unwanted (Holmes 320-25). This paper suggests that there is always a possibility of abortion, however bills to complicate this process are constantly passed, such as the propositions made in 2013. These force women, who are pregnant after being raped, to listen to the heartbeat of the unborn baby, or they are denied access to health insurance that would cover the abortion costs. Furthermore, women are not allowed to abort after an arbitrary number of weeks, and they are not granted the optimal medical care (Levin and Borchelt 1-3). This proves that even today, pro-life activists suggest that the life of the unborn rapist’s child matters more than the psychological wellbeing of the mother (*Rape, Incest, and Abortion*).

The severely wounded Sergeant impregnated Jenny Fields and provided her with her greatest wish. Jenny, who glorified single motherhood and regarded the situation with a dead or absent father as the ideal state, had the prospect of bearing a child. “A baby with no strings attached.” (Irving, *Garp* 14) This progressive view is still controversial today, but the wish for a baby without the company of a significant other gained acceptance during the sexual revolution and experiences a growing acknowledgment today. However, at the time that Jenny decided sharing her life with a man was just not for her, she was treated with suspicion everywhere she went.

The book presents the reader with numerous instances that highlight the gender roles present at the first half of the twentieth century. When Jenny Fields decides to start working again after her maternity leave, her father's reaction is governed by a lack of understanding. "He [Jenny's father] was irritated with her that she chose to work at all; there was money enough, and he'd have been happier if she'd gone into hiding at the family estate in Dog's Head Harbor until her bastard son had grown up and moved away." (Irving *Garp*, 33-34) She was regarded as a disgrace to the family and a child born out of wedlock was stigmatized. Although *The World According to Garp* features heroic and independent women to a great extent, there are also many women being degraded and reduced to the typical gender roles of the post-war generation. The novel features many submissive women but the females Garp is surrounded by are always strong female role models. First, his mother and later, Helen Holm, his wrestling coach's and surrogate father's daughter. Helen, who spent most of her early life in the wrestling room grew up to be a strong-minded and determined women, who did not let herself be fooled by men, and throughout her teenage years as a young, prosperous woman, did not show any romantic interest in Garp.

While residing in Vienna, Garp and his mother have an encounter with two prostitutes while strolling along the Kärntnerstraße by night. Prostitution at the time is legal in Vienna and the prostitutes in the first district are regarded as good-looking and earning a good wage. The stigma around this profession in the States and the absence of it in the Austrian capital is confusing to Garp's mother. Despite her being an independent women ahead of her time, in terms of sexuality, libido and lust, her views are rather Victorian and she does not understand the longing for sexual contact. The characters in Irving's novel view the prostitutes as pursuing completely normal and righteous occupations.

> Garp explained to his mother the Viennese system of prostitution. Jenny was not surprised to hear that prostitution was legal; she was surprised to learn that it was *illegal* in so many other places. 'Why shouldn't it be legal?' she asked. 'Why can't a woman use her body the way she wants to? If someone wants to pay for it, it's just one more crummy deal.' (*Garp* 136 Irving's italics)

Garp's mother does not judge the prostitutes, she believes in the postulates of the sexual revolution that would hit Europe merely ten years later and would encourage young women to own their bodies and their sexualities. Jenny Fields' progressive thinking illustrates the growing awareness of women's rights and Irving's implementation of the perceptible change he must have felt around him as a result of the sexual revolution. Furthermore, Irving portrays the prostitutes as *normal* people. Although even nowadays there is a stigma around prostitution, Garp talks to his prostitute of choice about trivial and insignificant details of his

life and does not hesitate to start a conversation with her when he meets her shopping for groceries.

During their time in Vienna, Garp's mother finished her autobiography, a work based on her life as a single working mother of a son born out of wedlock. After finishing the manuscript she handed it to Helen. Helen, a fellow woman and avid reader, should be the first critic of her book that was intended to show her life without having to legitimate her choices or excuse her decisions. Her work was reviewed by critics and postulated as being of great relevance for women and the development of feminism.

> […] the media, in general, felt warmly toward the book. 'The first truly feminist autobiography that is as full of celebrating one kind of life as it is full of putting down another,' somebody wrote. 'This brave book makes the important assertion that a woman can have a whole life without a sexual attachment of *any* kind,' wrote somebody else. (*Garp* 185, Irving's italics)

Jenny was considered a feminist writer, a voice of her generation. Her publisher John Wolf had warned her, "'you're either going to be taken as the right voice at the right time, or you're going to be put down as all wrong.' She was taken as the right voice at the right time." (Irving, *Garp* 185) She was regarded as being a feminist, an early forerunner of the sexual revolution that would take place just a few years later. However, Jenny did not consider herself a feminist.

> Jenny Fields […] felt discomfort at the word *feminism*. She was not sure what it meant, but the *word* reminded her of feminine hygiene and the Valentine treatment. After all, her formal training had been nursing. She said shyly that she'd only thought she made the right choice about how to live her life, and since it had not been a popular choice, she'd felt goaded into saying something to defend it. (*Garp* 185, Irving's italics)

Jenny does not understand the concept of feminism, although, being unknowingly a leading figure in terms of women's rights and the abolishment of the double standard. "As for Jenny, she felt only that women – just like men – should at least be able to make conscious decisions about the course of their lives; if that made her a feminist, she said, then she guessed she *was* one." (*Garp* 185-86, Irving's italics) Furthermore, Jenny started to give advice to women seeking an answer, to help them with decisions concerning their role as females in a male-dominated society. Jenny soon became a spokesperson for women's rights and she "traveled with a small core of adorers, or with occasional other figures who felt they were part of what would be called the women's movement;" (Irving, *Garp* 188). Irving displays in his novel the transition of progressive thinking characters from pre-sexual revolution America to post-sexual revolution America. Furthermore, Jenny, Garp and many of their close family and

friends show a gaining acceptance of a change in society and a challenging of traditional gender roles.

Another aspect concerning the role of women is the notion of gender equality. During the sexual revolution women started to break away from their designated place in the family kitchen, and more and more women started working outside the house (Hekma and Giami 9). However, this did not automatically mean that men became homemakers and reverse the traditional gender roles. Being a stay-at-home dad is nowadays still not fully accepted and considered by many as unmanly and irritating. Garp and Helen however, live for the time a very progressive life and Garp becomes a stay-at-home dad to their first son Duncan, while Helen pursues an academic career as a literary scholar at a college for girls. "Helen was at school every day; she had agreed to have a child only if Garp would agree to take care of it. Garp loved the idea of never having to go out. He wrote and took care of Duncan; he cooked and wrote and took care of Duncan some more. When Helen came home, she came home to a reasonably happy homemaker;" (Irving, *Garp* 187) Garp is taking care of the household and the baby and does enjoy it. However, this lifestyle was not accepted by Garp's contemporaries and frequently ridiculed.

> […] once an interviewer from a women's magazine asked if she could come interview him about what it was like to be the son of a famous feminist. When the interviewer discovered Garp's chosen life, his 'housewife's role,' as she gleefully called it, Garp blew up at her. 'I'm doing what I want to do,' he said. 'Don't call it by any other name. I'm just doing what I want to do – and that's all my mother ever did, too. Just what *she* wanted to do.' (*Garp* 188-89, Irving's italics)

This passage shows that Garp's chosen lifestyle was by no means accepted by society and was misunderstood by most. Garp was a stay-at-home dad, who was supported by his mother and his wife. This lifestyle was unusual for the time and the novelty of this situation becomes obvious in the following passage, in which Garp catches a child molester and is questioned by a policeman about his income.

> 'Then what do you do for a living?'' the policeman said. 'My wife and my mother support me,' Garp admitted. 'Well, I have to ask you what *they* do,' the policeman said. 'For the record, we like to know how everyone makes a living.' […] In his early, unpublished years Garp felt angry whenever he was forced to admit how he had enough to live on; he felt more like inviting confusion at this moment than he felt moved to clear things up. (*Garp* 204, Irving's italics)

Garp has to state, he, as a grown man is supported by two women; his wife and his mother. Although, the policeman does not express any derogatory opinion about this, Garp himself feels uncomfortable and the term *admit* additionally indicates shame over this fact. Furthermore, the fact that someone is supported by his mother and his wife is highly unusual

even nowadays, and when looked at from a historical perspective, almost non-existent at that time. Furthermore, Garp's writing career was overshadowed by his mother's famous autobiography. Albeit, Garp being a far better writer than his mother, his works were reviewed as the works of the son of the famous feminist, Jenny Fields.

> John Wolf had been Garp's publisher, and although he had agreed with Garp *not* to mention on the jacket flap that this was the first novel by the son of the feminist heroine Jenny Fields, there were few reviewers who failed to sound that chime. 'It is amazing that the now-famous son of Jenny Fields,' wrote one, 'has actually grown up to be what he said he wanted to be when he grew up.' This, and other irrelevant cuteness concerning Garp's relationship to Jenny, made Garp very angry that his book couldn't be read and discussed for its own faults and/or merits, but John Wolf explained to him the hard facts that most readers were probably more interested in who he was than in what he'd actually written. (*Garp* 195, Irving's italics)

In this passage, Jenny is taken as the point of departure. A work by a female author is used as a measure for a male writer. Jenny's importance succeeds Garp's, which is a rather untraditional aspect considering the time and the place in which the book originated.

Even though, the first mention of a student-teacher affair is that between a male professor and a female student, Helen Holm also becomes involved with a student. Helen, in her mid-thirties is primarily attracted to the confidence of the young Michael Milton. After an incident with Harrison Fletcher, whose employment was terminated after his liaison with a student, Helen is careful and takes precautions.

> 'There is nothing more to discus,' Helen said, taking a breath. She raced her tongue across his upper lip; […] 'We'll go to your apartment. Nowhere else,' she told him. 'It's across the river,' he said. 'I know where it is,' she said. 'Is it clean?' 'Of course,' he said. […] I want it clean.' 'It's pretty clean,' he said. 'I can clean it better.' 'We can only use your car,' she said. 'I don't have a car,' he said. 'I know you don't,' Helen said. 'You'll have to get one.' (Irving, *Garp* 340-41)

Helen makes clear that she is in charge. The allocations of the roles in this relationship are evident. Helen is superior to her student and she decides what is acceptable and what is not. "They both laughed, and Helen relaxed again; but when he came around her desk to kiss her, she shook her head and waved him back." (Irving, *Garp* 342) A female teacher having an affair with a male student is rather uncommon and in literature and the media, the reverse (male teacher, female student) is the common case. However, Helen's affair did not stay a secret for long and Michael's previous girlfriend discovers their liaison. Maggie, the ex-girlfriend, starts to observe the whereabouts and habits of the Garps and ultimately informs Garp about the affair. Garp then urges Helen to end the relationship, although he had had various affairs over the years. After the accident that left the Garps severely injured, Helen

resigned from her job as a teacher, even though the faculty did not force her to for having a relationship with a student.

Although the novel has a male protagonist, Irving induces a shift in perspective so that the women in *Garp* gain importance as well as validation and feminist issues are omnipresent and dominate the storyline. "Irving's work is the shaping, and gradual emergence, of female characters and the 'feminine perspective' Irving shifts from woman-as-victim to woman-as-hero" (Reilly 6). Females are not anymore regarded as primarily belonging to the private sphere solely concerned with household tasks and childcare. Strong, independent women, who made an impact not only on their families but also on society, surround Garp. This quote by Reilly illustrates a growing awareness of a change in women's rights. Whether this is a reaction to the actual women's rights movement or the other way round cannot be determined, however, it is certain that culture and literature influence one another. Irving's women are heroines in many ways; Jenny, the single mother who never cared what others thought of her and who whole-heartedly believed in women's rights and equality at a time when women were regarded as inferior to men in various aspects. Furthermore, Helen, who pursued a career and fought traditional gender roles by refusing to become a stay-at-home mother.

After Garp and his family left for Europe, shortly before the dreaded publication of Garp's blood and sex filled book, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, John Wolf sent Garp the first reviews.

> John Wolf clipped the first rave from among the important New York reviews: 'The women's movement has at last exhibited a significant influence on a significant male writer,' wrote the reviewer, who was an associate professor of women's studies somewhere. She went on to say that *The World According to Bensenhaver* was 'the first in-depth study, by a man, of the peculiarly *male* neurotic pressure many women are made to suffer.' And so forth. […] But the review helped to establish the rumor that *The World According to Bensenhaver* was 'a feminist novel.' (*Garp* 476-77, Irving's italics)

Similar to Jenny Fields, Garp was classified a feminist writer, albeit he did not regard himself as a feminist or even overly concerned with women's rights, however, he did not argue with being labeled a feminist. Furthermore, not only do Garp and Jenny feel uncomfortable about being referred to as feminists, but all female protagonists feel discontent being labeled feminists.

5.3 Gender Issues and Sexual Identity

In *The World According to Garp*, the LGBTQ community and the fluidity and fuzziness of gender, is primarily represented through the transsexual former football player Roberta Muldoon. Albeit, gender in all its aspects is not elaborately dealt with, Roberta serves as an

example of not only a man who wants to become a woman, but also as a character, who is conflicted by his own (sexual) identity. The football professional Robert Muldoon, previously regarded as an embodiment of masculinity, challenges the perception of male and female features. After her active career, Robert undergoes a sex-change operation and becomes Roberta.

> Jenny's newest colleague was a six-foot-four transsexual named Roberta Muldoon. Formerly Robert Muldoon, a standout tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Roberta's weight had dropped from 235 to 180 since her successful sex-change operation. The doses of estrogen had cut into her once-massive strength and some of her endurance; Garp guessed also that Robert Muldoon's former and famous 'quick hands' weren't so quick anymore, but Roberta Muldoon was a formidable companion to Jenny Fields. (Irving, *Garp* 227)

Garp's description of Roberta is a comparison between her male and female features and describes how the transformation from him to her changed her outer appearance. This transformation does not, however, entirely change Roberta – it dissolves her former existence. Roberta will always be reminded of her past as a man and she must learn to accept and embrace that part of her.

> Clinically, now, Roberta had the same genitalia and urological equipment as most other women. 'But of course I can't conceive,' she told Garp. 'I don't ovulate and I don't menstruate.' […] 'She [Jenny Fields] told me [Roberta] I was less sexually ambiguous than most people she knew,' Roberta said. 'I really needed that,' she said, 'because I had to use this horrible dilator all the time so that my vagina wouldn't close; I felt like a *machine*.' (*Garp* 383, Irving's italics)

Roberta therefore experiences difficulties throughout the story in placing herself in a world dominated by a gender binary system. Furthermore, "she is often confused about whether she should act like a man or a woman, a confusion underscoring the difficulties plaguing both men's and women's lives in the plot" (Reilly 67).

> 'I always knew I should have been a girl', she told Garp. 'I dreamed about having love made to me, by a man, but in the dreams I was always a woman; I was *never* a man having love made to me by another man.' There was more than a hint of distaste in Roberta's references to homosexuals, and Garp thought it strange that people in the process of making a decision that will plant them firmly in a minority, forever, are possibly less tolerant of other minorities than we might imagine. (Irving, *Garp* 382)

This citation emphasizes that the confusion concerning her gender started long before she actually had a sex-change operation. Roberta always knew that the sex she was born as, was not the gender she would have chosen. "'Well, they tried to confuse me,' Roberta said. 'When I was preparing myself for the operation, they kept trying to talk me out of it. 'Be gay,' they said. 'If you want men, have them as you are. If you become a woman, you'll just be taken advantage of,' they told me." (Irving, *Garp* 382) This passage indicates that woman are

inferior, they are taken advantage of and it is not desirable to become one. Furthermore, it shows how aware society is of the minority status Roberta will acquire by irreversibly altering her birth sex.

As previously mentioned, Roberta is challenging the perceptions of maleness and femaleness and showing that gender and sex is fluid and not fixed. The following passage illustrates that Roberta knows the importance a person, themselves, and society lays upon the aspect of gender:

"When Garp had been killed, Duncan remembered, Roberta Muldoon had threatened to have her sexual reversal *reversed*. 'I'd rather be a lousy *man* gain,' she wailed, 'than think there are women in this world who are actually gloating over this filthy murder by that filthy *cunt*!'" (Irving, *Garp* 603, Irving's italics)

Her threat to reverse her gender is obviously a reaction to her grief and an impulse due to the rush of emotions, however, the possibility of changing her gender again is mentioned as a possibility and emphasizes the interchangeability and fluidity of gender.

Roberta is blurring the lines between stereotypical male and female gender roles. She does not care about labels, and self-categorizes her gender even on a day-to-day basis.

> Roberta ran all the time. In her late fifties she was becoming forgetful of using her estrogen, which must be used for the whole of a transsexual's life to maintain a female body shape. The lapses in her estrogen, and her stepped-up running, made Roberta's large body change shape, and change back again, before Helen's eyes. 'I sometimes don't know what's *happening* to you, Roberta,' Helen told her. 'It's sort of exciting,' Roberta said. 'I never know what I'm going to feel like; I never know what I'm going to *look* like, either.' (*Garp* 599, Irving's italics)

This citations shows that Roberta does not depend on clearly visible bodily features and distinct male or female attributes to define her gender identity. She is who she is, even if this is decided on a day-to-day basis. Male and female categories are blurred and she is something in between. "'I don't know *what* women feel like,' Roberta wailed. 'I don't know what they're *supposed* to feel like, anyway. I just know what *I* feel like.'" (*Garp* 306, Irving's italics) Roberta does not at regard herself as a woman, she is in-between, she is not supposed to know how or what women feel. In this quotation, Roberta breaks free from gender norms and indirectly states that it does not matter whether she is a woman or not. It only matters that she knows who she is and what she is feeling.

Garp dressed as a woman, and concealing his gender is - although not voluntarily - a matter of gender fluidity. Garp, almost successfully, slips from one gender into another and by doing this he escapes the common gender binaries and creates another gender.

> Roberta had dressed Garp in a cheap turquoise jump suit, […] The jump suit had a gold zipper that ran from Garp's crotch to Garp's throat. Garp did not adequately fill the hips of the suit, but his breasts – or, rather, the falsies Roberta had fashioned for him – strained against the snap-flap pockets and twisted the vulnerable zipper askew. […] The shoulder straps of the huge, hideous bra dug into his shoulders. […] He was less sure of the wig. A tousled whore's head of honey-blond hair, under which his own scalp itched. A pretty green silk scarf was at his throat. His dark face was powdered a sickly gray, but this concealed, Roberta said, his stubble of beard. (Irving, *Garp* 495-96)

Garp experiences the upsides and (mostly) downsides of being a woman. It is the first time he realizes what influence gender and sex have upon the outside world. Furthermore, he realizes that although he is only dressed as woman, he immediately acts defensive and passionate when he becomes a victim of sexism - behavior he previously despised and ridiculed. The cross-dressing experiment that Garp tries for his mother's funeral, lets him experience how women feel and how they are treated in society. The following passage shows a cab driver's reaction to the public meltdown of a female political candidate when being informed about the passing of one of her greatest supporters, Jenny Fields:

> 'In my opinion,' the cabby said, 'it took something like that shooting to show the people that the woman couldn't handle the job, you know?' 'Shut up and drive,' Garp said. 'Look honey,' the cabby said. 'I don't have to put up with no *abuse*.' 'You're an asshole and a moron,' Garp told him, 'and if you don't drive me to the airport with your mouth shut, I'll tell a cop you tried to paw me all over,' […] 'If you don't slow down,' Garp said, 'I'll tell a cop you tried to rape me.' 'Fucking weirdo,' the cabby said, but he slowed down […] Garp put the money for the tip on the taxi's hood and one of the coins rolled into the crack between the hood and fender. 'Fucking *women*,' the cabby said. 'Fucking *men*,' said Garp, feeling – with mixed feelings – that he had done his duty to ensure that the sex war went on. (*Garp* 504, Irving's italics)

For a brief period of time, Garp gets to know what it feels like to walk in the shoes of a woman. His point of view changes and he realizes how women, not only in positions of power, but also in their everyday lives experience harassment and belittlement. This is emphasized when Garp boards his plane and has an unpleasant encounter with another man:

> As soon as he chose a seat, some man chose to sit beside him. […] 'Perhaps, when we're in the air,' the main said, knowingly, 'I could buy you a little drink?' His small, close together eyes were riveted on the twisted zipper of Garp's straining turquoise jump suit. Garp felt a peculiar kind of unfairness overwhelm him. He had not asked to have such and anatomy. (Irving, *Garp* 505)

This harassment and everyday sexism is new to Garp and he feels the urge to defend his newly acquired gender. The equal treatment women demanded during the sexual revolution is still only a concept and not part of Garp's reality. Furthermore, this incident portrays the superficiality of society.

Another aspect that questions the reader's perception of sexual identity is the never directly addressed asexuality of two characters. Jenny Fields, who always claimed that there is no need for sexual contact with a man, or for that matter a woman, does not show any signs of libido or sexual longing. Moreover, she does not even understand the concept of lust or longing, which becomes apparent when she discusses her biography with Garp.

> 'But that's what it *was*,' Jenny said. 'It was lust, all right.' 'It's better to say he was *thick* with lust,' Garp suggested. 'Yuck,' Jenny said. Another Grillparzer. It was the *lust* she didn't care for, in general. They discussed lust, as best they could. […] She did not understand the feeling and did not see how Garp could ever associate it with pleasure, much less with affection. (*Garp* 128-29, Irving's italics)

Furthermore, she wants to interrogate a Viennese prostitute on the topic of lust, especially male lust. "'Let's *talk* to her [the prostitute]," Jenny told Garp. 'I want to ask her about it.' 'About *what*, Mom?' Garp said. 'Jesus Christ.' 'What we were talking about,' Jenny said. 'I want to ask her about *lust*.' (*Garp* 133, Irving's italics)

The second character, who apparently does not have any sexual needs, is Bainbridge (Pooh) Percy, the youngest of the Percy children, and Garp's assassin. This assumption is primarily conveyed through her appearance. "Pooh was asexually attired, her haircut was similar to a popular and unisexual style, her features were neither delicate nor coarse. Pooh wore a U.S. Army shirt with sergeant stripes and a campaign button for the woman who'd hoped to be the new governor of the Sate of New Hampshire." (Irving, *Garp* 500) Also, Pooh Percy's hatred for men and additionally for everything associated with sexuality might have resulted from her misconception about the death of her sister and Garp's first crush, Cushie Percy:

"'He fucked my sister to *death*!' Pooh Percy wailed. How *this* perception of Garp had convinced her, Garp would never know- but convinced of it Pooh clearly was." (*Garp* 501, Irving's italics)

This passage portrays the origin of Pooh's hatred and distrust for men, which is concentrated on Garp, whom she directs her disgust and pain about her sister's death at.

An element that accompanies the question of gender and self-categorization of gender is the aspect of harassment and discrimination. In *The World According to Garp*, threats are not only proposed by angry feminists, but also by people degrading and defying Roberta's choice of lifestyle.

Roberta experiences discrimination throughout her life. The incident concerning her job search could equally be observed today:

"Jenny Fields was now supporting Roberta's case with the television networks, who, Roberta claimed, had secretly agreed not to hire her as a sports announcer for the football season.

Roberta's *knowledge* of football had not decreased one drop since all the estrogen, Jenny was arguing;" (*Garp* 227-28, Irving's italics)

Even though the book was released in the Seventies, still today there are hardly any professional active athletes who are openly homosexual and the entire topic is still not talked about in professional sports. Furthermore, Roberta receives hate mail that concerns Garp.

> Roberta promised to take Duncan to an Eagles game, but Garp was anxious about that. Roberta was a target figure; she had made some people very angry. Garp imagined various assaults and bomb threats on Roberta – and Duncan disappearing in the vast and roaring football stadium in Philadelphia, where he would be defiled by a child molester. (Irving, *Garp* 228)

This quote illustrates not only the fear but also the discrimination one has to experience when trying to accept a gender that exceeds the binary concept of male and female that is embodied in most western societies. The negativity directed towards LGBTQ youth leads to elevated self-harming, substance abuse and a decline in academic success. In addition, the attempted suicide rate amongst LGBTQ teenagers is significantly higher than that of heterosexual teenagers (cf. Grossman and D'Augelli 532-35, Mustanski and Liu and Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods and Goodman 489-92). The issue of discrimination and ignorance is also voiced very overtly, when a man from New York drives by Dog House Harbour, a safe haven for abused and conflicted women, and discriminates against Roberta and Garp. This quote illustrates the ignorance LGBTQ people are confronted with during their lives.

> 'Hey, you dildos!' he called to Garp and Roberta, who were sitting on the large porch swing, like old-fashioned lovers. 'Is this the whorehouse where you're keeping Laurel?' 'We're not exactly 'keeping' her,' Roberta said. 'Shut up, you big dyke,' said the New York man; […] 'I'm not a dyke,' Roberta said. 'Well, you're no vestal virgin either,' the man said. 'Where the fuck is Laurel?' […] 'Look, sweethearts,' the man said, to both Garp and Roberta. 'If Laurel doesn't get her ass out here, I'm going to clean house. What kind of fag joint is this, anyway? […] 'Look, you clowns,' the man said. 'I *know* what sort of douche bags hang out here. It's a big lesbian scene, right?' […] But it was Jenny Fields who met him in the doorway. 'Hello,' she said. 'I know who *you* are,' the man said. 'I recognize the dumb uniform. My Laurel's not your type, sweetie; she *likes* to fuck.' (*Garp* 391-93, Irving's italics)

This citation does not only portray the sexist nature of the man's comment but also his perception of gender and tolerance. He does not only belittle women but he clearly detests the way that Garp and Roberta, as he believes, choose to live.

Although, at the time Irving's book was written and published, the public was hardly aware of the term gender and the meaning behind. However, especially the character of Roberta is an ideal example for a struggle and identity crisis. She is on a quest to find a gender suitable for her. Roberta's character is therefore the only one in the book whose gender identity is

obviously in question, however a few other characters also do not consider their birth gender to coincide a hundred per cent with the way they feel.

6 *In One Person* – A (Bi-)sexual Awakening and Being Gay in the 80s

Being one of Irving's recent publications, *In One Person* deals with the coming of age of Bill and the discovery of his sexuality. The novel is narrated by the protagonist William, who tells the reader the story of his life as a bisexual man. The story begins in a similar way to Garp's story; a young boy who wants to become a writer was raised by his mother with an absent father, a World War II veteran. During the course of the story, Bill finds out more and more about his family's history and where his place in the world is.

In One Person features numerous characters who challenge the gender binary system of male and female. The language used to describe people of all genders is currently developing and the term *queer* is widely used as a general description of people who identify with something other than the ancient concepts of male, female and heterosexual love. The term *queer* originated in the early twentieth century and was used as a degrading term for homosexual men and women, until in 1990 the organization Queer Nation revitalized it and made it their own. The usage of the word *queer* still sparks controversy and it has not lost all negative connotations, but most argue that it captures the fluidity and the amount of the numerous sexualities and sexual identities present (Reis 5).

Bill's bisexuality is the focal point of the story and his struggles as a bisexual man growing up in pre-sexual revolution American are depicted. The term bisexuality first originated at the turn of the twentieth century, however, with the association that bisexual people were psychologically intersex. Freud was one of the first scientists to connect bisexuality with desire rather than with a psychological or physical state (Eisner 14-15). According to Angela Bowie, bisexuality is the attraction to both the male and the female sex. However, this definition excludes the possibility of being attracted to various other genders on the spectrum and does not include a degree of attraction or a specific form of attraction. Studies show that over 20% of men and almost 18% of women in the United States identify as bisexual and the technological progress has made it easier for people who feel attracted to more than one gender to interact with like-minded people (Bowie 7).

6.1 Images of the Sexual Grotesque

The book portrays the life story of William, whose sexual awakening was triggered by the librarian Miss Frost; a rather masculine woman with a private personality. "Miss Frost's second reference to me as *William* had given me an instant erection – though, at fifteen, I had a small penis and a laughably disappointing hard-on. (Suffice it to say, Miss Frost was in no danger of *noticing* that I had an erection.)" (*Person* 4, Irving's italics) The outer appearance of the grotesque figures is, as previously mentioned, a major indication of the grotesque. The physical abnormities of a person are of particular interest. Normally, the grotesque is indicated by the exaggeration of various body parts, however, the lack of size of Billy's penis is also part of the grotesque. The ridiculousness of it ties in with Bakhtin's element of laughter as well as Kayser's humor and preposterousness (Kayser 28-29).

Another element that is dominant in *The World According to Garp,* is speech impairment. Bill has problems pronouncing certain words, primarily the ones that have a sexual connotation for him or are connected to traumatic events from his life:

"I met Miss Frost in a library. I like libraries, though I have difficulty pronouncing the word – both the plural and the singular. It seems there are certain words I have considerable trouble pronouncing: nouns, for the most part – people, places and things that have caused me preternatural excitement, irresolvable conflict, or utter panic." (Irving, *Person* 1)

Bill, akin to various characters in *Garp* has to cope with speech impairments that keep him from formulating certain words, especially words connected to sexuality or sexual encounters and experiences that Bill has had.

The element of gender and genitals is very present in the grotesque literature and therefore, the mutability of Ariel's (Bill's) gender is both an image of the grotesque and an example of gender fluidity and gender identity.

> Richard had cast me as Ariel; in the dramatis personae for the play, Shakespeare calls Ariel 'an airy Spirit.' No, I don't believe that Richard was being particularly prescient in that Ariel's gender was 'polymorphous – more a matter of habiliment than anything organic.' […] I remember exactly how Richard had put it: 'Keeping the character of Ariel in the male gender is simpler than tricking out one more choirboy in women's garb.' […] 'I [Richard] believe that Ariel's gender is *mutable*.' (*Person* 56, Irving's italics)

This mutability, arguably part of Shakespeare's play but nevertheless a direct reflection of Bill's feelings, can be compared to Harpham's concept of the grotesque, which states that things that should not be combined are merged together (11). Ariel's gender is a mixture of genders and therefore grotesque. Furthermore, it illustrates Bill's struggle with his gender identity, since Bill being bisexual can be interpreted as being of mutable gender.

Another parallel to *The World According to Garp* is the presence of cross-dressers. Although, the novel *In One Person* features numerous cross-dressing scenes, not all of them are actually conducted by transsexuals. "Was Harry Marshall an actual transvestite? Was Harry more than the occasional cross-dresser? Today, would we call my grandpa a closeted gay man who only *acted* as a woman under the most permissible circumstances of his time?" (*Person* 49-50, Irving's italics) The tradition of cross-dressing within the grotesque is divided into two strands, the cross-dressers who do it to ridicule women and those who envy women. Grandpa Harry belongs, according to Bill, to the latter group.

> Given my grandfather's elevated status in our town, it was perhaps surprising that the First Sister Players always cast him in female roles. My grandpa was a terrific female impersonator; in our town's little playhouse, Harry Marshall had many (some would say *most*) of the leading women's roles. I actually remember my grandfather better as a woman than as a man. He was more vibrant and engaged in his onstage female roles than I ever saw him be in his monotonous real-life role as a mill manager and lumberman. (*Person* 11, Irving's italics)

The theme of cross-dressing is widely popular in the novel but almost all cross-dressers do it with the intention of being more feminine and not to ridicule the female gender. To what extent, for example in the previous quote, the audience sees cross-dressing as a ridiculing of the female gender, is not clear. However, for the protagonist himself, in this case Grandpa Harry, the masking of the male identity is not connected to comicality but to personal desire.

In One Person challenges the perceptions of gender through the existence of grotesque elements. In the following citation, Mrs. Kittredge, who only is known by the reader through her name and function as Kittredge's mother, is regarded as gender fluid.

"'I wonder if she [Mrs. Kittredge] waxes her face,' I [Bill] said to Elaine. 'Why would she have to?' Elaine asked me. 'I can imagine her with a mustache,' I said. 'Yeah, but with no hair on her chest, like him,' Elaine replied." (Irving, *Person* 55)

The supposed beard is not something usually attributed to the female body and Mrs. Kittredge is turned into a grotesque being. In the imaginations of Elaine and Bill, she is a mixture of male and female attributes.

The grotesque in its earliest forms was considered to be the merging of two different elements. In the following quotation, not only two different people are merged together but it is also portrayed as a hybridization between a man and a woman.

> What Elaine and I noticed, simultaneously, was that an unseen hand – it must have been Kittredge's – had cut off Mrs. Kittredge's face and glued it to Kittredge's body. There was Kittredge's mother in Kittredge's wrestling tights and singlet. And there was Kittredge's handsome face glued to his mother's beautiful and exquisitely tailored body. It was a funny photograph, but Elaine and I didn't laugh about it. (Irving, *Person* 233-34)

A male head on a female body does show the challenging of binary gender concepts and how the grotesque constantly tries to cross borders.

Martha Hadley is in some sense also not clearly female; she possesses both, male and female bodily features. Therefore, she challenges the classic gender binary and embodies a mixture of two concepts, of both male and female.

> Martha Hadley had a masculine kind of homeliness; she was thin-lipped but she had a big mouth, and big teeth. Her jaw was as prominent as Kittredge's, but her neck was long and contrastingly feminine; she had broad shoulders and big hands, like Miss Frost. Mrs. Hadley's hair was longer than Miss Frost's, and she wore it in a severe ponytail. Her flat chest never failed to remind me of Elaine's overlarge nipples and those darker-skinned rings around them – the areolae, which I imagined were a mother-daughter thing. (Irving, *Person* 104)

Martha's body is described as being a mixture of stereotypically male and stereotypically female attributes. Especially the male characteristics, the "big mouth" and "the big teeth", give the reader an image of the monstrous. Martha Hadley transgresses the boundaries between male and female, and this breaking of the traditional gender roles makes her grotesque. According to Kristeva, this addition of male attributes should emphasize the "absurdity of meaning." A woman is not supposed to have *typical* male features, neither visible, bodily nor intellectual (Kristeva 169). Furthermore, the mentioning of the large nipples ties in with Julia Kristeva's concept of the exaggerated and monstrous depiction of women in grotesque literature.

The following quotes also correlate with Kristeva's abjection theory. Tom Atkins is irritated by everything connected to the female body. He does not distinguish between the actual physical presence of female genitals or the mere description of them.

> That summer in Europe with Tom – when poor Tom became so insecure and felt so threatened, when all I really did was just look at girls and women – I remember saying, with no small amount of exasperation, 'For Christ's sake Tom – haven't you noticed how much I *like* anal sex? What do you think I imagine making love to a *vagina* would be like? Maybe like having sex with a ballroom!' Naturally, it had been the *vagina* word that sent poor Tom to the bathroom – where I could hear him *gagging*. (*Person* 123, Irving's italics)

The mere thought of the word *vagina* is enough for Tom to imagine the female body as something monstrous.

> And so I read aloud to Atkins – 'she was filled with lust, with rage, with hatred' – while he writhed; it was as if I were torturing him. When I read aloud that part where Emma is so enjoying the very idea of having her first lover […] I believed that Atkins was going to throw up in our bed. […] While Atkins went on vomiting in the bidet, I considered how the infidelity that poor Tom truly feared – namely, mine – was thrilling to me. (Irving, *Person* 278)

As a reaction to the female body, Tom starts vomiting. Although the bodily fluids are not directly connected to the female body, it is a reaction to the female body, an abjection of the feminine. Furthermore, the vagina, the sexual organ for fertility and procreation is the element that is made grotesque by Tom's reaction.

The following excerpt displays an omnipresent element when talking about the grotesque: the element of defecation.

> James Baldwin wrote excellent stuff, and he shocked me – most of all when Giovanni cries to his lover, 'You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love.' That phrase, 'the stink of love,' shocked me, and I made me feel so awfully naïve. What had I though making love to a boy or a man *might* smell like? Did Baldwin actually mean the smell of *shit*, because wouldn't that be the smell on your cock if you fucked a man or a boy? (*Person* 188-89, Irving's italics)

The text draws an immediate connection between sex and feces and therefore, the harmony and balance is disrupted. The sense of the *normal*, what is talked about, is shattered (Edwards and Graulund 65-71).

Defecation and urination are central elements especially in Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque. "This time, when she stood at the toilet and flipped up the wooden seat, Miss Frost didn't turn her back on me, or on Grandpa Harry. Her penis was not even a little hard, but she had a pretty big one – like the rest of her, except for her breasts." (Irving, *Person* 206) Additional to the grotesque concept of the visible existence of bodily fluids is the element of exaggeration. The mentioning of Miss Frost's big penis and generally big figure, again challenges the perceptions of male and female.

The following quote depicts incest, a theme that from a contemporary point of view is part of the *abnormal* and the grotesque.

> 'So I seduced him – it's not as if I had lots of other options,' Mrs. Kittredge told Elaine. 'The poor boy – he had to gain a little confidence *somewhere*!' […] Mrs. Kittredge matter-of-factly told Elaine that she'd slept with her son 'as much as he'd wanted to,' but only until Kittredge demonstrated a lack of fervor or a wandering sexual attention span. […] If Mrs. Kittredge had seduced her own son, so that he might gain a little confidence, did this explain why Kittredge felt so strongly that his mom was somewhat less (or maybe more) than motherly? (*Person* 157-58, Irving's italics)

Mrs. Kittredge seducing and sleeping with her son portrays the fluidity of grotesque elements and shows how over time, certain aspects gain and lose significance in terms of grotesque and absurd meaning. Incest might have been a common phenomenon during the antiquity, and sex between brother and sister as well as cousins was not only permitted but also supported.

However, in modern times such relationships are not only prohibited but also a social taboo. "If one could believe Mrs. Kittredge's story – if Kittredge's own mother had really had sex with him when she said she did – Kittredge had not been innocent for very long, and he'd definitely not been innocent by the time he attended Favorite River." (Irving, *Person* 230) Sleeping with one's own mother is, in the current historical context, regarded as abnormal and gross.

6.2 The Role of Women and Feminism

Having been published in 2012, issues regarding feminism and the women's rights movement are not as vocal as they had been in the Seventies. The novel therefore, has its fair share of empowered women and does not emphasize or depict the long road towards this position closer to equality .

The novel starts in a little amateur theatre in Vermont, and in line with this, the women in the novel are classified according to whether they are *leading lady material* or not.

> Alas, it was a source of some family friction that Grandpa Harry's only competition for the most demanding and rewarding female roles was his elder daughter, Muriel […] In Aunt Muriel's case, her impeccable enunciation made her entirely credible onstage; she was a perfect parrot, but a robotic and humorless one, and she was simply as sympathetic or unsympathetic as the character she played." (Irving, *Person* 11-12)

Muriel did not qualify as leading lady material, although she was willing to. Women considered more suitable for this role were Bill's mother Mary and the town's librarian Miss Frost. Both are victims of frequent gossip in the small town and although Bill's mother is a single mom, and Miss Frost does not have any plans to get married or share her life with a man, they are both regarded as strong enough to be leading lady material. "A tower of *sexual strength* stood before us; to Richard and me, Miss Frost was a woman with an *untamable* freedom – a certain lawlessness definitely accompanied her." (*Person* 35, Irving's italics)

Miss Frost's sexual presence is almost considered frightening by Bill and Richard. She, contrary to someone born with a female sex, had to make a conscious decision to become female, therefore, Miss Frost does regard it as a privilege to be a woman. She is who she wants to be and does everything to keep that freedom.

Even though most women in the novel are empowered and strong, there is a belittling by various representatives of the male gender and a feeling of superiority. "'The poor kid,' Kittredge had said to me, about Elaine. 'Such bad luck – her first time, and everything.' As had happened to me before, I was speechless." (Irving, *Person* 154) Kittredge does not in any way regard the unwanted pregnancy as his fault or his responsibility. Elaine being the woman, is the one with the problem; not him. On the contrary, Bill does not automatically victimize

Elaine, but, as illustrated in the last part of the quote, thinks Kittredge being the elder and more experienced of the two, carries even more responsibility than Elaine.

The classification of the Winthrop women as being dominant and possessive can be regarded as positive and negative. In the novel, the dominance of the wives over their husbands is regarded as something undesirable and ridiculous. However, being a strong and independent woman who knows what she wants, is not necessarily a bad thing. "Oh, those Winthrop girls, 'those Winthrop women,' as Miss Frost had labeled my mother and my aunt Muriel – giving them Nana Victoria's maiden name of Winthrop. (When it came to who had the balls in the Marshall family, the Winthrop genes were definitely the ball–carriers.)" (Irving, *Person* 244) In the context of the novel, this strong independency and willpower has turned into something negative. Feminism is not only about the empowerment of women but also about equality and in this novel, the equality aspect is not present. "'Richard is pussy-whipped, like all of you men married to those Winthrop women,' Miss Frost told him. […] 'That Bobby is a sweetheart, but he was always a pussy – even before he was pussy-whipped,' Miss Frost went on." (Irving, *Person* 205) In the novel there is no equality between the married couples. This is something that is criticized by Miss Frost, who, given her status as a man becoming a woman, is probably sensitive on the topic of equality.

6.3 Gender Issues and Sexual Identity

In One Person deals with the sexual journeys of several protagonists and includes numerous characters whose self-categorized genders differ from the common misconception of a binary male/female construction of gender (Peterson 412). Irving himself explained in an interview that he wanted to create something that mirrored the worldwide growing acceptance of sexual diversity and demonstrated the sexual repressiveness of the United States (Myers 86).

Bill has his first crushes on a man and a woman, almost simultaneously. However, in regard to his female crush, it is almost the stereotypical male things that he finds attractive. Miss Frost's androgyny and her *male* body are desirable for young William.

"Miss Frost was a woman with an erect posture and broad shoulders, though it was chiefly her small but pretty breasts that got my attention. In seeming contrast to her mannish size and obvious physical strength," (Irving, *Person* 3)

"Her […] hands, I had noticed, were both broader in the palms and longer in the fingers than Richard Abbott's hands, and – standing as they were, beside each other – I saw that Miss Frost's upper arms were more substantial than Richard's, and her shoulders were broader; she was taller than Richard too." (Irving, *Person* 32)

Bill, although he recognizes the apparent maleness of Miss Frost's body, does not put it into a category, he only feels his attraction to her.

The element of cross-dressing has already been discussed in the context of the sexual grotesque, but does however also apply to the issue of gender identity and self-categorization. In terms of cross-dressing, there are two previously mentioned motifs for cross-dressing. On the one side, cross-dressing for the entertainment of others and on the other side, cross-dressing for one's own pleasure. In the novel, there are various examples for cross-dressers, one of them being Grandpa Harry, who does live in a heterosexual relationship and even though he occasionally dresses as a woman, remains a man. Additionally in the novel, there are exclusively male to female transitions, which is the majority of sex changes in reality (Grossman and D'Augelli 528-29).

> Many years later, long after I'd left Favorite River Academy, at the height of my interest in she-males – I mean dating them, not being one – I was having dinner with Donna one night, and I told her about Grandpa Harry's onstage life as a female impersonator. 'Was it only onstage?' Donna asked. 'As far as I know,' I answered her, but you couldn't lie to her. […] Nana Victoria had been dead for more than a year when I first heard from Richard that no one could persuade Grandpa Harry to part with my grandmother's clothes. Eventually, I would come clean to Donna about Grandpa Harry spending his evenings in his late wife's attire […] I would leave out the part about Harry's cross-dressing adventures after he was moved to that assisted-living facility […] The other residents complained about Harry repeatedly surprising them in drag. (Irving, *Person* 61)

In the previous quote, Donna, a transgender woman, tries to place Grandpa Harry on the transgender spectrum, which is rather detailed and different for each individual. This is illustrated in one of Miss Frost's conversations with Bill. "'I have a lot at stake in being *Miss* Frost, William," she said. 'I did not acquire the *Miss* word accidentally.' […] 'My dear boy,' she said again. 'It doesn't matter how old I am – it's *what* I am. William, you don't know what I am, do you?'" (*Person* 173, Irving's italics) This passage gives a small insight into the difficulties that arise when the gender assigned at birth and the gender that one wants to become, differ.

The novel, set in the Fifties, provides the reader with an antiquated view on sexuality, especially on homosexuality. As previously mentioned, until the Seventies homosexuality was listed as a psychological illness. In the 1950s, this ideology was still popular and passed down to the younger generation (Shidlo, Schroeder and Drescher 1).

> I would hear the school physician, Dr. Harlow, invite us boys to treat the most common afflictions of our tender age aggressively. […] Dr. Harlow explained that he meant acne and 'an unwelcome sexual attraction to other boys or men.' […] In regard to those early indications of sexual yearnings-well […] 'There is a cure for these afflictions,' Dr. Harlow told us boys. (Irving, *Person* 22)

This is the first indication that Bill will struggle with his sexual identity not only while growing up but throughout his life. The adolescent boys are told that homosexuality is curable and since it is curable, it indirectly is considered as something wrong, even as a disease. Richard Abbot, Bill's soon-to-be stepfather, tries to assure Bill about the legitimacy of every crush.

> 'I wonder why I have sudden, unexplainable . . . *crushes*,' I said to him. 'Oh, crushes – you'll soon have many more of them,' Richard said encouragingly. […] Sometimes, the crushes are on the wrong people,' I tried to tell him. 'But there are no 'wrong' people to have crushes on, Bill,' Richard assured me. 'You cannot will yourself to have, or not to have, a crush on someone.' (*Person* 29, Irving's italics)

Throughout the course of Bill's growing up at the Favorite River Academy, he encounters many situations that make him question his sexuality and sexual preferences. "Yes, the French kissing was exciting, and (to this day) the touch of a woman's bare breasts is not something I am indifferent to; yet I believe my hard-on began when I imagined wearing Elaine's padded bra." (Irving, *Person* 93) Bill is still not sure what sexually attracts him and therefore exceeds the conventions regarded as normal by society. "Also, I [Bill] was mortally tiered; it is exhausting to be seventeen and not know who you are, and Elaine's bra was summoning me to bed." (Irving, *Person* 102) As previously mentioned, children's sexual identities are dependent and influenced by various factors; one being the similarity to the sexual identities of other children (cf. Tate 8). If one's sexuality does not overtly seem to coincide with the *norm,* constructed by society, confusion and shame often are the results. Furthermore, finding one's identity without knowing who you are and what is *wrong* with you is stressful and overpowering. This feeling of stress and anxiety is also visible in the following passage, in which Bill tries to find a solution by reading coming-of-age novels suggested by Miss Frost.

> Yes, having these disturbing attractions to other boys and men also made me afraid of what Baldwin calls 'the dreadful whiplash of public morality,' but I was much more frightened by the passage that describes the narrator's reaction to having sex with a woman – 'I was fantastically intimidated by her breasts, and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive.' (Irving, *Person* 188)

Bill has to find himself throughout the course of the book and he successfully achieves this not only through the literature provided by Miss Frost, but also by her guidance and her behavior. He manages to find himself, but not without help.

> I [Bill] liked to look like a gay boy – or enough like one to make other gay boys, and men, look twice at me. But I wanted the girls and women to wonder about me – to make them look twice at me, too. I wanted to retain something provocatively masculine in my appearance. […] I remembered, when we were rehearsing *The*

> *Tempest*, how Richard had said that Ariel's gender was 'mutable'; he'd said the sex of angles was mutable, too. […] I suppose I was trying to look sexually mutable, to capture something of Ariel's unresolved sexuality. […] There is no one way to *look* bisexual, but that was the look I sought. (*Person* 114, Irving's italics)

Bill finally knows who he wants to be and despite the hatred he experiences from others, he does manage to be who he wants to be in a time where this is not self-evident.

Furthermore, as a bisexual man, acceptance into the gay scene is not given and Bill has to fight for his place in the world.

> Not to mention the fact that, at the time, my gay friends and lovers *all* believed that anyone calling himself a bisexual man was really just a gay guy with one foot in the closet. […] Yet I knew I was bisexual […] But in my late teens and early twenties, I was holding back on my attractions to women […] Even at such a young age, I must have sensed that bisexual men were not trusted; perhaps we never will be, but we certainly weren't trusted then. (*Person* 118, Irving's italics)

Being bisexual is portrayed in the previous passage as almost a curse, because neither homosexuals nor heterosexuals fully accept this choice. Furthermore, bisexuality is often regarded as an unfinished process, a state of indecisiveness, which later progresses into a hetero- or homosexual identity. The first time the term bisexuality was utilized by bisexuals themselves and made their own, akin to the term *queer*, was in the 1970's on the back of the sexual revolution. Even though the gay and lesbian movements of the time still discriminated against bisexuals research suggests, that many bisexuals were active members of gay or lesbian movements (Eisner 16-19). According to Terry Evans there is an absence of a bisexual culture in the sense that there is no temporal, emergent and disputed cultural construction for bisexual people as, on the contrary, there is one for gay or straight people. Evans claims that there is a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, which leaves no space for bisexual men. As a result, bisexual men, akin to Bill, try to fit in either one of these categories and cultures (94-106). However, Bill later finds his place as a bisexual man who refuses to be labeled or put into a category. "'My dear boy,' I said sharply to young Kittredge, […] 'My dear boy, please don't put a *label* on me – don't make me a *category* before you get to know me!'" […] this was what I said to young Kittredge, the cocksure son of my old nemesis and forbidden love?" (*Person* 425, Irving's italics) Bill has found his place and gender identity, without feeling the urge to categorize himself or position himself on the gender spectrum. Bill moves in both spheres, the heterosexual culture and the homosexual culture, and although the acceptance still is not fully given today, he manages to be a member of each.

Bill, still influenced by the homophobic indoctrination of his school's physician, despite being glad is also slightly worried about the apparent seriousness of crushes. His sexual coming of

age is accompanied by many crushes on people of various genders and he, for himself, has to decide whether they are legitimate or not. During his time at the all-boys' academy, Bill realized not only his growing affection for people of the same gender, but also the negative reactions and hurtful comments of his colleagues. Furthermore, Bill is still convinced that he has crushes on the wrong people.

> I [Bill] developed a distant infatuation with a striking-looking boy on the wrestling team; it wasn't only that he had a beautiful body. (I say 'distant,' because initially I did my best to keep my distance from him – to keep as far away from him as I could get.) Talk about a crush on the wrong person! And it was not my imagination that every other word out of many of the older boys' mouths was 'homo' or 'fag' or 'queer'; these purposely hurtful words seemed to me to be the worst things you could say about another boy at the prep school. (Irving, *Person* 47)

Discrimination, verbally and physically is still a worldwide problem, not only, but primarily and frequently in an educational environment. This victimization of LGBTQ students does affect their behavior and academic achievements (Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw 47). Even though Bill is hurt by the comments, he knows whom he finds attractive and later concludes that he could not have been the only one who was attracted to same sex. "Was I [Bill] the only boy at the all-boys' school who found that the wrestling matches gave me a homoerotic charge? I doubt it, but boys like me kept their heads down." (Irving, *Person* 47) This picture, given by Irving as a reflection of the life of queer students in the Fifties and Sixties, does not considerably differ from today's everyday school life. Gay teenagers are much more likely to self-harm, to abuse substances and conduct risky sexual behavior than their heterosexual classmates. Furthermore, studies show that LGBTQ students are universally victimized and bullied in school when they come out (Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw 46-47).

Bill's attraction was almost solely towards transgender people and not towards cross-dressers, since he preferred the effort put into transformation.

> My [Bill's] attraction to transsexuals was pretty specific. (I'm sorry, but we didn't use to say 'transgender' – not until the eighties.) Transvestites never did it for me, and the transsexuals had to be what they call 'passable' – one of few adjectives I still have trouble with, in the pronunciation department. Furthermore, their breasts had to be natural – hormones were okay, but no surgical implants – and, not surprisingly, I preferred small breasts. (Irving, *Person* 62)

In terms of gender identity and self-categorization, Bill expected a certain steady gender identity also from his partners. The choice to not artificially alter one's breasts and remain technically a man is a choice each individual has to make for him or herself and is a major step in terms of accepting one's chosen gender.

For Bill, who fell in love with the person and not with the *woman,* Miss Frost's revelation of previously being a man came as a shock.

> In that year, Miss Frost – even as a boy – was unmistakable. She was seated front-row center, because 'A. Frost' was noted as the wrestling captain in '35; just the initial 'A.' was used in the captions under the team photo. […] I spotted her broad shoulders and big hands as easily as I doubtless would have if she'd been dressed and made up as a girl. […] I guessed that Aunt Muriel must have remembered Albert Frost, the handsome wrestling-team captain – Class of '35 – and that it was *as a boy* that Muriel meant Miss Frost '*used to be very good-looking*.' (Albert certainly was.) (*Person* 196, Irving's Italics)

Bill confronts Miss Frost with the fact that she was born male and criticizes her for not telling him. Although Bill himself is not sure about his sexuality, figuratively speaking, he puts Miss Frost *in a box*. A way of conceptualizing this complex topic of sexual identity, however, is to say that it is not possible to categorize someone without knowing the person.

> 'You're a *man*, aren't you?' I asked her [Miss Frost]. 'Goodness me, what makes a man?' she asked. 'Isn't Kittredge a man? You want to kiss him. Don't you still want to kiss me, William?' […] 'You're a *transsexual*!' I told her. 'My dear boy,' Miss Frost said sharply. 'My dear boy, please don't put a *label* on me – don't make me a *category* before you get to know me!' (*Person* 197-98, Irving's italics)

The element of labeling and of self-categorization is difficult to grasp and different for each individual. Bill's initial reaction is typical of the time, but this has changed for the better recently. Teenagers nowadays are much more aware of the topic of gender identity and studies show that there are more queer teenagers than ever (Savin-Williams 1-3). However, this does not mean that there is no discrimination against LGBTQ youth. The aspect of being labeled by someone other than oneself also affects Billy, whose relationship with the transgender town librarian becomes public after his family finds out about the incident.

> If those boys had heretofore thought of me as a miserable faggot, what were they to make of my apparent friendship with Kittredge? And now there was this story about the transsexual town librarian. Okay, so she was some guy in drag; she wasn't a *real* woman, but she *presented* as a woman. Maybe more to the point, I had acquired an undeniable mystique – if only to the Bancroft butt-room boys. Don't forget: Miss Frost was an *older* woman, and that goes a long way with boys – even if the older woman has a penis! (*Person* 218, Irving's italics)

Bill's fear of the reaction of his school colleagues and his anticipation of their reaction shows how unsure he still is about his sexuality. Furthermore, it also illustrates how important sex and sexual relationships are for teenagers.

> "I'd climbed the stairs to the second floor of Bancroft when Kittredge suddenly swept me into his arms; at a dead run, Kittredge carried me up the third flight of stairs and into the hall of the dormitory. Worshipful boys gaped at us from the open doorways to their rooms; I could feel their sad envy, a familiar and pathetic longing. […] 'Whereas

> *this* young man, Trowbridge,' Kittredge continued, still holding me in his strong arms, 'this young man has not only challenged the public image of gender roles. *This* nooky master, *this* poontang man,' Kittredge cried, jouncing me up and down, 'this *stud* has actually porked a *transsexual*! Do you have any idea, Trowbridge, what transsexual snatch even is?' (*Person* 219, Irving's italics)

Kittredge, even though he bullies and verbally abuses the younger students, apparently is very gender-sensitive. Therefore his masculine and confident behavior might result from his own insecurities and his personal search and struggle to find his own sexual identity. Which is later made clear when it is revealed he is a transgender person, himself.

Even though Bill's bisexuality that he has learned (at least to some extent) to accept, is not obvious from the outside, he experiences discrimination for the first time from people that do not know him at all. "I met Tom's parents at graduation. His father took a despairing look at e and refused to shake my hand; he didn't *call* me a fag, but I could feel him thinking it." (*Person* 264, Irving's italics) His best friend's father refuses to shake his hand; an experience that repeats itself when he meets other parents of his classmates. "Delacorte introduced me to his mom. 'This is the guy who was *going to be* Lear's Fool,' Delacorte began. When the pretty little woman in the sleeveless dress and the straw hat also declined to shake my hand, I realized that my being the original Lear's Fool was probably connected to the story of my having had sex with the transsexual town librarian." (*Person* 264, Irving's italics) Bill is not accepted by his school friends' parents, even though it becomes clear later in the novel that not only Tom Atkins, but also Delacorte, are both gay.

Homophobic comments and attitudes are visible throughout the course of the book and are formulated in various ways. "'You will not speak to that *creature*, Billy,' my mom said." (*Person* 268, Irving's italics) Discrimination is not unfamiliar to Miss Frost either and so she warns Bill about the cruel people out there in the real world. "'You're going out in world, William,' Miss Frost said matter-of-factly. 'There are homo-hating assholes everywhere.'" (Irving, *Person* 271) Although, Bill never really experiences physical violence against his person, Miss Frost and the Academy's wrestling coach teach him a little self-defense.

As previously mentioned, the element of incest is not only part of the sexual grotesque but in this case also ties in with Kittredge's mother seducing him so won't turn out gay.

> Mrs. Kittredge *had* seduced her son, but no real or imagined lack of confidence on the young Kittredge's part was ever the reason. Kittredge had always been very confident – even (indeed, most of all) about wanting to be a *girl*. His vain and misguided mother had seduced him for the most familiar and stupefying reasoning that many gay or bi young men commonly encounter – if not *usually* from their own mothers. Mrs. Kittredge believed that all her little boy needed was a positive sexual experience with a woman – that would surely bring him to his senses! (*Person* 373, Irving's italics)

This kind of conversion therapy and many others are still practiced today, often by clerics and self-proclaimed doctors. The causes are often severe and lead to long-term psychological damage of the victims. In conversion therapy, homosexuality is treated as an illness and various tools are used in attempt to cure this, such as religious faith healing, aversive behavioral conditioning and psychoanalysis either in isolation or in combination. Without doubt, the aim to transgress a homosexual being into a heterosexual is impossible and the damage that is caused to the patients who then have to adopt a gay or lesbian identity is enormous (Shidlo, Schroeder and Drescher 1-2).

7 Comparison

Pursuing a career in literature for over half a decade, John Irving has experienced numerous changes in politics, society and technology. These changes, whether somehow anticipated by him or having influenced him, are represented in most of his novels and present the reader with an arguably fictional but nevertheless to some extent accurate picture of the zeitgeist.

Both of the discussed novels were published at a time where gender norms were questioned and society was in collective uproar concerning either the treatment of the sexes or the existence and acknowledgment of more than two genders. *The World According to Garp* was published a few years after the end of the sexual revolution, whose participants demanded free sex and equality. *In One Person* was released recently, at a time where gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues gained visibility and acknowledgment.

In terms of feminism, the two novels differ greatly, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the achievements of the sexual revolution. However, at the time *Garp* was published, women's rights had just outgrown the developmental stage and slowly starting to become established. This is mirrored in the novel, since almost all of the characters are concerned with women's rights. Even though the word *feminism* is proscribed, the issues the characters are dealing with can be classified as feminist issues. It can be argued that the emphasis on women's rights in the novel is a reflection of the revolutionary era in which it was written. *In One Person* is distinguishably different in regard to feminist issues. Albeit, the women in the Irving's bisexual manifesto are also strong and independent, there is no specific emphasis on this. The women in *In One Person* do not have to constantly defend themselves or fight for their rights and against discrimination. Although equality is still not fully achieved, feminism and the activists of the previous decades have provided an environment far less discriminating and hostile towards women. According to gender studies professor Therese Frey Steffen, women's studies reached a peak in the 1990's and the concept of how

to deal with technological and sociological changes had to be revised. Gender studies as a new field of analysis emerged and scientists investigated power and knowledge relations with regard to gender (71-78).

Gender identity and sexual orientation are present in both of the discussed novels, however, *In One Person* has its focus on almost exactly this topic. Gender identity in *Garp* is almost exclusively dealt with inside the storyline of the transsexual football player Roberta. It can be argued that this focus on a single character, who is the only one openly questioning her sexuality, can be traced back to the origination process of the novel during and shortly after the sexual revolution. As previously mentioned, the sexual revolution for LGBTQ people came after the sexual revolution of the Sixties and is still in progress. The first step towards acceptance of the LGBTQ community took place during the sexual revolution, but only on the margins. Therefore, Roberta as the only representation of a transgender person, on the one hand shows that the presence of LGBTQ people and marginal groups was acknowledged by Irving's audience, but on the other hand also shows that LGBTQ people were seen as a minority that indeed existed but without greater influence. *In One Person* portrays the lives of numerous members of the LGBTQ community and might be representative for the current change that is visible in society nowadays. The bisexual protagonist is only one of the many characters who is questioning his sexuality and adapting his gender and sexual orientation towards his own categories. Having fixed gender categories in *Garp*, *In One Person* does move away from labels and presents the reader with a world where gender is mutable and self-chosen. Furthermore, acceptance of the various genders grows throughout the course and the timeline of the novel and acknowledgment of the non-heterosexual characters emerges.

Lastly, the aspect of the sexual grotesque will be briefly analyzed. Grotesque elements are unique in themselves and therefore a comparison between the two novels is impossible. Similarities and reoccurring patterns in either novel are the speech impairments that in both cases are connected to sexuality; whether as protest against discrimination, or as a protection mechanism towards a sexual identity that is not accepted in society. As a result, the characters become grotesque. The lack of vital body parts and functions is especially visible in *Garp* and these mutilations are almost solely concentrated on sexuality. The last grotesque aspect that is present in both novels is the element of cross-dressing that is not only part of the grotesque tradition, but also strongly connected to gender identity. *The World According to Garp* and *In One Person*, both share a theme of the comical, entertaining cross-dressing, with Garp as a woman at his mother's funeral and Grandpa Harry as a woman on stage. Although on both

occasions the initial thought is not to ridicule woman, especially in *Garp* there is no intention of becoming or wanting to be a woman behind it.

8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the grotesque despite being a literary concept and part of literature since the beginning of literacy, is still of great relevance and can be observed in various recent publications and popular culture. Sexual grotesque in particular, even though it is not as extensively researched as the grotesque in combination with horror or fear, does appear frequently throughout modern literature. To a vast extent it appears in the novels by John Irving, whose characters often display eccentric behavior and lie at the border of what Irving believes to be conventional opinion (cf. Myers 85). In the *World According to Garp* grotesque elements are omnipresent, and not only characters but, primarily situations, are clearly grotesque. The grotesque elements portrayed in *In One Person* are primarily connected to the sexual identity of the protagonists rather than situations. However, Irving's postmodern sexual grotesque does not necessarily create horror and fear but is accompanied by a feeling of unfamiliarity and discomfort. The norm is not challenged by horrific details but by sexual situations that force the reader to cringe and question normality. Furthermore, it requires the reader to define his or her own version of normality. The sexual grotesque elements that are analyzed and discussed in this thesis are implemented in the current historical context and therefore might only seem grotesque to the contemporary reader. This emphasizes the dependence of the grotesque on the historical context the text was written in and the historical context in which the reader is located. Both novels present the reader with various sexual grotesque scenes and elements and show that the sexual grotesque is often connected to LGBTQ issues. An example of this is the almost-omnipresent aspect of cross-dressing. This, primarily male to female cross-dressing has a long tradition within the grotesque as well as in the LGBTQ scene. Irving addressed LGBTQ issues in numerous novels and as the LGBTQ community's rights and fight for equality progresses, Irving's characters and storylines simultaneously progress. While in *The World According to Garp,* women's rights, feminism and consensual sex dominated the storyline, a topic very present right after the sexual revolution that *In One Person* is more concerned with is the growing acceptance of the LGBTQ community - with less concern over feminist issues. In both books the sexual revolution with its accomplishments and influences is mentioned numerous times and it is clear, especially for the novel *In One Person* that the sexual revolution had an impact on the storyline and the character development. This is visible with regard to the aspect of feminism,

which in *Garp*, a novel released shortly after the climax of the sexual revolution, is very present and extensively dealt with. Whereas, *In One Person*, released in 2012 is less, almost not concerned with feminism. Nevertheless, to what extend this is a result or a direct reflection of the sexual revolution is unclear but at least represents a certain zeitgeist.

Irving is well known not only for his eccentric characters that find themselves in elusive and almost unbelievable situations but also for his gender challenging literature. The analyzed novels display a wide array of sexual grotesque elements often connected with gender issues and feminism; issues that are influenced by the collective memory of a generation.

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10 Appendix

Zusammenfassung Deutsch

Das sexuell Groteske ist eine Kombination aus grotesken Elementen und Konzepten, die sich mit Aspekten der Sexualität, Gender und dem Körper beschäftigen. Der Ursprung des Grotesken findet sich im Italien des 15. Jahrhunderts und schon dort ist es oft im Zusammenhang mit dem Körper zu beobachten. Zusätzlich stehen Körperflüssigkeiten und für das zeitgenössische Publikum *abnormale* sexuelle Aspekte im Zusammenhang mit dem Grotesken. In der Postmodernen Literatur hat sich das Groteske einem Wandel unterzogen, neben Einsamkeit und Abgrenzung, sind es vor allem die monströsen Elemente, die als grotesk bezeichnet werden. Zudem wird das gesellschaftliche Verständnis von Normalität immer weiter ausgedehnt und die Frage, ob das *Abnormale* das neue *Normal*e ist, drängt sich auf. Unmögliches und Unvorstellbares sind Elemente, die John Irving in allen seinen Romanen verwendet. Diese überschreiten häufig die Vorstellung von Normalität seiner Leser und Leserinnen. In dieser Arbeit werden die Aspekte Gender, sexuelle Identität und Gender Fluidität im Bezug auf das Groteske analysiert. Sowohl *The World According to Garp*, als auch *In One Person* enthalten unzählige sexuell groteske Element, Charaktere und Szenen, in denen verschiedene Sexualitäten und sexuelle Identitäten porträtiert werden. Der Roman *The World According to Garp* erschien kurz nach der Sexuellen Revolution in Amerika und das Thema der Gleichstellung der Frau ist vorrangig gegenüber etwaigen sexuellen Identitätsproblemen der breiten Masse. *In One Person* wurde erst kürzlich publiziert und beschäftigt sich eingehend mit der Frage nach der sexuellen Identität des Individuums. In der folgenden Arbeit werden Feminismus, das sexuell Groteske, Gender und sexuelle Identität untersucht, sowie in Bezug auf ihre Häufigkeit und Intensität in den beiden Romanen analysiert und verglichen. Zusätzlich werden diese Konzepte in Verbindung mit den Ereignissen der Sexuellen Revolution gesetzt und es wird versucht, eine Verbindung zwischen den kulturellen Veränderungen und der literarischen Umsetzung herzustellen.

Abstract

The sexual grotesque is a combination of grotesque elements and concepts dealing with the aspects of sexuality, gender and the body. Having its origins in fifteenth century Italy, the grotesque often appears in combination with the body, body fluids and *abnormal* gender aspects, at least to the contemporary reader's mind. In postmodern literature, the grotesque has reached a point at which the abnormal is becoming the norm, alienation and loss are portrayed as the grotesque as well as the monstrous elements of the body. Therefore, the question arises whether the *abnormal* should be understood as the new *normal*? John Irving's books contain numerous elements bordering on the impossible and unimaginable and often exceeding the reader's common conception of *normality.* In this thesis, the elements of gender, sexual identity and gender fluidity are analyzed with regard to the grotesque. *The World According to Garp* and *In One Person*, both contain various characters and other elements displaying sexual grotesqueries. Furthermore, a difference between pre- and post American sexual revolution novels is clearly visible within the storyline of the novels, since the characters and their actions can be connected to the innovations and changes brought to society by the revolution of the sixties. In this thesis, I will compare the aspects of the sexual grotesque, feminist issues and gender in Irving's novels *The World According to Garp* and *In One Person* and relate them to the American sexual revolution.