Ambivalent portrayal of feminism in John Irving's
The World According to Garp

Diploma thesis

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Declaration:

I declare that I wrote this thesis by myself and that I used only the sources listed in the bibliography section.

Brno, March 2015               Bc. Kristýna Brabcová
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1. Introduction

One of the most commonly repeated themes in John Irving's novels are gender issues. He focuses on several feminist issues, which are portrayed in a compelling and unique way, and often might even confuse the reader with the actual meaning. Thus, when reading one of Irving's most famous novels *The World According to Garp* (1987), it is but natural that these contradictory feminist features may be observed within this novel.

This thesis deals with the analysis of the actual perception of feminist issues described by Irving in the novel *The World According to Garp*. Irving shows a certain amount of ambivalence in perceiving feminism as such, thus it provides the reader with more options on how to understand what the author meant to portray. This thesis attempts to provide a portrayal of feminism presented by Irving throughout the novel, and also approaches Irving's intentions to present feminism in an ambivalent way. In the theoretical part of this thesis is a necessary illustration of feminist history. It is primarily focused on the period of the 1940s until the 1980s which is the setting of the novel, as it is essential to learn the circumstances for women in society at the time in order to understand in what way are Irving's feminist topics ambivalent. Also, the major feminist authors and their views on feminist challenges and changes at the time of the second wave of feminism are included. In addition to the theoretical part, the author of the novel is depicted with the details of his life, inspirations for his writings, and last but not least, some of his most famous writings with similar gender issues are depicted and compared. A short description of the novel *The World According to Garp* is also included and some of the major situations from the book are described in order to link to the analysis section of the thesis. As the last subchapter of the theoretical part, the postmodern features in the novel *The World According to Garp* are introduced in order to understand some of the bizarre themes in the novel.

Major part of the thesis is dedicated to the analysis of Irving's perception of feminism as such, and his intentions to present feminist's issues in an ambivalent and contradictory way. The analysis grounds on the theoretical part of the paper and focuses on positive and negative feminist topics presented on the main characters of the novel. Other subchapters of the analysis part contribute to making the analysis complete by maintaining the ambivalent feminist issues in the major themes, such as the Perception of women; Partnership; Men as violators, women as victims; Sexual themes and suspects; Women in sisterhood, and Extreme
views. The discoveries of the paper are further concluded.
2. Perception of women from the 1940s to the 1980s

Feminist issues will be described fairly frequently in this thesis, thus clear depiction of the period after the end of the first wave of feminism and the beginning of the second wave of feminism is included, since the setting of the novel analyzed is the 1940s to the 1980s. The historical circumstances for women are essential for the theoretical part of this work. Therefore, prior to the study itself, the historical background needs to be clarified.

2.1. From housewives to men's labour in the 1940s

At first, it is essential to refer to the period after the first wave of feminism finished and the new wave was about to start. It is crucial to understand the circumstances in society for women living at his period of time in order to understand the ambivalence of the feminist issues Irving presents in the novel *The World According to Garp*.

As the author of the book *Rosie and Mrs. America* Catherine Gourley says, one of the most important changes for women came during World War II, in which United States became part after the Pearl Harbor bombing. Until then, women were in the roles of housewives, not even being able to find a job for themselves since they were generally considered as mothers and house cleaners. Moreover, most women were proud of being housewives, and they believed this was the place where they were supposed to be. However, after the Pearl Harbor bombing most American men had to leave to participate in the War. Suddenly, the US government needed women to work, since there were not enough men in the workforce. The Government had to create a plan on how to convince the US industry to employ women in the first place, and secondly they needed to convince women to want to work. The Government created a new media image in order to convince and support all women who had to enter the workforce, which was called “*Rosie the Riveter.*” This image was supposed to present a “tireless and patriotic woman” who would build airplanes and warships, do secretary jobs in government offices, or women who “engineered trains, flew airplanes, and planted Victory Gardens.” (4) According to Gourley, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, American women managed a great achievement by gaining significant independence. Not only could they now graduate from colleges or vote, they could also join professions which were before considered for men only. Thus women began working in
According to Gail Collins, who wrote the book *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present* (2009), when men returned from the War and required their positions back, women were reluctant to leave their jobs, even though they were supposed to give the jobs back to men as patriotic duty. Women discovered a certain self-awareness and consciousness, and simply did not want to return to the point of being home and serving the children, husband and taking care of the household. Once women joined the workforce, they did not wish to leave anymore, even though they were no longer wanted. (Collins)

### 2.2. Great changes in 1960's

According to Gail Collins, the great change for women happened with the Civil Rights Act in 1964, when Howard W. Smith added the word “sex” to the Civil Rights Act, which forbade discrimination based on “sex, race in hiring, promoting and firing.” (Collins) It was argued by critics that Howard did it to “kill the entire bill.” (Collins) Martha Wright Griffiths, who was the only woman lawyer in the house at the time, grabbed hold of this and led the effort to keep the word “sex” on the bill, and got it passed. “Title VII of the act created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to implement the law.” (Collins) No women in the whole country at the time were thinking that there should be a change in the law by adding the word “sex” and prohibiting discrimination because this was just way too far to imagine. They were used to the fact that it was legal for employers to say that the job was not suitable for women, or that women could not do the job as good as men did, that women could not be in management positions because it was not good for the men, or simply that if women were to get jobs in their companies it would always be lower level jobs without the possibility of professional growth. However, once it was in the law and women realized that the government was not planning on enforcing that part of the law, they established the National Organizations which fought for change, and this is when the greatest advances for women
began. Another great change that appeared was when the birth control pill came to the market. As Gail Collin says, until then women did not apply for studies because they were getting married at very young age and got pregnant right after getting married, therefore for women it was not possible to start a career with children. When the birth control pill was introduced, women started having more possibilities and could take the time to start a career. However, the 1960’s was still a period of time where women were mostly housewives, taking care of the whole family and in some cases having a part-time job if needed to support the family. In most middle class families it was not necessary that both wife and husband would work because the living costs were cheap and it was enough to live in a single income family. There was still a very low number of women in the positions of lawyers, doctors, managers or for instance women were never even the main characters in TV shows or movies. There were generations of women whose parents could afford to send them to college even if they were not planning on having a great career. The reason their families saw behind sending their daughters to college was to find a husband with a degree, since the goal was to get married to a solid man who would support the family. Those women attended the same classes as men, they were perhaps interested in the same things, however, when they got out of the college they were supposed to become housewives, while their husbands got the jobs they could have had as well which made many of the women feel trapped. Thus women were frustrated with something they couldn’t name, just as Betty Friedan described in her book *Feminine Mystique* (1963), that these feelings of frustration meant women felt the need to have a job and to feel fulfilled and satisfied. Women had choices though, and to actually become a full-time housewife meant to choose a management role because they were left alone, running things by themselves, while the jobs in the outside world were either that they had to obey some woman because they were domestic or obey some man because they were in a factory. Thus, there were no visions of a “dream” job for women at the time, and that is the reason why being a housewife was considered a reasonable and empowering job for women. (Collins)
What they are describing as unseen self-destruction in man, is, I think, no less destructive in women who adjust to the feminine mystique, who expect to live through their husbands and children, who want only to be loved and secure to be accepted by others, who never make a commitment of their own society or to the future, who never realize their human potential. The adjusted, or cured ones who live without conflict or anxiety in the confined world of home have forfeited their own being; the others, the miserable, frustrated ones, still have some hope. For the problem that has no name, from which so many women in America suffer today, is caused by adjustment to an image that does not permit them to become what they now can be. (Friedan 300)

Collins claims that the biggest changes for women happened between 1964 and 1972. This short period of time meant abolishing discrimination of women in jobs, education, in credit, congress passed the equal rights amendment, they passed a law which provided better quality for early childhood education for all the children of working women which was then vetoed. (Collins)

2.3. Women in the late 1970s and 1980s

According to Friedan, many changes were happening throughout years and especially in the late 1970s and 1980s, which was the period of modern changes and the new ways of perceiving women. The trend of women as housewives was disappearing, the roles were changing, women were employed on higher level positions, and they began being ambitious. On the other hand, men began staying home with children, while their wives were working on their careers. There was a higher number of women studying universities, the difference between men's and women's housework tasks disappeared, salaries for women were getting higher and closer to a man’s wage, women could decide to have children later and there were women having their first child in their 40's, one parent families started appearing and women were not judged for being single mothers anymore, and many more great changes which were slowly developing throughout years and were finally becoming reality as society was also becoming more liberal. (6)

In the near past which might seem as ancient history, women were still obeying men's rules, in the role of being mothers and housewives, and doing the best they could in order to
provide a satisfying home environment for both their husbands and their children. Women simply did not realize their own identity; they did not have their own opinions, and did not express their desired needs and social status. The generation in the late 1970s and 1980s began considering women's individuality as something natural and ordinary. The women of the new generation began having different problems, which were for instance too many concerns about their jobs, having to decide whether to have children or whether to wait for later or not to have them at all, or how to live off with two incomes or with one only. Women simply put too much on their shoulders, which was only proof of how far the revolution of the previous women’s generation influenced the younger generations, and it also meant that women were stepping into another phase. (Friedan 8)

Friedan says that along with these many changes, several unforeseen issues were arising. With the introduction of birth control, and the possibility to choose whether motherhood is what women wanted or what they could afford, came up a lot of questions regarding the economic situation of families. Women had to often go soon after delivering a child back to the workplace, since one income was not enough for the family and women needed to support as well. In comparison to the 1960's when there was about one fifth of mothers employed, in 1980's there was more than half of all mothers employed. (12)

As Friedan states, even though the majority of people were still getting married in the United States during the 1980’s, they were also getting divorced often and the average of child birth decreased. Also, there were many more unmarried people which was a new minority of about 10% of overall population, and that was a circa 100% increase compared to the last decade. Additionally, there was a 100% increase of single householders, where nine out of ten were women. In 25% of households people did not have children at all. The number of couples without children increased about 89% and divorce rate was of 50%. The decision whether to get married and stay in the marriage was based also on existential and economical questions, since the poorest families were single mother families, and right after families led by men, so single income families. However, women still earned about 59% less than men at the time. (12)
3. Feminist challenges and changes throughout history

It is also essential to present the major second wave feminist authors in order to look deeper into their views and opinions, thus understand the major perspectives of the second wave of feminism. Hence, feminist’s issues will be recognized.

One of the first tasks for the second wave theorists was to form evidence of considerable oppression towards women and create theories to justify that oppression. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most famous feminist authors, created a detailed analysis of women's oppression in the book *The Second Sex* (1949). According to de Beauvoir, women were “exhorted to be women, remain women, become women.” (13) Beauvoir claims that many American women were disposed to think that there was no longer a place for “woman as such.” (14) “If a backward individual still takes herself for a woman, her friends advise her to be psychoanalyzed and thus get rid of this obsession.” (14) Beauvoir says that a statement such as women and men are both equal human beings is just abstract. She asserts that in the time women intended to wish they were born men, which certainly did not lead to men’s consideration and respect. (14) “The attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity.” (14) The major concern that Beauvoir has is the actual reason why women must face the question “what is a woman”? (14) Moreover, the fact that she even asks this question is “significant” according to her words. (14) A man would not ever write a book on the situation of the human male. She states that “a man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong.” (15) Women are limited in their own nature; men think their bodies are a “direct and normal connection with the world.” (15) “The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,” said Aristotle. (15) Also, as another example, de Beauvoir depicts a sentence pronounced by St Thomas who said that a woman is an “imperfect man,” an “incidental” being. (15) This comes from Genesis where Eve is created from a “supernumerary bone” of Adam. (15) Beauvoir claims that a woman appears as a sexual being to the male. For a man, woman is sex – “absolute sex, no less.” (16) A woman is generally depicted and differentiated referring to man not referring to her. “She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (16) She states that throughout time there had been categories which

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¹ “The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view.” (Beauvoir 16)
dominated another completely for some period of time. Usually these groups very unequal in numbers – the majority dominated minorities. However, women are not a minority like African-Americans or Jews; there are just as many women as men in the world. (17) Within the whole history of mankind, women have always been subordinated to men, thus their dependency did not arise from a historical event or a social change – it just “occurred”. (18) Beauvoir states that a woman has always been dependent on a man, and they never shared equality. (19) In the 1940s when the book was being written and published, Beauvoir said that women were still handicapped; however, the situation was starting to change. At the time, legal status was nowhere the same for woman and man and very often it was to her disadvantage. Moreover, even though her rights were already legally recognized the long-lasting habits prevented from respecting women fully. Also, in the economic sphere it still often happened that men received better jobs, higher wages and had more possibilities to success. On the other side, women were often happy with their role of the Other. (19) They would receive the material protection and the “moral justification” of their existence. (20) Beauvoir states that if women want to receive respect and understanding, they must get over the historical roots which mainly speak about man as a Creator, Christ, The God, Adam, and woman as the secondary human being. “We must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.” (22)

In the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the United States, women were still trying to be perfect wives and mothers but they were not fully satisfied, not knowing the reason why. The family and household were the highest priorities for women at the time, however, most of them felt an odd dissatisfaction, struggled with many feelings and psychological problems which they did not understand. There was a great change in the lives of many American women, men and families thanks to a book that was written by feminist and women’s rights activist Betty Friedan. The book *Feminine Mystique* (1963) launched a revolution which had fundamental impact on culture, thinking and lives of all American women at the time. Betty Friedan questioned the very basis of the problems and highlighted concerns which were important for all women to realize. In the book she speaks about equality of women and full-filling careers, marriage and family dreams. (45) She was inspired from her own experience and knew that the reality of a happy housewife was very different from the ideology. She researched and completed a deep analysis offering new perspectives
on how to connect family and work together.

Friedan applied her theory on the American Middle-class. This theory of “a problem without a name” actually showed that the reality was very different from the ideology of a happy woman as a housewife. Thus after publishing the book, many American women actually began to feel released and satisfied by knowing that they were not alone with having these feelings, and by realizing what those feelings actually meant.

THE PROBLEM LAY BURIED, UNSPOKEN, FOR MANY years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. (Friedan 11)

Based on the researches Friedan made, she found out that even though women were already allowed to study, as compared with the very beginning of feminism when women had to fight to be able to study, they were not willing to spend much time with studies and said education was not necessary anyway since most of them were getting married at early age, and they asserted that being married to a man that provides a comfortable life is better than to study. (142)

These kids are concerned about dating and sex, how to get along with boys, is it all right to have premarital relations. Maybe a girl is trying to decide about her major; she’s thinking about a career, and she’s also thinking about marriage. You set up a role-playing situation to help her work it out – so she sees the effect on the children. She sees she need not feel guilty about being just a housewife. (Friedan 160)

As Sheila Rowbotham states in her book *The Past is Before Us* (1989), even though every girl in university wished to get married and become a housewife, after getting married women felt isolated, spending most of their time doing their domestic duties, which was supposed to be their destiny. The housework and duties women did on daily basis became socially dismissed and ignored, however it was still something that filled the lives of most of them. Yet for many American women it was hard to force the assumption that this is really what they wanted for the rest of their lives. The “domestic destiny” was everywhere around them, advertised heavily by the media for women to see that their destiny is ineluctable. (5) It was not just a sudden thing that women started feeling unhappy, dissatisfied with their family
lives. Starting to be convinced that there should be more options resulted in increased frustration. According to interviews with women living at the time it is obvious that usually their husbands expected them to do all the housework by themselves, since they were housewives and did not have anything else to do, while their husbands where working hard to earn the money for the whole family. Also, their husbands dominated them, criticized their housekeeping, and many times they were not even at home but in the pub, so their wives did not even have anyone to talk to about their feelings and frustrations. (5-8)

According to Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor who were observed by Sheila Rowbothan (the author of The Past if Before Us), women had many own desires on their mind since their lives were not fulfilled. Many of them turned to therapy and psychoanalysis to be able to actually comprehend the complexity of their sexual desires and self-identities in their families which led to women understanding why it was difficult to change the desires they had. Women wanted to be a person like any other but at the same time they desired to be unique. Octave Mannoni says that women’s call for equality concealed the demand “to be recognized in their uniqueness as women, and for each woman to be recognized in her oneness, as herself – as the woman she feels herself to be and not as men wish to see her.” (18-19)

Over time, as feminism became stronger, women of differing classes, colours, cultures, sexual preferences have stressed their uniqueness along with the desire for equal connection expressed in sisterhood. It could be taken as feminism’s ideal impetus for transforming the family: the recognition of equality and the recognition of difference. (Rowbotham 19)

Dissatisfaction and unhappiness with life had a powerful influence on women’s liberation; however, the women’s movement was certainly never “anti-family” in any way. Families for most women were often also source of security, care, affection as well as it could be a source of violence, oppression and control. (Rowbotham 20)

As Rowbothan asserts, later on family and personal lives were becoming highly important targets of mass marketing and advertisements for fashion and domestic goods which were reproducing images of pretty housewives, happy families and motherhood. This was capitalist marketing aimed at profiting from the perception of what was ideal. “In capitalism’s fantasy of itself as an ‘affluent’ society, women remain in her ‘proper’ place
chained between the kitchen and the bedroom.” (21) Capitalism’s impact on women’s position within the family was discussed mainly in terms of “work, relations and values.” (21) Suddenly a great feminist theory arose when the feminist started thinking about these capital values – the family as a place of work, the labor which was the burden of housework on women as a sex. According to the women’s movement assertion, it was socially and economically necessary for capitalism that women would be responsible for taking care of children. “In modern capitalism the family conveyed values which transmitted the dominant assumptions of capitalist society.” (22) Women could possibly mean a cheap source of labor in the family. It was unpaid household labor that saved the state from giving resources for reproduction. It was a benefit for men gained from women’s domestic work as well as acquiring an interest in women being paid lower. Overall, it was claimed by many women that the relation of capitalism towards the family was contradictory. It both tended to destroy the family and maintain it at the same time. (21-23)

The campaign titled ‘Why Be a Wife?’ which appeared in the United States during the late 1970’s has a connection to The World According to Garp and some of the novel’s key points. This campaign “challenged legal dependence, the allocation of domestic work, private responsibility for child care, and the isolation of couples. It was an attempt to project the needs women experienced in families into a wider political context of law, economics and social provision.” (Rowbotham 32) Women tended to be extremely attached to marriages and family lives because families provided them with loving relationships, a possibility to bring up their children and give them the care they need. The “Why Be a Wife” campaign claims that love and care of children stops to be a synonym for “dependent and unequal status for women.” (33) Women began to rebel immediately against “the mystique of ideal mother and the exhaustion of actual mothering” by getting a paid job for instance, which was an impulse for society to see women’s dissatisfaction and imagine how the society could be better. (Rowbotham 33)

As Rowbotham claims, the situation for women started changing within time, and extraordinary unusual things were becoming quite numerous; therefore the society was forced to start getting used to it. Lesbian mothers, one-parent families, men on maternity leave, women working and some of them even starting successful careers, earning decent wages, and becoming independent. All these were new things at the time, however, getting ordinary over time. Even though these so-called unusual cases were becoming more frequent in society,
there were still quite a few problems with them. Single mothers were likely to be poor and dependent on the government. Couples that were not married, single mothers and collective families were all facing a system of law and policy in which they were breaking the concept of the normal married couple and normal family. Lesbian mothers were still considered as contravenes and they were prejudiced by the society. In 1973 the radical feminist view of *Shrew* asked: 'Are Fathers Really Necessary?' (113) The writer of the article claimed that men caused more trouble than good and were likely to sexually abuse children. By late 1970’s and early 1980’s some feminists assumed that bringing up their child would be better without men. This decision generalized a suspect of men not to be trusted with children. During that period of time, the role of men was a highly discussed issue within the society. (111-114)

Betty Friedan compared the situation when *Feminine Mystique* (1963) was written and the difference in 20 years’ time. She says that the changes are great, amazing, painful, far-reaching and influencing many lives of women and men as well.

Well, it actually is a far history. Only in far history the women obediently, diligently, and resignedly accepted their roles of wives, mothers, and objects supposed to satisfy her husband’s needs, children and house, only then they didn’t know their own identity and they didn’t have their own opinions, needs, and social status as well. However, twenty years ago those were the mothers of nowadays students who opposed to this and started applying for universities and build careers and overall they deserved great changes both in personal and in social life. (Friedan 7, my translation)

As Friedan says, the fact that women are in the roles of firemen, politicians, men are on maternity leave, that universities teach gender studies, academic works on the theme of women, women with ambitious dress codes, more women studying in universities, the traditional roles of women and men of the house are disappearing, the first child births before the age of forty, the traditional house roles between men and women also disappearing, families with only one parent or families living from two salaries,… all these and many more changes that she couldn’t even imagine at the time of writing the book. Although it seems like now the life should be easy, the new generation is facing new and different problems and new earlier unknown conflicts. (6)
4. John Irving

4.1. Irving’s inspirations and writings

Irving was born in New Hampshire in 1942, originally named John Wallace Blunt. Right after he was born his parents got divorced and he actually never met his father, who was an Army Air Force pilot. Irving, as he personally admits, described some of the details of his real father’s war experience in his novels. It was his way of contacting him, telling him that he knows about him. However, he never heard from him, and until now, he still does not know whether his father actually knew he was a writer. Among another painful event lifted from Irving’s past belongs “a boy’s seduction by an older woman.” He was abused at age of eleven by a woman around twenty years of age. (Stoynoff)

Irving is considered one of the best-selling modern writers, whose “novels have combined 19th century traditions with modern-day melodrama, sex and random violence.” (Pollak) He is quite well known for his specific style of creating odd characters and sexual outsiders. He says: “I think that you can write best about sexual intolerance if you get yourself into a character who is not easily identified or embraced by any group... There's obviously something I'm attracted to in the area of extreme sexual minorities of one kind or another.” (Pollak)

Irving’s writings contain some autobiographical elements as Irving admits. As an example, in the novel Until I find You (2005), Irving writes about aspects of childhood sexuality which came from his own experience of sexual abuse. In his last novel In One Person (2012), which is a book with solid number of certain sexual and other particularities, his main character is a bisexual who falls in love with an older transgender woman. Irving, as he says, when he was a teenager and he went to a boy school, he had “unwelcome and sort of gripping crushes on older boys.” (qtd. in Lee) At the time, of course he hated himself for being attracted to the male kind; however, he also knew how it was to be attracted to a woman mainly because of seeing his friend’s mothers at the faculty. (Lee) As Irving said:
I’ve had attractions I would never have acted upon, whether they were straight or gay. But to say I didn’t feel them. … I’ve always assumed using my own example that boys from the ages of 13 to 17 are turned on by virtually everything that moves. In my case — and maybe this is a mark of my generation or the fact that I’m an American, or both — you beat yourself up and hate yourself for half of the people you’re attracted to of whatever sex. Because you think, “How can I be attracted to her? How can I be attracted to him?” (qtd. in Lee)

Irving was a wrestler for great part of his life. He started with wrestling in his teens and continued at a competitive level for the next twenty years, thus wrestling is a sport often mentioned in his novels. In *The World According to Garp* wrestling has an important meaning to the main character Garp, who is a wrestler since his childhood. Wrestling is both his life and his death because he dies on a wrestling floor killed by a radical feminist. Another feature from his life included in his novels is the absence of his father, whom he never met. The same happened to Garp, whose father was a soldier and died before Garp was born. Often used themes in Irving’s novels are his own sexual fantasies.

Last but not least, his inspirations come from his own family, and mainly his children. As he asserts, he was too young to become a father at age of twenty-three and he feared “the unknown” coming in hand with being a father. (Pollak) “My novels are not about what’s happened to me; my novels are about what I’m afraid of… My children have been such an active presence in my life for so long; these children have given me my subject, really, which is fear for them.” (qtd. in Pollak) Fear for children is a great topic in *The World According to Garp*. Garp is obsessed with the fear for his children, he is always thinking about the worst cases of what could happen to them. Since he is the one taking care of them at home, he has the “motherly” instinct and he fears the danger that could happen to his children. In the edition of *The World According to Garp* after twenty years of publishing the book (1998) Irving wrote:

I may have written this novel twenty years ago, but I go back there almost every day – back to those fears. Even the smallest detail of *The World According to Garp* is the expression of fear; even the curious pockmark on the face of the Viennese prostitute – it is also an expression of that most terrible fear. “The silvery gouge on her forehead was nearly as big as her mouth; her pickmark looked to Garp like a small, open grave.” A child's grave... (Irving)
As Irving states, the novel is not only about a father's fears but also about other types of fears. Throughout the book, it is obvious that there are fears of marriage, of lust, or for the loss of someone close.

In regards to Irving's standpoint towards feminism as such and the feminist views presented in the *World According to Garp*, Irving disclaims any kind of assertions that his characters present any opinions on feminism, feminism movements, gay rights or any other topics. However, he is still often seen as feminist friendly writer, due to his statements regarding women’s struggle over men's violence for instance, or the fact that he received a few awards, such as the fact that he was included by *Ms.* Magazine (1982) in the list of twenty-five male heroes for integrating feminism into as a major theme of some of his novels, or in 1988 when he was nominated as one of the top ten “Good Guys” by the “National Women's Political Causus” for contributing to women's struggle for equality in his novel *The Cider House Rules* (1985). That is what makes Irving seem generally ambivalent about the views presented in his novels in connection to feminism. (Loudermilk, 67-68)

Irving often portrays feminism in his novels, thus comparison of *The World According to Garp* to some of his novels containing similar feminist themes is introduced. *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) is about a family with bohemian personalities and sharing their happiness and tragedies at the same time. In the same year that this novel was published, Irving was going through a difficult period in his life when he got divorced from his first wife. Although his life was uneasy at the time, he continued to write novels. Both of these novels among other themes present feminist views in ambivalent ways, both positive and negative. Both of them discuss the discrimination of women and show the necessity of feminist movements. They describe women as victims and men as violators, and the sexual violence towards women arises from the patriarchal oppression which in the end makes violence natural and something that women simply have to face in society. The description of a wounded women harmed by men's violence are for instance Ellen Jamesians in *The World According to Garp* and Franny Berry and Susie the Bear in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. (Larsson 4) Susie the Bear represents a submissive woman character that wears a bear costume, and is afraid to become a human being. Throughout the story, she is developing into a more self-aware woman, and finally finds her luck with John Berry, a brother of Franny Berry. Franny Berry on the other hand is a strong woman character. She is confident, smart
and open-minded. She is raped in the forest by a group of guys from school, which influences the rest of her life. She feels the need of revenge, which she finally realizes with the help of others. Also, she is open to anything sexually. She has a sexual relationship with Susie, and moreover, she has incestuous relationship with her brother John who loves her more than anything. John is a sexual symbol for women, and he has quite a few affairs with several women. However, he loves his sister Franny the most, only in the end he finds happiness with Susie, whom he helps to find her qualities and be more self-aware.

To compare the novel *The Hotel New Hampshire* to the novel *The World According to Garp*, there are several similar issues such as for instance sexual violence and rape, extreme and immoral relationships and temptations of lust, extreme characters that are not understood by society and life tragedies which might a punishment for the characters.

Irving wrote in the edition of *The World According to Garp* in 1998, twenty years later of publishing the book:

> To my horror, and full of self-loathing, I jumped to the conclusion that the book was about the temptations of lust – lust leads just about everyone to a miserable end. There is even a chapter called “Most Lust,” as if there weren't enough already. I was positively ashamed of how much lust was in the book, not to every character in the story who indulges his or her lust is severely punished. And, among the culprits and the victims, physical mutilations abound: characters lose eyes and arms and tongues –even penises! (Irving)

The lust that the author is describing seems to be the main theme in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Irving points out several types of lust, be it the lust between an older woman and a young boy, between a sister and a brother, between a man and a man, between a man and a prostitute, or between a woman and a woman. Additionally, the punishment for the characters in *The World According to Garp* is similar in *The Hotel New Hampshire*. The mother of the family dies together with the youngest son Egg in a plane crash on the way to Vienna, the father of the family becomes blind due to the terror attack in Vienna, and also, the second youngest daughter Lily, who is a talented writer and publishes a book that earns a lot of money for the whole family, commits a suicide because she does not bear the criticism of her second book. In *The World According to Garp*, the tragedy starts with the car accident of Garp with the children and Helen with the student, where one of Garp’s and Helen's sons loses
his life, the other one loses his eye, the student loses a part of his penis, and Helen and Garp have serious physical injuries but mainly undergo serious psychical suffering.

Moreover, what these two novels have in common are the moral questions. In *The World According to Garp* it starts with Jenny conceiving a child with the mortally injured soldier T.S. Garp, who is basically raped by Jenny. Jenny considers this as something that she is happy for and that she would never change. From her point of view, it was a strategic thing to do because the soldier was dying and he would not be able to require either the child or her, which was the ideal situation for Jenny. Moreover, she made him feel happy before his death, which was definitely a pleasant thing to do. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* the immoral questions are also related to sexual relations. The most vivid immoral question is raised by the incestuous relationship of Franny and John, who do not consider this relationship in any way abnormal. They simply love each other and long for each other also sexually.

Another famous novel that discusses issues such as gender equality, immoral questions, and relationships and affairs is called *The Cider House Rules* (1985). It is about an orphanage in Maine run by a doctor Wilbur who established this orphanage for helping women with unwanted pregnancies and having the possibility to put the baby to an orphanage. Doctor Wilbur also performs abortions, which he came to do reluctantly. Doctor Wilbur trains a boy named Homer to be the obstetrician, because Homer is like his son since he spends his whole childhood in the orphanage. However, Homer finds out about Wilbur's secret of doing the abortions and finds it very immoral at the beginning. Also, there is an affair going on between Homer and Candy whose husband goes off to war and unexpectedly returns while she is already having an affair with Homer and has also pregnant with Homer, giving birth to a baby boy called Angel. The fact that the child is not her husbands but Homer's remains secret, and also the affair is going on secretly. Other moral questions arise when Angel as a teenager falls in love with the daughter of the head migrant worker of the apple orchard. Rose is sexually abused by her father, and becomes pregnant with him. Homer then performs the abortion on her. Similarly like in previously described novels, some of the themes are identical.

Overall, the themes that Irving uses in his writings are often autobiographical but turned into fiction by using eccentric characters involved in tragicomic life situations. He uses violence, maiming, sexual issues, gender topics and relations, family and social surroundings, death, misfortune, absurdity of good intentions, bad luck and fate. As the autobiographical elements are for instance wrestling, relocation to Vienna, which Irving also experienced, an
absent father during childhood, which Irving experienced only partly because he actually did have a step-father who took him as his own but Irving was still missing the presence of his biological father whom he never met. Also, Irving's feelings of fear for his own children are very much present especially in The World According to Garp.

4.2. Description of the novel The World According to Garp

The story is set in 1942 mostly in New England. The main character, an extraordinary woman Jenny Fields is a nurse coming from a rich family which refuses all opportunities that the time could give her - college education, a husband and men in general. She does not consider herself a feminist; however, her character represents some of the feminist ideas such as “individual freedom and women’s right over the own bodies.” (Larsson 15) As a nurse, Jenny takes care of soldiers coming injured from the war, most of the time mortally wounded. Despite the fact that Jenny does not feel the least need for any kind of sexual or any other relationship with man, at one point she actually begins to feel the maternal need, and for that purpose she conceives with a mortally wounded soldier Technical Sergeant Garp, and thus her son T.S. Garp is born. The way she conceives the child is morally questionable since the soldier is mentally on a level of a small baby. However, Jenny believes she provides Garp with a happy life-end and in her eyes there is nothing wrong about the way it happened. Jenny is a single mother living with her son in a hospital apartment, and within all those years she meets a number of unpleasant confrontations with other people who tend to criticize her and make presumptions since she does not have a father for her son. Luckily, Jenny has her own very strong opinion about that and does not have any problems with explaining it to others. Therefore, she is considered a social outsider and moreover, sexually suspected. Based on her life experience, she later on writes an autobiographical book A Sexual Suspect which achieves great success. Based on this book, Jenny appears to be the spokesperson of the women’s movement and thus establishes a center for exploited and abused women. T.S. Garp graduates and gets married to University professor Helen Duncan, whom he also has children with. An interesting fact about Garp and Helen having children is that Garp is the one who stays on maternity leave and takes care of the children full-time, which was not an ordinary case for the time. There are several sexual affairs within their marriage and one of them turns into a
tragedy. It’s Helen’s affair with her student that causes a car accident in front of their house and one of their sons is killed while her other son and the student both have permanent injuries. To recover, the family moves into Jenny’s center for women who experienced some kind of men's oppression in the past and want to isolate themselves from men. Another part of the story takes place in this center where Garp meets many interesting characters. For instance, a transsexual and former football player Roberta Muldoon who becomes his close friend. Also, a group of Ellen Jamesians, which is a group of radical feminists who cut their tongues to support an eleven year old rape victim Ellen James, whose tongue was cut off by the rapist to make her silent about what they did to her. Garp also writes a controversial book *The World according to Bensenhaver* which is highly influenced by the environment that Garp writes the book in, and deals mainly with rape and open criticism of Ellen Jamesians.

Jenny is killed during a public feminist meeting by a man who hates women, and Garp is assassinated by Bainbridge Percy, sister of Cushie Percy, who is Garp's first lover and a childhood friend. Bainbridge Percy was always a little odd, as Garp says. She is twenty at the time when she decides to join the Ellen Jamesians radical group and cut her tongue. As all Ellen Jamesians, she hates Garp for the criticism that he expresses against this group, and that is why she decides to murder him. She goes into the gym where Garp is training wrestling and just shoots him twice, which Garp does not survive. Garp is thirty-three at the time just like Helen, their daughter Jenny is three, and Duncan is thirteen.

Helen lives alone for many years until she dies due to illness in her sleep. Duncan also lives a long life; however, he dies ironically because of his sense of humor. He dies laughing at his joke at a coming-out party for a new transsexual. Roberta Muldoon kills herself with a gun. Jenny Garp is the one who lives the longest out of all the characters. She becomes a doctor, gets divorced once and remarried in time. She spends a number of years researching cancer, working closely with the Connecticut Tumor Registry. She wants to “get to the bottom of cancer. In a sense, she would. She would die of it.” (Irving 608)

“A doctor who sees only terminal cases.”

In the world according to her father, Jenny Garp knew we must have energy. Her famous grandmother, Jenny Fields, once thought of us as Externals, Vital Organs, Absentees, and Goners. But in the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases. (Irving 609)
Every character dies in a way that he or she deserves, as it seems that Irving punishes his characters for what they do in their lives. Also, their deaths are in a way absurd or tragicomic, which makes the ending as extreme as the whole story is.

4.2.1. Postmodern features in *The World According to Garp*

In the 1960’s there had been a noticeable difference in some of the American fiction novels. There was not an official agreement among writers how to name this phase, only the critiques in attempt to discuss this fiction straightforward, coined it with the title of “postmodernism”. In this part of the work, an attempt to define common postmodern features in connection with the novel *The World According to Garp* is conducted. To begin with, Albert J. La Valley says that the “new literature” demonstrates a “new consciousness” that has been “inspired by the breakdown of our culture, its traditions, and its justifications of the American social structure.” (qtd. in Wilson 74) Postmodern literature was named as a “literature of exhaustion” by John Barth who classified it literally as “literature of exhausted possibilities” and stated that by the actual “exhaustion” he did not mean anything related to physical, moral or intellectual tiredness. (qtd. in Wilson 74) What he meant was the exploitation of certain possibilities in this style. What Barth also asserted was that the authors of the time came to despair while realizing that there might be possible limitations of possibilities in the form of fiction since a number of possibilities had already been explored. However, the despair that they feared according to Barth actually caused new, fresh work with original and remarkable ideas. Barth maintains that it turned into an “artistic victory.” “Intellectual dead end” confronting the accomplishment of “a new human work.” (qtd. in Wilson 75) Postmodern literature contains eccentric characteristics, black humor in compensation with realism by “evoking echoes of non-less-real feelings from our persona pasts, feelings that today we can experience only in dreams or in moments of great stress-of terror, perhaps when our “normal” functioning breaks down.” The bizarre reflects from the “emotional power” and it’s based on principals of realism which aims to pierce deep into the characters. (qtd. in Wilson 75)

*The World According to Garp* is an example of earlier postmodern writings where John Irving plays with the modernist forms of the mid-century American comedy of manners. The beginning of the novel contains strong elements of modernism while the final third is a
pure postmodern novel full of black humor and bizarre violence. An example of postmodern black humor and bizarre violence is the radical feminist group of Ellen Jamesians, who hurt themselves physically when they have their tongues cut in order to express their support to the little girl who is raped and had her tongue removed so she could not speak about it. Irving is ridiculing radical feminism and pointing out the bizarre that women are capable of doing because of men's oppression. Another example of black humor in the novel is the accident which happens because of Helen's affair. First of all, it happens because of Helen who is all those years silently suffering from Garp's affairs, and when she starts an affair, it ends up in tragedy. Secondly, the situation in which the accident happens is bizarre. Garp coming home with children, playing their favorite game of switching the headlights off and driving with no hands on the steering wheel, just letting the car go down the hill towards the house. In that moment, Helen is giving the last fellatio to her student since he does not want to leave her without that. The tragedy happens when Garp's car hits their car, and their son Walter is dead, another son loses his eye, Garp and Helen are injured, and the student suffers a partial penectomy. It seems like Irving wants to punish his characters for all they did, and uses bizarre features to maintain the irony of their destinies.

Another postmodern feature typical of The World According to Garp is sexuality, sexual outsiders and sexual violence. Jenny Fields is a considerable example of a sexual outsider. The reason why she is completely against sexual relations and considers sexual needs simply as a lust, is not clear. She wishes to be independent and not supported by anybody but herself, which also includes any kind of sexual relations, which she simply does not need or want. The only sexual intercourse she undergoes is to conceive her child, which is achieved in an absurd way. Sexual assaults are also a vast part of the novel, for instance when Garp finds a raped girl in the park while jogging, or little Ellen James when she is raped by a group of men which after removed her tongue, or the women from the Ellen Jamesians group who went through violent episodes with men in their lives. Sexuality as such is an extensive theme in the novel. Irving maintains sexual diversity among people, and how it actually can influence people's lives. Jenny who is resistant towards sexuality, or Garp who on the other hand is fascinated by sexuality and feels engrossed into it. Roberta Muldoon discovers her sexuality in a different body, so she transfers herself into a woman's body even though she was born a man. Gender issues are one of postmodern literature’s aspects, which Irving employs extensively.
Another typical feature for the postmodern wave is self-consciousness, which we can see in *The World According to Garp* in the character of Jenny Fields and Helen Holm, which are both self-conscious and seeking to achieve their goals. The novels are often concerned with searching for the understanding of the individual, finding the purpose of one’s being in this world, which is more of an issue for the group of Ellen Jamesians for example, who clearly search for their own identity.

Significant examples of postmodern extreme topics in the novel are the profound life and death situations. It is connected to Garp's neurotic anxiety about his children’s safety, and his great wish that the world would be a safe place. Garp believes that it is necessary to be constantly alert because there is a threat of imminent catastrophe with every step you take. However, the dangers that Garp faces are usually “home grown.” The car accident that happens and kills one of his sons and permanently injures the other corresponds to Garp's greatest fears. Moreover, the accident is caused by Garp himself being mad about his wife's affair with the student. Irving describes this tragic accident using grotesque effects as one of Garp’s son’s dies and the other seriously injured, and Helen's lover suffers a partial penectomy in the car after impact with Garp's car. The cause of this accident is Helen's sympathy for her rejected student lover, who requires the last fellatio before he leaves for good, and Garp's habit loved by the children to leave the car coasting at speed into his driveway with the lights off. As Willbern claims, it seems like Irving's intention was to punish all the participants of marriage betrayals, setting up the background and current occurrences in a detailed way so that the reader can be horrified by the massacre while admiring the writer’s technique of composition. (82) Willbern also states that:

> It is perhaps a question of control. Characters in *Garp* are vulnerable to all manner of bizarre events. Accidents, assaults, injuries, and illnesses and strike at any time in this hap-hazard world. Yet the unpredictable events are carefully arrange and composed by the author, and neutrally recounted by the omniscient narrator, so that they seem inevitable results of prior occurrences, or necessary con-sequences. (Willbern 82)

Overall, the novel contains a number of postmodern features such as gender issues, feelings of guilt, feelings of fear, marital identity, sexual sins and their punishment, which make the novel extraordinary, bizarre, and compelling.
5. Ambivalent views on feminism

The aim of this chapter is to approach and analyze Irving's perception of the feminist features depicted in the novel *The World According to Garp* and show the ambivalence of feminism depicted in the novel according to general perception of feminism.

The ambivalence of feminist views in *The World According to Garp* is apparent for several reasons. Irving presents a number of positive and feminism supportive topics, thus it seems that he intends to point out the necessity for women's movements and independence. By creating the strong woman character Jenny Fields, who literally goes against society's mainstream positions, maintains her opinions and lives according to them even though she is not accepted by society, he shows an example of how independent and brave women should be even though the society does not allow it. Especially the society of the 1940s, as described in the theoretical part, did not respect any differences and women who wanted to oppose society could hardly exist. There rarely were job possibilities for women, thus women had to be dependent on men which did not allow them many choices. The best option for women was to become housewives and live well with their families, while maybe secretly wanting something different even though not knowing what. Thus Jenny seems a very unique woman since she is aware of her life goals and she is not afraid to achieve them at any cost.

Irving also expresses the necessity for a feminist voice by making Jenny a leader of a feminist movement because of the autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect* which she publishes. Even though she does not intend to be a feminist in the first place, she accepts to be a feminist leader because she simply associates herself with the views of feminists.

She was taken as the right voice at the right time, but Jenny Fields, sitting whitely in her nurse's uniform-in the restaurant where John wolf took only his favourite writers – 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... 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. (Irving 185, 186)
The character of Jenny Fields is highly similar to the well-known second wave feminist Betty Friedan, who was mentioned in the theoretical part. Similarly to Betty, Jenny is portrayed as a significant feminist voice thanks to whom things started to change in the history of feminism, since she published an autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect* about her own experience, how it was to think differently and to do things differently than the rest of society, and what it actually meant to be an individual. Jenny also influenced women across the United States, and many women gained self-consciousness and strength to do something about their lives. Both Jenny and Betty became important leaders of feminist movements after publishing their books, which is a very interesting assimilation that Irving uses and it maintains the feminist supportive features the author described.

Jenny is depicted as a natural born-feminist leader who has the need to spread her views to other women, and convince them about their strength to live without a man because in fact they do not need men as opposed to what they think. This approach on not needing men on the other hand, presents the negative stereotypes of feminism since it makes the character of Jenny seem as a man hater who tries to convince other women that men and women’s involvement with them are unnecessary. The intention of the author is not clear in this case. He could have intended to create an overall negative feminist character that hates men, and does extreme things in order to achieve her goals. Also, the author could have meant to ridicule the position of women at the period of time since women were oppressed and not respected by the society. However, the most probable intention Irving could have had while creating Jenny's character was to show a woman who mirrors the situation at the time for women in society and who differs from the rest of women, who were not brave enough to speak out. As Irving points out, Jenny does not intend to be a feminist, in fact, she does not even know what the word “feminist” means. She just becomes the leader of the movements because she agrees with the actual content, which in the end makes her a feminist.

Irving shows another feminist supportive stance with the character of Jenny since he depicts her as a working woman. She shows a prototype of a woman in the 1940s who is needed as a nurse in the hospital during the War, and who decides to continue working further even after the War, since she is convinced that women should work and be independent. In Jenny’s case it is even more unusual because she comes from a rich family, and to become a nurse and work was purely her own decision, which the family never agreed with. If she followed the expectations of her parents, she would most likely go to college, meet a husband,
get married, have children and become a housewife, just like her mother did, and just like most other women of her time did. However, Jenny was different; she followed her own dreams and beliefs. In the character of Jenny Fields, Irving created a self-confident, strong woman who is not afraid to work and support herself and her child, instead of being supported by a man.

She was nothing of the kind. In fact, she had dropped out of college when she suspected that the chief purpose of her parents' sending her to Wellesley had been to have her dated by and eventually mated to some well-bred man. The recommendation of Wellesley had come from her older brothers, who had assured her parents that Wellesley women were not thought of loosely and were considered high in marriage potential. Jenny felt that her education was merely a polite way to bide tie, as if she were really a cow, being prepared only for the insertion of the device for artificial insemination. (Irving 2)

Again, Irving shows how he perceives women in the 1940s and what a good example of an independent woman looks like, thus he is showing the positives of feminism. He expresses the passion Jenny has for her job; in fact, she considers her profession a life mission, something more than just a job. It could be the fact that Jenny is a nurse and she enjoys helping others, or it could be the need to support other women as Jenny also helps women that were oppressed by men in any way, be it oppression of physical or psychological nature. She brings them back to life and shows them a different way of living, an existence with the absence of men.

Into her fifties, Jenny Fields would remain an athletically attractive woman, crisp and plain. She would rise and say, “This is right,” Or, sometimes, “This is wrong” - depending on the occasion. She was the decision maker who's made the hard choices in her own life and therefore she could be counted on to be on the right side of a woman's problem. (Irving 188)

A significant positive feminist position that Irving presents is the fact that Garp is not a typical man who goes to work and earns the money to support the family, and his wife Helen is also not an ordinary wife that would stay home as a housewife and take care of the household, children and her husband.
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. Her 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; as long as Garp's novel progressed, no routine, however, mindless, could upset him. (Irving 187)

Garp and Helen choose another, for the time still quite unusual style of living. Garp stays home and mainly takes care of family and the household while being supported financially from his wife and mother. His wife, Helen, is a University professor and she has a great career. By showing these two examples Irving created an ideal feminist vision, which gives a space for the woman's career, and a man takes over the family and household care. Having a career makes Helen a confident, self-conscious woman and a great example of positive feminism.

Garp lives a rather bohemian life, he is a writer, trying to be successful but his novels are not as successful as the only book his mother wrote. He sometimes thinks about getting a job but in fact he does not know what he should actually do. Moreover, he loves being in the role of a housewife. He enjoys cooking, cleaning and mainly taking care of his children, which is also his obsession to secure that nothing happens to them, just like Irving in his real life. The period of the 1960s and 1970s was becoming more liberal and meant many great changes for women especially, as described in the theoretical part of the thesis. Irving's example of the modern family mirrors the upcoming situation in this period of time in the United States. Irving's portrayal of Garp is a mostly positive example of feminism, and it definitely points out a big change in society's position relating to women. However, Irving's depiction of Garp might be also understood negatively in some points. First of all, he is in a way described as a man who basically uses his mother for financial sources and the same his wife. Second of all, he is a man who betrays his wife and has a number of affairs, while his wife is silently suffering because she knows about them all. He enjoys the lust that his mother Jenny is so concerned with. From young age, he is very interested in women and nothing changes even though he gets married to Helen. In Garp's eyes, interest in women leading to extramarital relations is a completely natural need and he simply cannot do anything about his urges as he considers them basic instinct. An interesting fact is that he also self-reflects his acts and he is sure that he would not want to have a daughter because of men like himself,
therefore men who have extramarital sexual relations with students, baby sitters or others. Also, he is aware of how violent men can be towards women, which is another reason not to have a daughter as he says.

It was the “lust” chapter of *A Sexual Suspect* that especially embarrassed Garp. It was one thing to be a famous child born out of wedlock, quite another to be a famous case history of adolescent need – his private randiness become a popular story. Helen thought it was very funny, though she confessed to not understanding his attraction to whores. “Lust make the best men behave out of character,” wrote Jenny Fields – a line that particularly infuriated Garp. (Irving 184, 185)

A significant example of Irving's negative perception of feminism is the depiction of the Ellen Jamesians group. The women in this group are presented as radical feminists and men haters, who are obsessed with punishment for all men because all men are a threat of violence and sexual abuse. Irving himself wrote in the edition (1998) of *The World According to Garp* after twenty years of publishing the book:

It had seemed at one time, when I was beginning the novel, that the polarization of the sexes was a dominant theme; the story was about men and women growing farther and farther apart. Just look at the plot: a remarkable, albeit outspoken, woman (Garp's mother, Jenny Fields) is killed by a lunatic male who hates women; and Garp himself is assassinated by a lunatic female who hates men.

“In this dirty-minded world,” Jenny thinks, “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 there is nothing with Garp's mother. In her autobiography, Jenny writes: “I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to have to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too.” And being what she calls “a sexual suspect” also makes Jenny a target of antifeminist hatred – just as Garp, her son, becomes a target of radical feminists. (Irving)
The bizarre and absurd that Irving presents is that Jenny Fields is killed by a man who hates women, since he believes that the feminist movement had a negative influence on his wife who divorced him, and Garp is assassinated by a woman who hates men, a member of the Ellen Jamesians. Both these facts make feminism seem negative. At first, a desperate man whose wife left him because of feminism, which again gives an impression that feminists are men haters. Ellen Jamesians killing Garp makes feminists seem radical and also violent in order to achieve their goals, thus in this case it is to punish Garp for ridiculing and criticizing the extremism of their group. Garp claims that for many Ellen Jamesians “the imitation of the horrible untonguing” (Irving 538) is an entirely political matter. However, among these women there are also women that were oppressed by men either by physical violence or psychological oppression. Garp blames them for the political enforcing which only prolongs the misery of Ellen James. (Irving 539)

The organization was full of crazies, no one would deny. Not even some Ellen Jamesians would have denied that. It was generally true that they were an inflammatory political group of feminist extremists who often detracted from the extreme seriousness of other women, and other feminists, around them. But Ellen James’ attack on them was as inconsiderate of the occasional individuals among the Ellen Jamesians as the James – not really thinking how an eleven-year-old girl would have preferred to get over her horror more privately. (Irving 539)

Garp perceives Ellen Jamesians as a threat for Ellen James, with whom he has a close relationship and whom he wants to protect even though she tells him not to do it because it is only her fight. Ellen James is just a symbol of the radical feminist group who made her own tragedy into a political agenda. Ellen James writes the essay Why I'm Not an Ellen Jamesian which is about her views and problematic relationship with the radical Ellen Jamesians group. “It recounted her rape, her difficulty with it; it made what the Ellen Jamesians did seem like a shallow, wholly political imitation of a very private trauma.” (Irving 538)

The group of Ellen Jamesians aims to make “private trauma” a “political concern” as Garp says and criticizes them for. (538) Garp also thinks they are mad to do such a thing as removing their tongues in order to protest. However, it seems this group was not fully understood by Garp. They actually intend to make a personal trauma into a political matter because they think it is important that personal issues of women become political issues, and
that society would take women’s voices seriously once they knew about things happening to women. There is an essential similarity in the thinking of Ellen Jamesians and an essay which was based on the thought of personal issues and the importance of making these issues political. *The Personal Is Political* essay written by Carol Hanisch in 1969 which appeared in the anthology *Notes From the Second Year: Women's Liberation in 1970*, thus Carol is often considered a creator of this phase. Carol wrote the essay as a reaction to the argument that women consciousness raising groups were just a “therapy.” (Hanisch 3) The meaning of this phase is that women’s personal problems are political problems because these groups were dealing with feminist views important for women but not considered serious by the society of the time. Carol intended to say that many of their personal problems were political because they were the result of systematic oppression. Women were in difficult life situations because they experienced gender oppression and inequality. (Hanisch 3-5)

Understanding that our oppressive situations were not our own fault—were not, in the parlance of the time, “all in our head”—gave us a lot more courage as well as a more solid, real foundation on which to fight for liberation. (Hanisch 2)

Women felt pressure and they wanted to fight for their rights and consideration in society. Carol intended to point out that society should be looking at issues across the spectrum of issues themselves, and that it should be considered to look at things that affect the individuals even on a personal level as something significant before any political decisions are made.

The question arises when thinking whether Irving actually created the group of Ellen Jamesians based on this phase, or whether it was just a coincidence. He depicted the group with postmodern features like the bizarre removing their tongues, however, the basis of their thinking seems similar. On the contrary, Irving puts Garp in the role of criticizing and hating Ellen Jamesians, moreover, believing that this radical group gives feminism a bad name, thus the reader does not know whether Irving perceives feminism in a good way and wants to highlight the basic feminist thoughts or whether he is transforming the essential thoughts into absurd examples that in the end make feminism seem negative.
But he wrote angrily and well; he said more firmly what Ellen James had meant. He spoke with eloquence for those serious women who suffered, by association, “the radical self-damage” of the Ellen Jamesians - “the kind of shit that gives feminism a bad name.” He could not resist putting them down, and though he did it well. (Irving 554)

To sum up, Irving himself is generally considered a “friend of feminism, as evidenced by his own statements and awards he’s received.” (Loudermilk 68) Although he supports feminism on one hand, on the other hand he disclaims that he would intend to speak out for feminism or he would ever write about feminism or women’s movements. Despite of these assertions, the novel *The World According to Garp* contains a number of feminist’s issues and stands for several feminist characters. The ambivalence of feminism that Irving depicts in this story was also commented on in reviews of the novel. Most of the reviewers agree that Irving is truly commenting on feminism. Some of them say that he is “aware of something like a war on women going on in our society,” (Loudermilk, 68) some of them even state that without the women’s movement there would be no novel, since the movement inspired Irving so importantly. Irving himself seems to consider feminists and non-feminists equal. In the novel, he mentions several reviews of Garp’s own novel *The World According to Bensenhaver*, containing divergent opinions about feminism and Garp’s novel. Some critics assert that “the women’s movement has at last exhibited a significant influence on a significant male writer,” while the others express dissatisfaction about *Bensehaver* upholding “the sexist notion that women are chiefly an assemblage of orifices and the acceptable prey of predatory males.” (Loudermilk, 69) The main character Garp considers these critiques both irrelevant, such as Irving who also finds such criticism incorrect. (Loudermilk, 68-69)

5.1. Perception of women

At this point, it is essential to trace the main feminist themes Irving depicts in the novel in order to maintain the analysis of the ambivalence in Irving’s perception of feminism. Also, the interpretation will be based on the theoretical part of this thesis, thus on the corresponding period of time of the novel's setting.

Within the novel, Irving portrays diverse ways of perceiving women. In some cases, he perceives them as equal to men, strong and brave, capable of being fully self-conscious and
capable of making their own decisions. In other cases, he perceives them as victims of men's oppression, not capable of being independent, which overall makes his perceptions of women in the novel seem ambivalent. Apart from Irving's imagination and creativity, there is certainly a considerable amount of inspiration sourced from the society in which he grew up and lived in. The setting of the novel begins in the 1940s and continues to the 1980s. As discussed in the theoretical part of the paper, by the time of the 1940s still until the 1960s the general perception of women in the United States was that women were the submissive parts of the household, they were the ones who obeyed and did the work in the house, while their husbands had the main word since they were the ones supporting the family financially. The main fulfillments in women’s lives were supposed to be the roles of housewives, fully committed to the family and to the household, which was also highly promoted by the society in general. As Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*:

> Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights – the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (Friedan 11)

As Friedan says, women longed for getting married, having at least four children and living in a beautiful house in the suburbs. Being a suburban housewife was the dream of every young lady and girl. However, many of American housewives were still not happy after they actually got what they always wanted. There was something which they were not able to recognize, and the number of women visiting psychiatrists raised enormously. (20-21)

On the contrary, Irving shows the character of Jenny Fields, who does not have the typical goals as most women did at the time. He describes a unique prototype of a modern woman as being highly individualist as well. Through the character of Jenny, Irving seems to define the need of a voice for women, their independence and free choices regardless of the
opinions of society. Jenny was under suspicion by society simply because she wanted to have a job, she did not want to get married, she did not want to be dependent on anybody but herself, she had sharp opinions which she said directly, she was a single mother with a child born from unconventional conception, and therefore she was socially considered extreme. Her behavior was perceived as abnormal for the time she lived in, and for the social understanding of women as happy American housewives.

Irving portrays another, very positive woman character Helen Holm. Helen provides a picture of a smart, emancipated, modern and independent woman who plays the traditional male part in the relationship with Garp, since she is the one who has a career and supports the family financially. As Irving describes Garp’s feelings when he returns home from being with his young lover: “He felt fortunate to be with Helen; she had her own ambitions and he could not manipulate her.” (212) Interestingly, Garp is pointing out Helen’s ambitions and the fact that he cannot manipulate her, however, Garp is having affairs with another women for several years while Helen knows about them and silently suffers because of them. This example makes Irving’s perception of Helen contradictory. She is depicted as a strong woman character but on the other hand, suffering from her husband's oppression in a way.

Among other women characters, Irving also presents women as victims of rape and violation and men as abusers. A clear example of that is the case of Ellen James – a little girl raped by two men who cut off her tongue for her to remain silent of what they did to her. The actual group of Ellen Jamesians present women who support the little girl and protest against what was done to her in an extreme way. Moreover, this group is also presented as desperate women, who experienced some kind of affliction caused by men in their own lives, which is another reason why they hate men and they are fiercely scared of them.

Among women characters, even though not the major ones, belongs also a lady called Mrs. Ralph. She is a victim and a negative example of a dependent and submissive woman, who becomes desperate when her husband humiliates her and leaves her. She does not have her life under control; she suffers and humiliates herself. Irving intends to show an example of a woman, who was betrayed by her husband and who just did not know how to handle it. She was dependent on her husband, now she ends up with having nothing and she somehow cannot get over it. She is perceived as an exhausted woman who loses respect towards herself, and also loses all her confidence, which seems like Irving wanted to point out how important it is for women to actually be independent, capable of finding a job and deciding about their
lives by themselves.

In this subchapter Irving's diverse perceptions of feminism were discussed. It can be said, that Irving perceives feminism in both positive and negative ways by showing both examples. He either promotes the positives of feminism and maintains their importance, or just uses just basics of feminist thoughts and transfers them into his own ideas, and such a portrayal indeed evokes the ambivalence in understanding his intentions.

5.2. Partnership

It is of high importance to also learn how Irving perceives partnerships within the novel, since partnership is a crucial theme for feminism. Irving describes various types of partnerships with various intensities, in various occasions and life periods. He depicts partnerships of woman and man, of husband and wife, of lovers, and of women between each other. Women in his partnerships are again both individual and self-conscious beings, and victims of men's oppression, which leads to sense the ambivalence of feminist views in his examples.

The very first and the most exceptional partnership is introduced right at the beginning of the novel. It is a partnership between Jenny and the mortally injured soldier. In fact, they have a mutually beneficial partnership since Jenny keeps him company most of the time, not only by telling stories but also by having sexual proximity. And in return, he gives her a child. For Jenny, he seems to be an ideal partner to conceive her child with. He was surely smart, since he was a soldier before he got injured he was also healthy, and moreover, now he is dying so it is not a threat for her since he will not demand his child or marriage with Jenny. On this example, Irving shows how women can achieve what they want even though it might be morally wrong. It describes a woman who is highly individual, not dependent on anybody and also not wanting to depend on anybody in the future. She acts against society’s habits and goes directly for her goals, no matter at what costs, which can be perceived as extreme. In fact, she just acts according to her believes, which includes living alone just with a child, to have a job and to be independent. This perception again, seems quite contradictory since the reader does not know if Irving's intentions were to point out the extremes women are capable of doing for their feminist goals, even though the ways of achieving the goals might be immoral, or whether again he only intended to depict women’s independence, strength and capability of
achieving their aims.

A striking example of partnership Irving depicts between a husband and wife, Garp and Helen. Their partnership starts in high school, when Helen reads books and Garp wrestles, and they fall in love with each other immediately at the first sight. Garp writes tales and Helen, as an experienced reader gives him her feedback. Their love is delightful but complicated since the very beginning. Garp adores women in general and he can’t resist sexual relations with other women, be it even a prostitute with whom he has a relationship in Vienna. He loves Helen to death; however, he simply cannot help his natural instincts. Helen knows about it since the very beginning and she silently suffers from each affair Garp has. An extreme, extraordinary situation happens when they want to help their friends to save their marriage. Helen is the one who suggests that she will start an affair with the husband of her friend so he stops his affair with a young student at the university and therefore he understands that this relationship is nothing serious. Garp on the other hand, is supposed to help the wife with her suffering and make her happy. They all have an affair until it just becomes unbearable and Garp and Helen have to stop it, otherwise it would ruin their own marriage.

But Helen, enjoying it the least of them, suffered it the most; when she finally called an end to it, she couldn’t help but show her euphoria. The other three couldn’t help but show their resentment; that she should appear so uplifted while they were cast into such gloom. Without formal imposition there existed a six-month moratorium on the couples’ seeing each other, except by chance. (Irving 213)

Irving shows a modern relationship of the 1960s and 1970s when the relationships were becoming more liberal, and things that were taboo a few years ago now were starting to become more usual. Helen is portrayed as a modern wife, earning money for the family to live, making a career as a university professor, and not devoting her life to her children and household, while Garp is depicted in more of a “housewife” role, being supported by his wife and taking care of the children and the household. Irving presents several aspects of feminism in this partnership. At first, he shows the positive feminist views, such as Helen in the role of the house supporter and career maker, who fully decides about her own future on her own and Garp supports her in her decisions. The role of Garp is also very positive towards feminism, considering that Garp gives Helen space for doing what she wants and takes responsibility for
taking care of the family. Moreover, he enjoys the role of a family and household caretaker and it fully satisfies him. However, there are also negative feminist topics presented in this partnership. That is the fact that Garp betrays his wife, and from what he says, he is just following men's natural instincts. Even though Helen is portrayed as a strong character, she suffers from Garp's affairs silently. These topics combined create a contradictory impression of the whole partnership, thus again the reader is on doubts what was the actual intention of the author while creating this example.

5.3. Men as violators, women as victims

Violence and rape is a central theme in the novel *The World According to Garp*. It is illustrated by both, just fictional stories written by Garp or real events in the novel. Irving presents this theme with a significant respect for women's vulnerability, however, always makes the men characters to the most inhuman violent acts on women. The brutality of rape and violence is illustrated and described in a real pain and suffering of women who experience violence from men either from physical or psychological oppression. To begin with, Ellen James is an example of a brutal violent act inflicted to an eleven year old little girl. She was brutally raped by a few men who afterwards removed her tongue to make sure she would not speak about what happened to her. Not only that she was raped, but the fact that her tongue was cut off makes the whole case even more bizarre.

The 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-year-old could write. Ellen James wrote a very careful description of the men, and they were caught, and they were tried and convicted. In jail, someone murdered them. (Irving 184)

Irving makes the readers of the novel stunned by the violence he portrays, especially by using a girl-character, which makes the situation even more disturbing. Another example of physical violence on a little girl is when Garp goes running to the park and he finds a little, about 10 year-old naked girl running ahead of him on the path. The little girl is raped in the park and Garp sees her right after it happens, but the man who did it is not there anymore. She
is scared, shaking and crying. Garp is shocked by what he sees and he wants to help her. “It was a cold day, late fall, and Garp saw the blood on the child’s things and her frightened swollen eyes. She screamed and screamed at him.” (Irving 192)

Being portrayed as a positive example for feminism, Garp’s role in these violent acts is the role of a saver and supporter. In the case of Ellen James, Garp supports and protects Ellen from the radical group of Ellen Jamesians, and he tries to fight for Ellen’s peace because the radical group as he says prolongs her trauma by making it public. Also, when finding a little girl in the park, he does his best in helping her and catching the man who abused her. It seems like through the character of Garp, Irving aims to depict men’s violence and show an example of man who stands on women’s side.

Rape and violence are indeed included in a brutal piece written by Garp The World According to Bensenhaver. The story depicts kidnapping of a lady by a sixteen year old teenager, who just wants to have her and kill her right after. She, in order to save her own life tries to satisfy him with oral sex, and afterwards while she’s being raped, she kills him with his own pocket knife. Mr. Bensenhaver is described as a criminal policeman who seeks for her and finds her right after she is raped and she kills the teenager. Bensenhaver expresses understanding of what she has done, and feels extremely sorry for her, since he considers rape a crime worse than murder. Bensehaver experienced this type of a crime on his own, when his wife was raped and killed while he was waiting for her to pick up the clothes from the public dryer. Three young guys put her head and arms into the dryer so she could not scream loud, raped her and afterwards she died because she had suffocated in her own clothes and vomit. Bensehaver is presented as an unusual criminal policeman, who shows sympathy to the victims of rape and violence and agrees with killing the sex offender for what he did.

Hope Standish, at the moment, felt safe at last in Bensenhaver’s world. She floated and dipped over the farmlands beside him, trying not to be sick. She was beginning to notice things about her body again – she could smell herself and feel every sore spot. She felt such disgust, but here was this cheerful policeman who sat there admiring her – his heart touched by her violent success. (Irving 412)
Brutalization of sex is a significant theme for Irving in this novel. He portrays women as victims and as weaker beings, demonstrating men either in the role of violators or rescuers, which are vivid examples of the ambivalence of feminism that Irving describes. He also generalizes rape and violence in a way that it seems that men are violent by nature and nothing can be done with it. On the other hand, he makes essential points that also men are aware of the existence of rape and violence caused to women and they are not disregarding it. Irving shows that any other type of men's oppression on women is the source of hatred of men that women feel.

5.4. Sexual themes and suspects

Sexuality is essential to Irving's writings in general, and it is one of the main themes in The World According to Garp. Irving uses the most extraordinary examples that go beyond the readers' imagination, thus it turns the novel into a daring and unique piece.

In the first place, the major sexual theme comes along with the character of Jenny Fields. Jenny, as previously stated, refuses to live in the usual gender role partnership and she chooses the way that she believes in, which is the greater freedom for women. Even though she does not intend to live with a man her whole life, she pines to have a child. The very first sexual and moral theme at the same time comes when she conceives a child with the mortally ill sergeant Garp. It seems like she does not even think about the moral point of view in this matter. She is sure that she is doing the sergeant a great favor since he is struggling with erections and his hands are wrapped into a bandage, therefore he cannot touch himself. Also, because of his erections, she knows that he has a strong sexual appetite and therefore conceiving a child should not be a problem with him. Additionally, she knows that he would be happy to leave something good after him, and a child is a perfect option. She only starts thinking about the child with Garp when she begins to spend more time with him, and she starts helping him out with his sexual or motherly needs by letting him suck her finger and also her breast to calm down.
If only his hands would heal, she thought. Then he could suck his thumb. When he woke from his suckling dreams, hungry to nurse, or so he imagined, Jenny would put her own finger to his mouth and let his lips tug at her. Though he had real, grown-up teeth, in his mind he was toothless and he never bit her. It was this observation that led Jenny, one night, to offer him her breast, where he sucked inexhaustibly and didn't seem to mind that there was nothing to be had there. Jenny thought that if he kept nursing at her, she would have milk; she felt such a firm tug in her womb, both maternal and sexual. Her feelings were so vivid – she believed for a while that she could possibly conceive a child simply by suckling the baby ball turret gunner.

(Irving 36)

The behavior of Jenny Fields seems irrational to others, however, she does everything with such conviction that it is simply right because it is how she feels it and what she wishes. Irving intends to show how a woman can be strong and brave in achieving her goals, and nothing can stop her, not even the moral issues or extreme behavior. This intention of the author could be understood in two different approaches. He either aims to depict a good feminine example who believes in freedom of women and who acts freely according to her own beliefs regardless of society’s expectations, or he condemns women who act according to their believes even though their believes are immoral and absurd. Jenny's behavior can be accepted in a sense that she wants a child but does not want any man to entitle her child. Also, she is sure that it is beneficial for the sergeant, even though he is not capable of saying anything against what she was doing.

'Garp?' Jenny whispered. She stepped out of the slip and her panties; she too off her bra and pulled back the sheet. 'Christ!' said the External, softly; his lips were blistered with burns. 'Goddamn shit!' cried the Vital Organ man. '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. (Irving 37)

Jenny becomes suspected by society and the reason is that she turns into a single mother and nobody knows who the father is, which is simply disturbing for that period of time in the 1940s, where single mothers were social outcasts. Not only that people do not know who the father of her child is, but she lives alone and raises the child by her own, moreover,
she does not keep her intentions of living like this a secret. She dares to say that she does not need a man to raise her child or support her; she knows she will manage by her own. That is hardly acceptable for society, thus she becomes a social outsider. When Garp grows up and begins to write stories because he wants to become a writer, it inspires Jenny and she writes her own novel called *A Social Suspect*, which appears to be a best-seller and considered a feminist masterpiece even though Jenny does not intend to seem like a feminist supporter. In this case, Irving either intends to promote the feminist voice and show that women are capable of being independent, even though society does not have the same opinion, or he aims to ridicule the position of women at the time of the 1940s in comparison with the time of the early 1980s where social circumstances were highly different, and single mothers were not condemned by society anymore. He also seems to express the need for women to come out of their comfort zone, and fight for their rights and possibility to do things their own way.

   Sexuality, in a different way, is of life importance to Garp, who lives a life full of sexual affairs and from his teenage years he tends to discover sexuality, for example even with prostitutes. However, he truly loves only one woman, which is Helen Holm. He marries her, has children with her but it does not stop him from enjoying sexuality with other women. He knows it is not correct but he just cannot help himself.

   Irving describes men as naturally sexually possessed, while women are more restrained in this matter. For men it comes from the past, from history, from animal instincts which they cannot deny. For women it is just not allowed, as Garp shows in his reaction when he finds out that Helen betrayed him as well. In this matter, women are portrayed as rather submissive as suffering silently from affairs their husbands have.

   David Willbern says that “the co-existence of desire and danger, and the dual postures of men as both rapist and rescuers and women as both victims and vigilantes, complicate any generalizations about Irving's uses of sexuality in *Garp*. Some of the feminist critics even considered the story pornographic, which David Willbern thinks is off the mark. “The issue is not Irving's pseudo-feminist moral outrage (about rape) versus whatever sexual excitement the story may provide a (very) few male readers, but between an impulse to protect female characters and an impulse to attack them, or to imagine them victimized.” (80) As Willbern claims, Irving uses the theme of sexuality in a diverse way; therefore it is difficult to generalize his intentions of the uses of sexuality in the book. Hence, ambivalence of the feminist views he portrays may be recognized again.
5.5. Women in sisterhood

Being the essence of feminism itself, women’s sisterhood portrayed in the novel needs to be discussed in order to maintain the fact that Irving included feminism in the novel even though he says he did not intend to write about gender issues, as stated in the theoretical part.

“Women in sisterhood” is a significant theme in the whole story. The main character Jenny Fields wants to help other women, give them strength and persuade them that life without men makes everything much easier and better. It starts during the war, when Jenny is a nurse at the department for mothers and newborns. Since the period of time is difficult and many men were to lose their lives in the war, many of those women who just gave birth to their children remained alone, without the support of their husbands. While the women tend to fall into depressions and sadness, Jenny finds it as a great case. She also longs for a child, however, without any help of a man. And she finds it an extremely convenient situation that these women remain without their husbands, just with their children. In fact, she even feels jealous and she just wishes something like that would happen to her. In the first place she wants to help and explain that the situation that they are going through is not as bad as it seems, and she wants to teach them basically how to reconcile the fact that it happened, and how to get the best out of it and understand that in many ways their situation is advantageous. She actually manages to give them strength, and many of them are leaving the hospital convinced that it is much better this way and in fact, they do not need any men at all.

“Don't you believe you're a good woman?” she'd ask them. Most of them thought they were.
“And isn't your baby beautiful? Most of them thought their babies were.
“And the father? What was he like?” A bum, many thought. A swine, a lout, a liar – a no-good run-out fuck-around of a man! But he's dead! sobbed a few.
“Then you're better off, aren't you?” Jenny asked. (Irving 15)

Irving's intentions are again slightly ambiguous in this case. It is not clear, whether he aimed to express that women need to be more self-conscious and realize that they do not need men to survive, or whether he rather intended to depict a negative example of a feminist stereotype that women do not need men. Considering the period of time in the 1940s, women were attached to their husbands especially due to existential reasons, thus Irving might have
also intended to show the necessity of women's self-realization in society by presenting Jenny's character who shares her experience and visions with other women.

The theme of sisterhood appears also when Irving depicts Jenny's talk to the prostitute in Vienna. In terms of gaining understanding to all women Jenny pays the prostitute for a talk in a coffeehouse. She needs to understand the lust that other women could possibly feel and she thinks that a prostitute might be the best person to ask. Jenny only aims to support her and she honestly sees that prostitution should be legal everywhere because every woman has the right to use her body as she wants to. This example shows the ambivalence in Irving's perception of women's choices of this type. He can be either supportive to the position of prostitutes in society because any woman should do what she wants with her own body, as Jenny claims, or he can be also ridiculing women who choose to be prostitutes, which is considered as inferior job to do.

The major part of the theme of sisterhood takes place when Jenny writes her autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect*. The book turns into a feminist master piece, written at the right time and the right place. It was an extensively discussed topic within the American women's society in the 1960's when Jenny published her book, and by publishing this book she supported women to speak out and fight against men's oppression. Irving seemingly represents Jenny as the positive side of feminism with the ideas that she represents in the book, which are mainly ideas of individual freedom and the right over women's own bodies. However, many of her standpoints actually do not promote feminist ideology; moreover, some of the ideas even reinforce feminist stereotypes. Despite of this fact, she is considered a feminist leader by women that realized something went wrong in their lives and now they wanted to change it. They believe that Jenny would show them how to live without a man, and that she would support them and help them gain the courage she has. She becomes the leader of feminist demonstrations, moreover, she offers her home for women that went through difficult situations in life because of men who treated them disrespectfully, and in many cases caused them physical and psychological harm to their health.

She became a figure of famous strength; women sought her advice. With the sudden success of *A Sexual Suspect*, Jenny Fields uncovered a nation of women who faced making choices about how to live; these women felt encouraged by Jenny's own example of making unpopular decisions. (Irving 186)
As already discussed, Jenny Fields is immensely similar to Betty Friedan who published her autobiographical book *The Feminine Mystique* (1960). Betty also opened the eyes of many women at the time just by describing the real feelings she had. She supported women in fulfilling their dreams, studying at universities and not being afraid that “too much education would be a marriage bar” (Friedan 12), and being overall self-confident women who are equal to men. She was convincing women not to become victims of fashion and beauty in order to attract men, not to sacrifice their life for children and household only but to follow their career dreams, not to depend on their husbands but find their hobbies and things to fulfill their time, not to be ashamed to speak about sexual or other sensitive topics, not to take anti-depressives to feel stronger but to do something about it, to share their problems with other women because they will feel relieved when they find out that they are not alone in what they feel, to be interested in politics, art, culture or news in the world, not to be passive and say their opinions, to read books,... (11) As stated in the theoretical part, Friedan contributed to women emancipation and she started a new fight for women's freedom. It was a very hard time for women due to society’s conventions and prejudices towards women and their roles. That is why the roles of women such as Betty Friedan or Jenny Fields in the novel were crucial for women because they gained strength and courage to do something about the situation they were in. Thus, they found out that they were not the only ones having some kind of a personal problem, and that gave them even more strength to act.

“These women must have suffered, in other way, themselves,” Jenny said. “That's what makes them want to get closer to each other.” (Irving 192)

Creating the remarkable similarity in Jenny's character with Betty Friedan, Irving maintained the clarity of feminism presented in the novel. The sense of sisterhood of women is obvious and the author's intentions are shown on the examples of women gathering together in order to achieve some change in their lives.
5.6. Extreme views

The aim of this subchapter is to depict the extreme views contained in the novel *The World According to Garp*, since they are essential to understand Irving's perception of feminist views and the ambivalence he portrays. There are several extreme views and circumstances, such as sexual extremes and assaults, extreme views on relationships with men, extreme feminism, extreme life and death situations, extreme social judgments, and extreme relationships.

Irving presents Jenny Fields, as an example someone of extreme views and extreme acts in order to achieve her goals. Jenny's view on life could also be considered extreme due to her attitude towards men and her assertions about co-existing with men. Her ideas are in a sense radical and uncompromising regarding men. She believes that men are not needed in women's lives since they are only source of patriarchal oppression for women who tend to be too dependent on men, since they provide them with material support. Jenny stands for independence of women, and she states that only without men women can reach their full independence. Jenny is highly concerned with male lust which only means a threat for women, as she claims.

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 13)

Jenny is depicted as being extreme in her views and beliefs regarding men and also as a violent character that can do anything in order to protect herself from men. That is, because of the issue that happens right at the beginning of the novel, when Jenny goes to the cinema and a soldier tries to touch her under her skirt. She basically slices the soldier's arm in half and removes a piece from his lips the scalpel. She remains completely calm, and later on she tells the police: “I was not trying to slash his throat,”... “I was trying to cut his nose off, but I missed.” (9) Willbern claims that the novel seems to be in sympathy to women's liberation and pointing out the threats for women in the world, mainly considering the threat of male violence. The cause of everything is the male lust, which seems to be the intention that the
author wants to promote. There were many discussions among the critiques regarding the feminist views contained in the book, and as Willbern writes in his book, an early reviewer of *The World According to Garp* wrote that the novel “is either the best pro-feminist book yet by a man or else the worst piece of male chauvinist garbage.... I still don't know which.” (qtd. in Willbern 80) Also, “Marilyn French reviewed the novel, concluding that “[Irving] seems to believe that feminism is a violent response to male sexuality... [The] villains of his book are feminists. (qtd. in Willbern 80) Doane and Hodges in their book on *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference* assume that *Garp* is less than ambivalent about feminism. “In fact, they claim it is conservative and defensive.” (qtd. in Willbern 80) Kim Loudermilk sees the novel as “a troubling view on fictional feminism.” (Loudermilk 66) It is apparently sympathetic, “Garp's feminists are grotesque, fanatical, silenced, and ultimately ineffective.” (66) Loudermilk claims that Irving's descriptions of feminists are of man-hating, violent women which had a negative impact on cultural opinion of feminism. (68) These opinions bring the analysis closer to the resolution, as they clearly stand by the idea that Irving's perception of feminism within the book is not clear, and in many cases it seems ambivalent since he combines both positive and negative feminist views.

Jenny is indeed the first example of “rape” in the story, even though broadly considered. She describes this fact in her autobiographical book *A Sexual Suspect* years later, and she is admired by many women even though she is a cause of social outrage. She never has any feelings of regret, and she is convinced this was the best decision of her life.

„Of course I felt something when he died.” Jenny Fields wrote in her famous autobiography. “But the best of him was inside me. That was the best thing for way I wanted to have a child. That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn't respect the rights of an individual.” (Irving 29)

Extreme could be indeed considered also society’s judgment of Jenny Fields at the time; however, it is only extreme if we compare it with the approach of society in the later period of time. During the 1940s, society was still quite puritan and did not allow many differences from the established norms, as discussed in the theoretical part of this paper. The social judgment of Jenny Fields is a significant theme that appears at the very beginning of the novel especially, but continues when Jenny publishes her autobiography containing her
shocking life experience. At the very beginning, society judges Jenny due to prejudices that women should get married, have children and become housewives. Jenny refuses to follow this path, therefore she is rejected by society and becomes looked down upon and a social outsider. She is known as a woman who hates and wounds men (such as the episode in the cinema with a soldier). As Willbern asserts about Jenny, “she vigorously rejects conventional definitions of femininity in terms of a sexual relation to a man, and hates the idea of maternity if it involved such relations, although as a nurse she loves to care for babies. She finds the existence of lust a mystery. These attitudes, she believed, made her a “sexual suspect,” which also became the title of her best-selling autobiography. Antagonism, not merely toward men but toward society, was in her nature.” (77) Irving's intentions in Jenny's portrayal are not clear considering feminism, thus an ambiguous understanding of her acts is created. She promotes a new way of life in society and she maintains the fact that a woman is capable of making a living by herself, supporting her child on her own and living without a man and any kind of a sexual contact with a man, and by the way she leads her life shows what rights of women and equality are to her. On the other hand, her intention is not to fight for feminism as such; in fact, she does not even know what feminism means at the beginning. It seems that her prior intention is to live her own way without men, and spread the idea that men are only violators and a source of oppression for women. Also, she promotes the fact that sexual desire is only a male lust, which is something that causes men to be violators with women as their victims.

Extreme in acts and philosophy is the radical feminist group of the Ellen Jamesians. Irving portrays women who are desperately wanting to seek revenge of men's oppression which they experienced themselves or what was experienced by the victim Ellen James, who this group stands for. By the act of removing their tongues, they express the support for the little raped girl Ellen James, even though she does not wish this to happen. Again, there are more ways how to understand this radical group in Irving's depiction. At first, these women view feminism as a “battle between the sexes” (Larsson 24) where men are considered violent enemies and source of fear. Ellen Jamesians seem to struggle for “superiority of women and the exclusion of men,” (Larsson 24) rather than a struggle for equality of both genders and women's rights in the society. Therefore, the assumption is that they definitely do not represent constructive feminism; however, it is more a type of feminism leading to self-destruction by a complete alienation from men and reinforcing extreme ideas about excluding
men from the society, since men are seen as violators and enemies. Additionally, there are several occasions where the violent aspect of Ellen Jamesian feminism is demonstrated and finally it leads to the assassination of Garp. This feminist radical group has no philosophy; the only idea is of men hatred. (Larsson 25)

,,Rape is every woman's problem, “Jenny said. Garp hated his mother's „everyone” language most of all. A case, he thought, of carrying democracy to an idiotic extreme.
It's every man's problem, too, Mom. The next time there's rape, suppose I cut my prick off and wear it around my neck. Would you respect that, too?
,,We are talking about sincere gestures, “Jenny said.
,,We are talking about stupid gestures, “Garp said. (Irving 192)

Secondly, as previously discussed, the radical group is highly similar in the basic thoughts to “The Personal is Political” phase, which stands for the basic feminist idea of personal problems being political since they are the result of a long term oppression of women in society. Women were trying to fight for their rights and consideration in society, even though the pressure from the society was enormous. The Ellen Jamesians group seems to choose an extreme way of drawing public attention to maintain women’s rights and essential problems of women a topic of discussion in society, and they show how far the oppression of men can actually go.

Irving's inspirations could be from more sources, and one of them could be for instance the radical feminism in the United States which appeared around the late 1960s. Similarly to the group of Ellen Jamesians, the emphasis was mostly on violence of men against women and gender inequality. There was only a minority of radical feminists who expressed hatred towards men and who actively supported campaigns around issues such as rape, sexual harassment or domestic violence. (Dean) One of the most known radical feminists was Valerie Solanas, who wrote a famous book called SCUM Manifesto (1968), which is an acronym for “Society for Cutting Up Men” (Heller) This book contains arguments that men ruined the world and now women needed to improve it. SCUM is an organization which is supposed to overthrow society and destroy the male sex. Valerie was inspired by her own life experience. She had a negative relationship with her mother and her stepfather, therefore she was sent away to her grandparents. Her alcoholic grandfather abused her so she
ran away and became homeless. In 1968, she shot Andy Warhol (who was supposed to steal her script), and afterwards she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and sentenced to prison for three years including psychiatric hospital time. (Baer) Valeria Solanas was probably the most radical feminist in the United States at the time, and some features of her behavior are alike to the feminist group of Ellen Jamesians. She uses violence against men in order to have revenge, and it seems to get over her head which leads her to desperate behavior resulting even in murder. Similarly in *The World According to Garp*, the groups of radical feminists seem to live by the idea of revenge on men, which finally also lead to the murder of Garp, who criticizes them the most.

Considering all the possible intentions of the author in the depiction of the Ellen Jamesians, the conclusion that arises is that Irving managed to create an ambivalence in the actual meaning of the group within the book, thus the reader cannot decide whether the group is actually really speaking for women's rights from the basics of the group's philosophy, or whether it is a negative example mirroring feminism in a wrong way, and showing feminists as radical man-haters capable of doing anything to achieve their goals.

As Willburn says, Garp is living in “a place of damage, breakdowns, breakups, sudden shift from joy to despair.” In fact, the world Irving describes is populated with “a variety of freaks and misfits – like the man who could only walk on his hands, the trans-sexual pro football player, Roberta Muldoon, the self-mutilated Ellen Jamesians, the accidentally mutilated Michael Milton – and a relatively normal family of Garps who try to comprehend and survive their surroundings. This world is absurd, tragicomic and extreme.” (78) Just like Willburn claims, the novel is full of extremes and absurd situations, which are depicted in a unique, sorrowful and humorous way at the same time, which is what makes Irving's writings special and joyful to read.

To sum up, Irving portrays feminism in extreme ways in order to reinforce the effect of shocking of the reader. He uses unconventional themes such as gender issues; however, his portrayal is in many ways contradictory and creates a confusion of the reader's thoughts about Irving's perception of these issues.
6. Conclusion

In this thesis an attempt to provide an analysis of Irving's perception of feminism is made, thus show the ambivalence of feminist views portrayed by John Irving in the novel *The World According to Garp* was contrived. In order to successfully do so, historical background of feminist movements was introduced in the theoretical section. Thus, the first part of the paper included an explanation of the way how women were actually perceived in society throughout years. In short, this section introduced the circumstances of the society women lived in throughout the 1940s to the 1980s. These periods are described to provide with a clear understanding of the female characters in from the novel *The World According to Garp* since the setting of the novel starts in the 1940s and continues until the 1980s, when the novel was actually written. The theoretical part of this thesis also provided explanation of changes that women went through, and challenges that they facing within time. There it was maintained that women were historically perceived as the submissive and “imperfect men,” and that women never shared equality with men in history. However, it is also stated that even though women were mostly considered only as housewives without any future career perspective, for a long period of time they were satisfied with being homemakers and most of them did not have the need to change it simply because they were provided with everything they needed to live well by their husbands. Yet, to draw a clear beginning of consciousness rising in women's lives, this chapter is also provided with an explanation of one of the most famous second wave feminists Betty Friedan, who wrote the book *Feminine Mystique* (1963) based on her own experience and researches she did to describe when was the point in women's lives to start thinking about the circumstances they lived in a little deeper. After learning what the problem was, and discovering the need of self-realization, women began to change feminist history. As a result, women started working and earning some money for themselves which meant a certain part of independence from their husbands, due to the introduction of contraceptive pills they started being able to willingly control conception, which enabled them to gain more time for building a career before they started families, and overall they began to feel more satisfied about their lives.

Since this thesis’ major concern was the analysis of the author's perception of the feminism as presented in the novel *The World According to Garp*, and consequent analysis of the findings maintaining that Irving's intentions were clearly ambiguous, explanations of the
author's life and inspirations are also depicted in order to understand the possible reasons of his novels' themes. It was proved, that Irving used a number of autobiographical features in his novels, such as sexual themes, wrestling, travels to Vienna, or fear for his children. In regards to his understanding of feminism as such, he seems to be ambivalent in his own standpoints towards feminism in his novels, which supposedly might be the reason why the feminist views presented in *The World According to Garp* appear ambivalent to the reader. Additionally, some of his writings were introduced in order to maintain Irving's use of similar gender issues and other autobiographical features in his novels. To learn the happening of the story itself, a short description of the novel is included in the theoretical part as well. Last but not least, postmodern literature and features in *The World According to Garp* were depicted in order to understand some of the bizarre and absurd themes Irving used within the novel.

The main part of this Master's thesis focused on the analysis of Irving's perception of the feminist features portrayed in his novel *The World According to Garp*, following the maintenance of the ambivalence of feminism portrayed that originated in his ambiguous intentions. The novel is set in the United States from the 1940s to the 1980s where circumstances for women living in that period of time were difficult and significant changes were seen as denoted in the theoretical part. The major analysis was executed in one chapter with following division into several subchapters maintaining the analysis of the novel's major themes. The major chapter dealt with the ambivalence of the feminism presented in the novel which proved to drift from positive to negative feminist perspectives respectively. Jenny Fields, the main character of the novel, portrays both, the positive and the negative sides of feminism. Going against mainstream society in the 1940s, she wants to work and be independent, she does not want to get married or have anything to do with any men. After publishing her autobiographical book, she is considered as a strong feminist leader and example of independence for all women in the United States. Taking part in feminist protests, she implies the need for feminist movements and the existence of a feminist voice in society. On the other hand, she is depicted as a man hater who asserts that men are but only a source of violence and women's oppression. She thinks there is no need to co-exist with men except for one thing, which is conceiving children. Wanting a child so much, she decides to conceive it with a mortally injured soldier, who cannot defend himself, which raises a number of moral questions as well. Another major character is Garp, Jenny's son. Being portrayed as a both positive and negative feminist character, he allows his wife Helen to build her career while he
stays at home with children, being supported by his wife and mother financially, and on the other hand, he betrays his wife a number of times since he follows men's instinct for lust. Helen, Garp's wife, is portrayed rather as a feminist positive character by being a self-conscious woman going for her career and full-filling her dreams. However, what makes her character slightly negative is the fact that she is oppressed by Garp since she silently suffers from his affairs, and does not have the strength to do anything about it.

In the following part the analysis, as the ambivalence in perceiving feminist topics by the author was analyzed, the subchapters analyzing the major themes within the novel and maintaining the ambivalence in feminism are depicted. At this point, a theme of Irving's perception of women in the novel was depicted and compared to the historical background of the situation for women in society. The analysis followed with another theme of perception partnership within the novel. Both these themes were indeed crucial to analyze in order to understand Irving's perception of feminism as such, which is clearly mirrored in these examples, where he shows clear ambiguity in his perceptions, thus the feminist issues presented appear ambivalent as well.

Irving's perception of women as victims and men as violators is the next subchapter. Irving often likens women to victims in sexual oppression of men, who are on the other hand often portrayed as sexual violators by nature. As it was noted, this kind of a description of women in relation towards men maintains the analysis of the ambivalence of Irving's depiction of feminism, since again he portrays women as the weaker ones while men are the major, the stronger and the one obsessed by their instincts, which leads to almost seeming like Irving's tends to justify men's violence, since they cannot influence it.

Another significant theme in the novel is sexual matters and suspects, which seems to be Irving's favorite theme in most of his novels. Being different as not having a husband in early twenties and being a single mother, Jenny Fields appears to be a target of suspicion by society of the time. Irving maintained the situation women had to go through when wanting to live differently than others. However, a reader cannot know whether Irving was being positive about Jenny being different and whether he wanted to support women like her, or if he was rather ridiculing the position of women at the time and the fact that they could not decide according on their own but had to follow society’s mainstream positions, otherwise they would be social outsiders, just like Jenny was. In short, sexual matters are depicted especially on the character of Jenny in comparison with her son, Garp. Jenny does not understand the
lust people experience, while Garp is driven by the lust almost his whole life.

Additionally, sections devoted to the themes “Women in sisterhood” and “Extreme views” are also described, since these themes represent a considerable part of the novel. By description of “Women in sisterhood” it was meant to maintain the feminist issues presented within the novel. Being the strongest feminine character in the novel, Jenny since the beginning of the story supports women to become independent, and finally she becomes a feminist leader supporting women across the United States, and helping them in her sanatorium to recover from men's oppression. In the last section, “Extreme views” were again Jenny's views depicted in the first place. Jenny is a very unique character that does not follow any other life views but her own. They are in many ways extreme, be it generally or just for society at the time. Having extreme views on men and doing extreme things in order to protest against men's violence, that is the radical feminist group of Ellen Jamesians seemingly portrayed as the negative example of feminism depicted by Irving. By portraying this example, Irving's being ambiguous in the actual meaning of the radical group as such. It could be either understood that he is ridiculing feminism and women in a large scale, or that he is speaking for the women's rights by the basic philosophy of the group, which is making the personal issues of women a political topic in order to show the oppression of women and the results of it.

In almost every case of a character or a situation depicted within the novel, Irving remains ambiguous about the initial meaning, which in the end creates an impression of ambivalence in feminism presented, and the reader might be easily confused of the author's intentions which are indeed not clear. Irving generally does not consider himself a feminist author, however, both feminist supportive features and feminist stereotypes can be found in his novel. Thus the novel allows the readers to understand it in a way which is the closest to them.
Résumé

This diploma thesis deals with analysis of the perception of feminism described by John Irving in the novel The World According to Garp (1987). Irving appears to be ambiguous in his primary intentions of creating feminist characters and situations within the novel, thus the feminist issues themselves are portrayed in an ambivalent way, hence the reader is confused with the meaning of feminism Irving intended to present. The theoretical part of the paper is devoted to the illustration of feminist history with prior focus on the period of the 1940s until the 1980s since it is the setting of the novel, and it is crucial to understand the circumstances for women in society of the time. Challenges and changes for women in history is another chapter within the theoretical part, where the most significant feminist authors are depicted. In order to understand the author’s inspirations, another chapter is devoted to John Irving and his life, writings, and last but not least, a short description of the novel The World According to Garp is depicted. The last subchapter of the theoretical part describes the postmodern features in The World According to Garp, since the novel is partly classified as postmodern. The second part of the thesis deals with the analysis of Irving's perception of feminism, and his intentions to depict feminism in an ambivalent way. In order to maintain the analysis, the following subchapters deal with the major themes of the novel and the feminist aspects contained in these themes. Even though Irving does not consider himself a feminist author it is possible to find a number of features that speak about the opposite. Not even the literal critiques can agree on how to actually evaluate Irving's novel from the feminist point of view. Although several features supportive of feminism can be found in the novel, there are also features that enforce feminist stereotypes.

Resumé

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