# Alienation as Satire: A Fool's Paradise in *The World According to Garp* by John Irving

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# THE ALIEN: OBSERVER, PARTICIPANT, AND TRICKSTER

Our identity in early life is determined by how other people act toward us, depending on what they think they know of us. The more mysterious we are (the less fact known about us), the greater the need and desire for others to speculate, and eventually "create" an identity for us that does not disturb their sense of "normalcy" or reality. That makes us candidates for either acceptance or rejection in their reality—if we choose to be a part of it. Most of us find it unbearable to be ordinary, cellophane. We have the need to be noticed, whether it be for good or bad. A few of us are unique:

What could be exactly different about a five-year-old boy was not clear, but there was a certain sleek, dark wet look to his head (like the head of a seal), and the compactness of his body brought back the old speculation about his genes. He could climb anything. (*Garp*, 29)

There are participants and observers, in varying degrees, in all of us. Perhaps the weight and balance of each of these qualities determines the degree of alienation we are capable of. Imagine a see-saw with "norm" in the middle and the extremes of "observer" and "participant" at either end. I have witnessed the strict observer resent the participant because the observer may lack the physical or social confidence to be active. The participant may be completely naive to the observer's feelings or so completely selfabsorbed that he/she is oblivious to the world you and I exist in, living in a "fool's paradise" of their own design. On the other hand, the observer can be a rare and valuable intellectual tool in the understanding of society. There is a quality of terminal uniqueness in either extreme, and possibly "comfort" in such labels when one feels uncomfortable at either end of this bi-polar see-saw. That we are all terminal is definite, and perhaps we have all felt isolated in the peculiarities and "isms" we express that set up apart from the herd–feeling like the square peg that doesn't fit in the round hole. As most adolescents grow up and out of these ruts by logical maturation they realize their uniqueness is actually commonly experienced. Some are sadly "arrested" in these traps that become self-feeding traumas. What about those incapable of either position? Is this where the serial killer emerges and the Ellen Jamesians cut out their own tongues in order to identify with other human beings that have done the same? Are they so caught in the fringes of active society that rage is all they can express? Have they no core identity?

"You make people too angry," Helen told him, in bed. "You get them all wound up. You inflame." (*Garp*, 389)

He had made Pooh Percy too angry; at least that was clear. (*Garp*, 414)

Looking back at people, places, and events that have profoundly changed my life, I realize that these changes were spontaneous—sparklike in nature—that came completely by surprise. As corny as this sounds I was readily "combustible" material waiting for the ignition of the "spark." I recall, not long ago, a colleague twenty years my junior. We were amazingly similar in many respects, such as our beliefs about life in general, literary tastes, and even physical appearance (sans my twenty extra years). It was uncanny. We would sometimes even show up at work wearing nearly identical clothing.

We had yet a deeper connection in which we saw much of our unknown (alien) selves in each other, and allowed these "other" selves to speak. Time spent together could become disconcerting, alternately attracting and repelling each of us to the other, arrogance intact.

...he shared with Garp the virtue, or the vice, of arrogance. Like Garp, he was aggressive in the way only someone who believes totally in himself can be aggressive. (*Garp*, 221)

We could literally verbalize each other's thoughts. It was like being split open on a buffet table, served up on the half-shell. The self-clarity was electrifying and frightening. The association was short lived, but intense. For me, the essence of my past was breathing right in front of me, in the flesh. Choosing to re-live any of that past, I would have lost the living of today. How could I have lived the present evolution of my progress while attempting to direct the destiny of another? I became both participant and observer. The other being (the colleague), I believe, was performing for me, in my drama, as the Trickster. What joy to see myself twenty years ago, but today! What opportunity to comprehend what I had never understood (or had capacity to understand) before this moment! What discovery to have the strength to say no to the fantasy of myself standing before me. I was freed in that instant of the bondage of self. This alien-Trickster had allowed me a look back, in wonder, not regret or fear, at the fresh promise of youth. I was free not to grab and steer another's opportunity for growth for my ego. Whew! That was the most enlightening and difficult thing I've ever not done. As much as Garp is wrestling and jogging his way through life, he teaches us, the readers, to look for our own worth in the keen observation of the values of other aliens.

Irving writes much of Garp in an autobiographical fashion, like the previous paragraph, partly I believe to put his reader and his own ego at ease to wander around in the protected alienation of a fool's paradise, changing vehicles for his Trickster's "voice" at will. Ironically using Pooh Percy as Garp's assassin is what we, the readers, least expect. She is the weakest and most insipid of Garp's childhood playmates—the washed out and silent one who is still wearing diapers well into her pre-teen years. Maybe Pooh qualifies with the gang tipping down one end of the bi-polar seesaw. Pooh is the arrested observer.

She is the necessary Trickster for Chapter 19, "Life After Garp." You sometimes don't know when Irving is dead serious or just being a smart ass about being dead serious. Speaking of Robo in "The Pension Grillparzer";

He went to a private school and was well liked there, but he was killed by a homemade bomb in his first year at the university. He was not even "political." In his last letter to my parents he wrote: "The self-seriousness of the radical factions among the students is much over-rated. The food is execrable." Then Robo went to his own history class, and his classroom was blown apart. (*Garp*, 126)

Irving illustrates in several episodes by elevating situations of a regular nature to be status of high camp hyperbole. Irving's Trickster is always at work right down to the pebble caught inside the heel of your shoe.

I feel that a large part of Irving's message in *Garp* is that we're all aliens in a world where the normal and realistic are not commonplace, and the bizarre and unlikely are everyday occurrences. Furthermore, we're powerless over other people, places, and things, and the best way to deal with life is to:

#### BE A JOKE UNTO YOURSELF

Live! Live totally, live passionately,
live intelligently, live lovingly,
Become aflame, so intense,
so total, that each moment
starts having the flavor of eternity.

(This Very Place This Lotus Paradise, 204)

We've all known this Trickster for centuries as the antagonistic and dualistic court jester, and he is no alien to the weeping clown of opera, art, theater, and literature. He's the Joker in any deck of cards at a poker game on a Saturday night. He's as old as the ancient Viking messenger Loki in the mystic Runes. He is luck AND adversity. He is alienation and familiarity, everything and nothing. He is raw energy.

The image I most often conjure is the "Fool" card, number zero in the Rider Tarot deck. The figure is a young man dressed in a richly embroidered tunic, in the act of travelling toward the edge of precipice. His head, however, is looking up at the sky. A little white dog yaps at his ankles. In one hand he holds the white rose of purity, and in the other he holds a staff thrown over his shoulder to which a small bundle is attached (his worldly cares/possessions?). The background color of the card is yellow, suggesting a brightly auspicious situation. If he is in danger of stepping over the cliff, he is oblivious to danger—focusing instead on something above him. Is he making the "blind leap of faith"

into the void? Is he unknowingly stepping into the chasm with a pure heart? Is it possible for us to even warn him if we wanted to? Most importantly, would he listen to us?

The Trickster for the reader of *Garp* is John Irving. He enwraps us in such a total commitment of the moment with Garp so that after Garp is assassinated, we actually miss his company. T.S. Garp has become real to us and we grieve him, so we continue to think about what he was, what he said, and what he did. We become lost without him.

#### WHY GARP?

My chief reason for choosing *Garp* to teach in a unit on alienation is to raise the level of consciousness of both the teacher and the student toward tolerance—especially toward the intolerant. If the joy of the uncertainty of life is one of Irving's messages in <u>Garp</u>, satire is his vehicle in holding up to our eyes for inspection the foibles of ourselves and other aliens like us that make up society. Both Jenny and Garp have cracked the mold of conventional society's perceptions of reality and made themselves targets, sacrifices of an ignorantly frightened world. After Garp's first bout with fame, Jenny writes him:

"Like me," Jenny Fields wrote her son, "it appears you are going to be the beneficiary of one of the many popular misunderstandings of our time." (*Garp*, 342)

Jenny and Garp are Tricksters, created by Irving, to be "necessary troublemakers" and "cultural tonics" that probe the deep waters of the American psyche—"manipulating the untouchable." (*Power to Hurt*, Ch. 5) By stirring up the unconscious, the Trickster brings to the surface our past and present fears, our hope of success (and fear of failure), our need for acceptance of ourselves and from others, and most importantly, the question of if we are willing to accept and live what we really *feel*. Garp's mother, nurse Jenny Fields, begins Irving's canon with an almost virgin birth, and a maverick attitude for living life on her own terms.

In this dirty-minded world, we are either somebody's wife of somebody's whore – or fast on your way to becoming one or the other. (*Garp*, 11)

Jenny has refused the "fixed" American values of the 1940's and 50's and alienated herself from mainstream society, and almost her family, upper-crust New England industrialists that believe a woman's purpose in attending college is to meet an appropriate husband. Thus, she becomes a nurse.

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 share my body or my life to have one. (*Garp*, 13)

So, Garp grows up and matures with his mother's sense of practical self-reliance at an exclusive boarding school, where Jenny is head nurse.

Temperamentally, the child appeared to resemble his mother: determined, possibly dull, aloof but eternally watchful. Although he was small for his age, he seemed unnaturally mature in other ways; he had a discomforting calmness. (*Garp*, 29)

He plays and learns with other faculty children, but retains his "mystery of origin." Though no knows who Garp's father is except Jenny, the missing parent is unsettling to the small community.

... Stewart Percy was not looking for where Garp was hurt. He was looking at Garp's shining brown eyes ... "I spent enough time in the Pacific to recognize Jap eyes when I see them. I told you it was a Jap" ... ("it" being Garp's father). (*Garp*, 45)

Garp also wears his uniqueness by a missing earlobe, lost in an encounter with Bonkers, Stewart Percy's dog, a privileged neighborhood cur that runs free without a leash. Upon graduation, Garp decides he wants to write and goes to Vienna with Jenny. Jenny writes her life story in Vienna while Garp is writing, and Jenny unknowingly becomes a prophetess when her autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*, interprets the suppressed voice of an entire generation of women, becoming the first "feminist manifesto," with Garp as the key figure. Garp's writing is serious fiction, but minuscule in volume. Garp lives in his mother's shadow, but defines his own set of peculiarities in adulthood. He has grown up virtually alien.

When Jenny took Garp to Europe, Garp was better prepared for the solitary confinement of a writer's life than most eighteen-year olds ... He was already thriving in a world of imagination; after all, he had been brought up by a woman who thought solitary confinement was a perfectly natural way to live. It would be years before Garp noticed that he didn't have any friends. (*Garp*, 82)

Garp is, unknowingly, a feminist, and evolves to become very much his mother's son, striving to do the right thing.

UNSUCCESSFUL WRITER NO FAILURE AS HERO!

CITIZEN CATCHES PARK PERVERT:

SON OF FAMOUS FEMINIST HAS KNACK FOR HELPING GIRLS ... (*Garp*, 146)

Just a word about Garp's origin—his father was a seriously wounded turret-ball aircraft gunner whom Jenny nursed as he gradually slipped away from life and back into a fetus-like state. The conception was passionless but fruitful for Jenny as well as an act of mercy for the fading soldier named T.S. Garp.

The story Garp knew was all that Jenny would tell anyone who was bold enough to ask. Jenny's story was a sobering three sentences long.

- 1. The father of Garp was a soldier.
- 2. The war killed him.
- 3. Who took the time for weddings when there was a war? (*Garp*, 26)

John Irving's purpose in *Garp* is to encourage us as humans to be examples of tolerance by being tolerant of the intolerant, as we will discuss in the HOW section of this look into alienation. Irving wants us to laugh at ourselves and the world around us and cherish the energy that is life by living in the moment.

#### **HOW: TEACHING STRATEGIES**

Irving uses the literary technique of the <u>story</u> within the <u>story</u> to help the reader better understand symbol, character, and underlying theme. Of the three "stories" in *Garp*, the most memorable is "The Pension Grillparzer." The predominant figure and symbol of this story is Duna, the unicycling bear. Duna is domesticated and is a productive and useful circus performer in his prime. As he grows older, housing laws forbid Duna living in the pension with humans, so he is abandoned to a cage in the alley, where he is antagonized by cats and children. He becomes very depressed. Finally, despite his advancing years, Schonbrunn Zoo accepts him as a charity case. In one last attempt to regain some usefulness and dignity, Duna attempts to unicycle for the spectators at the zoo. Being unstable and old, he loses his balance and falls when somebody laughs. He then becomes stressed from embarrassment and develops a rash on his great chest. All his fur must be shaved. He literally dies of embarrassment.

Who ever heard of a shaved bear? (*Garp*, "The Pension Grillparzer") Could this be a comment on how we (society) deal with the elderly and less productive beings in our environment? Another character in this story illustrates the "brave optimism" (*Garp*, 403) of the man who can only walk on his hands because he has no shin bones. His only option for work is the circus.

Irving makes a <u>parable</u> from the <u>dictum</u> in the Old Testament, "an eye for an eye," to "an ear for an ear." As a child, Garp loses one of his earlobes to the unleashed neighborhood dog, Bonkers. Years later, on Garp's graduation day from Steering, he has another encounter with "Bonkie," only this time:

In the scuffle, an ear appeared—in Garp's mouth—and Garp bit it. He bit as hard as he could, and Bonkers howled. He bit Bonker's ear in memory of his own missing flesh; he bit him for the four years he'd spent at Steering and for his mother's eighteen years. (*Garp*, 79)

The entire novel has the <u>mythic</u> quality of the Bible. Garp is conceived of an almost "virgin birth," of a father of mysterious origin. His mother is worshipped as the prophetess of the age, and both are terminated by an intolerant society. Garp is assassinated at the age of thirty-tree, the same age at which the Christ was crucified. The <u>epilogue</u> trails the outcomes of the Jenny and Garp disciples and family members, revealing in Irving's ironic style the particular maining or dis-ease that claims each.

<u>Satire</u> and <u>hyperbole</u> are used extensively, holding up for ridicule sex roles, self-help groups, protest groups and human nature. Roberta Muldoon, a key character, is a former tight end for the Philadelphia Eagles that has had a sex change operation and becomes a devotee of Jenny's and a close friend to Garp. She, formerly known as Robert Muldoon, had had her bouts with the intolerant species in society; but after her death, with the band playing, and the flag flying at half mast as the Dallas Cowboys kicked off to the Eagles, the announcer said:

... "she didda lot for" ... and he struggled, while Duncan waited to hear from whom—"She didda lot for people wid complicated lives," the sports announcer said, surprising himself and Duncan Garp—but with dignity.

The Ellen James Society is a protest group of women who have cut out their tongues in memory of an eleven year old girl who had her tongue cut out by the two men who raped her so she couldn't talk. Garp is severely intolerant of these intolerant women, and Jenny's acceptance of them is part of his "lesson" in tolerance.

Although he felt deeply disturbed by what had happened to Ellen James, he only felt disgust at her grown-up, sour imitators... (*Garp*, 136)

# Garp to Jenny:

... "The next time there's a rape suppose I cut my prick off and wear it around my neck. Would you respect that too?" (referring to tongues being cut out in protest)

"We're talking about sincere gestures," Jenny said.

"We're talking about *stupid* gestures," Garp said. (*Garp*, 137)

Ellen James does not approve of these women either, and later in the novel while living with the Garp's, speaks out openly against them. An Ellen Jamesian attempts to run Garp over in a dirty white Saab while he is jogging. She does not succeed.

Garp assumes the traditional role of the mother in his family. He cooks and cleans house; he runs (jogs), and writes. He also worries and frets over the safety of his children, becoming obsessed with it.

I wave them over; they always stop. "What happened?" they always ask. "You didn't see my children, did you? I repeat. "A little boy pulling a little girl in a red wagon?" "No," the bewildered speeder says. "I saw children, some children. But I don't think I saw those children. Why?" "Because you almost killed them," I say. "But I didn't see them!" the speeder protests. "You were driving too fast to see them!" I say. This is sprung on them as if it were proof of their guilt... (*Garp*, 230)

Garp is forced to dress in "drag" (as a woman) to disguise his identity as a male in order to attend his own mother's funeral. No men are allowed at a "feminist" funeral. He is, of course, discovered, and narrowly escapes with the aid of a nurse named Dotty, and Roberta's famous blocking.

Farther up the aisle he felt his falsies being punched; ... "Take off, Garp!" Roberta cried. He ran ... someone's blow landed where it aimed. "Try to get up," she said, gently. He saw that she was a nurse ... She took his arm and led him through the remaining mob. No one appeared to want to hurt him when he was with her. (*Garp*, 360)

Irving is generous and gentle in teaching his reader to tolerate and embrace the spontaneity of life. I believe he wants the reader to see again as a child, with wonder and awe at the unfolding of events. An example of this teaching is the word "undertoad," Walt's mispronunciation of the word undertow -- meaning the current under the surface tide that pulls you helplessly out to sea, and often fatal for a child. "Undertoad" comes to mean to us lurking danger, something amiss. But this, too, is reconciled by Garp as he is dying, as part of the natural rhythm and flow of things—that ultimately, the undertoad is nothing to fear because it's part of you and always has been. The undertoad is the alien part of ourselves that we eventually come to *accept*, if not completely understand. Death.

It was yielding, like the warm wrestling mats; it smelled like the sweat of clean boys—and like Helen, the first and last woman Garp had loved. The Under Toad, Garp knew now, could even look like a nurse; a person who is familiar with death and trained to make practical response to pain. (*Garp*, 413)

More specific strategies would include: 1) chapter-by-chapter worksheets for sequence of content; 2) traditional plot analysis, including exposition, rising action, conflict, climax, falling action, and denouement; 3) character analysis by category

including static, dynamic, flat, and round types, and 4) most importantly theme development.

More creatively, I have included some sample questionnaires and prompts that seem to be effective in priming the student for the novel. The first of these is a PRE-UNIT-SELF-QUESTIONNAIRE designed to specifically ask provocative questions, personal questions such as, "If you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?" After the students answer the questions, they are paired randomly, and interview each other. This is a good ice-breaker for the beginning of a semester with a new class—Instant intimacy, on a group level. The random pairing discourages clique activity. After the pairs of students have interviewed each other, each stands up in front of the class and tells about the other. This sounds intimidating, but the surprise element works in dispelling feelings of fear. When all members of the class are brought to the same level and become "equal" in value, out of their cliques and "alien" to their partner, a bonding occurs. There is always surprise at the similarities of each other's alien uniqueness.

Another strategy is an AUTOBIOGRAPHY PROJECT that consists of four parts: 1) history of home and family; 2) poetry about life or self-definition; 3) photo essay in which a photo of a close friend or relative is explained, like where the photo was taken, what was the occasion, and a few details about it; and 4) me: then and now, including a photo of the student when younger, and then today accompanied by a piece of writing showing comparisons and contrasts. Four pieces of writing are needed for this project, and a visual aide will be constructed. (Wood) A project focused more specifically on a novel would be a summation project and consists of TEN STATEMENTS TO MAKE ABOUT A NOVEL, the last "statement" being a visual for the specific novel (Peck). As most adolescents are most obsessed with themselves, it becomes easier for them to write about themselves. LIFE MAPPING uses a point-and-line graph on an "X" and "Y" grid axis, one grid corresponding to the student's age, and the other to the degree of "good" or "bad" in relation to the experience. (Reif) I have modified these formats somewhat.

Garp contains expletives and specific references to the discovery, politics, and motivations of sex. These references are necessary to the life force of the novel, and provide humor and insight into human nature. They are not to be glossed over and ignored, but neither are these incidents to be stressed by the teacher. Any discussion, in the proper frame of reference, should be brought up by the student, allowing them to make their own assumptions as to the relevance of its place in the novel. The teacher's role in such discussion is to monitor its appropriateness in the frame of reference of the text only.

He (Garp) once wrote that a novel was "only a place for storage -- of all the meaningful things that a novelist isn't able to use in his life." (*Garp*, 412) I believe that all of us, not only novelists, have enormous storehouses of experience in our memories and psyches that can heal others, and in the healing of others, so heal ourselves. We have the

need to give and receive, thus ending our alienation. Alienation is like a cancer that more cures are being found for every day. Our most valuable tool as humans is our ability to be honest, open, and willing to make a move -- not necessarily the first move toward a fellow alien traveling in a fool's paradise.

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. (*Garp*, 432)

# **CLASSROOM HANDOUTS**

Below are copies of handouts that can be used with the projects described above

# PRE-UNIT SELF INTERVIEW

|     | NAME:  |
|-----|--|
|     | DATE/PER:  |
| 1.  | Where were you born? Do you ever return there to visit?  |
| 2.  | How many members are in your family? Where are you in sequence?  |
| 3.  | If you were an animal, what would you be? Why?   |
| 4.  | Who is the most important person in your life? Why?  |
| 5.  | What is one value (something you believe in strongly) that you would never change your mind about, no matter what?   |
| 6.  | Who is your favorite celebrity? Why?   |
| 7.  | What are your hobbies or special interests?  |
| 8.  | What do you consider to be your greatest achievement thus far?   |
| 9.  | What would you change about yourself if you could?   |
| 10. | If you could have one wish granted right here, right now (other than asking for more wishes), what would it be? Why? |

#### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY PROJECT GUIDELINES**

For this project you will need to finish at least four pieces of writing. Each piece will be a different form of writing, but all will be about your favorite subject ... YOU! You will need to have photographs of yourself, your family and your friends to complete much of the writing. Have fun! You are creating something that future generations in your family will be able to enjoy, and cherish.

# I. History

In this section you will write a short history of your life and your family., It must include the following:

- 1. One or two pictures of yourself and your family.
- 2. A one page biographical essay including the following information:
  - A) When you were born and where.
  - B) Members of your family.
  - C) Where you grew up, and information about your childhood.
  - D) Current events in your life and future plans.

# II. Poetry

Include at least one poem written in class about Life, Self definition, or another poem you have written about yourself or your family, or in response to a photo.

#### III. Photo Essay

- 1. Choose one photograph of your family or friends to write about. Use the essays read in class as models for your own writing.
- 2. This writing should be at least one page long with the following information:
  - A) Explanation of who is in the picture.
  - B) When and Where the picture was taken.
  - C) At least two other details about the picture or the people in it.

#### IV. Me: Now and Then

- 1. Use a picture of yourself when you were younger, and one from when you were older.
- 2. Include a piece of writing that compares the differences between how you were then, and how you are now.

# FINAL PROJECT / GUIDELINES

10.

| Ten St                 | tatement   | s to Make About A Novel   |  |
|------------------------|--|---|--|
|                        |  | NAME:   |  |
|                        |  | DATE/PER:   |  |
| Instru                 | ections:   | Answer each question (except #10) in paragraph form, 3-5 sentences per  |  |
|                        |  | paragraph, ON THE NOVEL OF YOUR CHOICE.   |  |
|                        | 2.   | Attach #10 to the <u>back</u> of the questions.   |  |
|                        | 3.   | Attach this form to the <u>front</u> of the questions.  |  |
| 1.                     | What v   | would this story be like if the main character were of the opposite sex?                                      |  |
| 2.                     | Why is   | the story set where it is? (What is important about the setting?)   |  |
| 3.                     | -  | were to rewrite a portion of this story, what characters or situations would minate if you couldn't use them? |  |
| 4.                     | Whati  | nterested you the most shout this story? Why?   |  |
| <ol> <li>5.</li> </ol> | What interested you the most about this story? Why?  How is the main character different from you? |   |  |
|                        |  | · ·   |  |
| 6.                     | Could  | this story be expanded into a TV series? Explain.   |  |
| 7.                     | What is  | s one similar situation in this novel that has happened to you?   |  |
| 1.                     | vv mat 1   | s one similar situation in this novel that has happened to you:   |  |
| 8.                     | Reread   | the first paragraph of Chapter 1. What in it makes you want to rad on?  |  |
| 9.                     | What d   | loes the title tell you about the book? Does it tell the truth?   |  |
|                        |  | <b>,</b>  |  |

Design a new cover or illustration for the book.

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