Chapter IV

_Nickel Mountain_

The Healing Power of Love
Nickel Mountain is Gardner's most sentimental novel. Gardner spent more time on it than any of his other books. In fact the novel went through almost two decades of scratch work and scrap work before finally getting published in 1973. Gardner believes that people in the city have no time to understand the essence of life. No time to understand themselves. No time to understand others. One can comprehend the true meaning of life only by living close to nature. This is what Gardner attempts to illustrate in Nickel Mountain; therefore the subtitle "A Pastoral Novel." Nickel Mountain is Gardner's impression of the American countryside, the pristine beauty of the American Pastoral that is life sustaining. According to Gardner a person who is close to nature, a farmer for instance, who ploughs and harvests, comprehends life in a way that a person from the city, for whom nature is a temporary getaway from the concrete jungle, cannot.

Henry Soames, the protagonist of Nickel Mountain is the owner of the Stop-Off Diner halfway up Nickel Mountain. He is like the mountain himself: he carries his three hundred pounds like a cross, nay, a coffin. Henry's "heart was bad, business at the Stop-Off had never been worse, he was close to a nervous breakdown." In short, his is the image of a man who is going to die: "They give me a year to live, Mr Kuzitsky," Henry would say. 'I had one heart attack already.' His tone never quite went with the words, but the old man could no doubt see that Henry was a frightened man. 'I get dizzy
spells,' Henry would say"(4). According to Butts, "The isolation of the Stop-Off, the cold darkness, the storm, all reflect Henry's physical and mental despair." Thus like James Chandler in *The Resurrection*, Henry Soames is threatened with death. The changes in his life as well as the changes in the world around him drive Henry to a kind of resurrection a sort of holistic understanding of life. Henry is largely guided by nature and as such is open to change. He is "physically ailing but morally healthy and true." He is always willing to adapt himself to the changing conditions of the world around him.

Henry Soames has inherited a lot from his father: like his father he is a huge bulky man with an extremely emotional temperament. He has also inherited the "sentimental Soames blood" which is the cause of his despair. All these things have made his life miserable. His heart has begun to give way under the unbearable weight of all the misery and despair. Soames yearns to get rid of his inheritance. For him "the idea that a man might be somebody else all his life and never be aware of it -- live out the wrong doom, grow fat because a man he had nothing to do with by blood had died of fat -- had a strange way of filling up his chest. In bed sometimes he would think about it, not making up some new life for himself as he'd done as a child, merely savoring the immense half-possibility" (15).

Henry's wild rides up Nickel Mountain in his '39 Ford resonate his yearning for escape:
On a clear night you could make it to the top of Nickel Mountain and back, teetering in the square black Ford, the walls pinning you in like the sides of an up-ended coffin, bumping down gravel and macadam roads and over the warped planks of narrow bridges that rocked when you hit and echoed *brrack!* through the hills and glens. The trees would slide into the headlight beams and the wind whipping through the open window made you feel like Jesu sfd. "Chariot ting to Heaven."[31]

Henry is also troubled by the many dreams and visions he sees. The shapes and images that he sees are too amorphous to be articulated. Morris too argues that Henry “cannot shape the language to the feeling; it is as if somewhere between the imagination and the tongue there is a breakdown, a net that catches his thoughts and images in flight.”[4] This inability to put his thoughts into words sometimes drives him out of his senses:

He would grow excited, gradually, and his words would come faster, and something that rarely showed in him at other times would show in him now: a streak of crazy violence. Like a drunken man, he would clutch his fists against his chest and his voice would get louder and higher in pitch, and sometimes he'd stop pacing to pound the counter or a tabletop, or he'd lift a
sugar dispenser and hold it tight in his hand as if thinking of throwing it. Mr. Kuzitsky would sit precariously balanced....Henry must have seen the hopelessness of trying to put what he meant into words, whatever it was, if anything, that he meant. He would check himself, straining to face death bravely, gallantly. But he was a weak man and childish, especially late at night, and all at once he would catch the old man’s arm and would cling to him, not shouting now but hissing at him like a snake. His eyes would bulge, and tears would run down to the stubble on his fat jowl. (5-6)

Henry is in a way schizophrenic. At times he is an ogre and at other times a lover, a god. He is ugly yet beautiful. He is a tortured man and an isolated soul. His loneliness does not scare him; in fact he values the time he spends all by himself. However this has in a way affected his ability to vocalize, to communicate with others. He has too many feelings but fails to find words to express them: “The words came out every which way, jumbled poetry that almost took wing but then pulled down into garble and grunt... his eyes full of tears...” (35). In short, Henry is a man who “is isolated, a man who values his solitude too highly and who has lost the ability to communicate. His feelings out-match his powers
of expression, exploding from him like a man's body in a child's communion suit."5

Henry's capacity for feeling is extraordinary. And that's how he is made — "weak" and "sentimental." All this emotion, this inability to "act," has come down to him from his father. His father was "as simple and harmless all his life as a great, fat girl. It was the floundering harmlessness, no doubt, that Henry's mother had hated in him" (20). Henry shares this image of his father. But the more he wants to get rid of the image the more he becomes like his father.

Why is Henry so ecstatic, so painfully sentimental? Has he gone barmy? No. He is just plain drunk: "Not drunk from whiskey, but drunk from something else, maybe. Drunk from the huge, stupid Love of Man that moved through his mind on its heels, empty and meaningless as fog, a Love of Man that came down in the end to wanting the whole damn world to itself..." (31). What Henry hates most is man's inability to love his neighbour. And when he realizes that he himself is overdoing it he thinks it is part of the "womanish" nature that he has inherited from his father. Henry affirms and celebrates love. But he fails to comprehend the mechanics of the acts of love. With him the distinction between feeling and action, emotion and expression is lost. According to Gregory Morris, Henry "suffers from a surfeit of emotion that warps his behaviour and that overshadows his reliable intuitive sense."6
This is what happens when Callie Wells enters his life. The sixteen-year-old country girl arrives like spring: “The girl appeared as if by magic, like a crocus where yesterday there’d been snow” (7). Callie is full of life. She stands in full contrast to what Leonard Butts calls Henry’s “dormant condition.” She brings rejuvenation to Henry who has almost given up on life. With Callie around everything looks fresh and fertile. Callie “was sixteen, not a grown-up but not a child either” (7). And as such she is caught between good and evil, between the “beautiful” and the “sad.”

Initially Henry assigns himself the role of a father and distances “himself from whatever else the girl might be besides make-believe daughter.” He protects her and cares for her like a father. However, deep inside him there is a new feeling, a new emotion:

In his dreams that night the Soames in his blood rose again and again like a gray-black monster out of a midnight ocean: He dreamed of himself in bed with her, misusing her again and again violently and in ungodly ways. Then, disgusted with himself, his chest burning, he found himself half-sitting on his bed with sunlight in his room and the sound of birds. (37)

Thus from father Henry turns seducer. This reminds him of his own father: “Then he remembered his father as he’d been toward the end, sitting asleep like a boulder with his hands folded over the head of his cane, his unlaced shoes toeing inward. Chippies could
walk on his shoulders without waking him. He'd looked dead" (112).

Against the calm and curative image of his father stood the ugly, brutal, homographic image of his own self:

And there, with only a candle burning, throwing huge shadows on the heat-buckled brown-paper wall, they had talked about loneliness and devotion and God knew what, and he had held her in his fat arms trying to tell her of the bursting piece of sentimental stupidity inside him that had longed for something or other all his life. Her hands playing on his back had been warm, vaguely like the big drops of rain that came in August. He'd told her by God he would marry her — he didn't even know her name — and she'd laughed her head off, not even drawing back, still rubbing against him, working him up. And at last in a kind of terror he had struck out at the damn drunken idiot, the stupid animal love in her raw hands and lips. What he had done, exactly, was hard to remember, or how she'd taken it. He'd hit her in the face when the climax came, that much he would never forget. That and the dry summer heat and the fact that now sometimes sitting in just his trousers, waiting, he could hear her moaning on his bed. The sound was distinct: so clear
that he sometimes thought, in a moment of panic, that he'd lost his mind. (43-44)

Henry is unable to give a definite shape to his love for Callie. He is unable to define his love. This leaves him perplexed. Reality about his own self – his physical ugliness, his proximity to death – leaves him enraged and puzzled. He tries to talk to Willard Freund, the young man who later seduces Callie, about things beyond the ordinary. But the whole exercise goes futile:

Henry had sighed, helpless, sitting in the back room with Willard the night the boy had told him of his father's plans. He'd felt old. He hadn't stopped to think about it, the feeling of having overgrown time and space altogether, falling into the boundless, where all contradictions stood resolved. He had listened as if from infinitely far away, and it had come down to this: That night he had given up hope for Willard, had quit denying the inevitable doom that swallows up all young men's schemes. And in the selfsame motion of the mind he had gone on hoping. (14)

Whenever Henry tries to communicate with others, there eventually is a communication breakdown and people fail to understand what he is trying to express. He feels ashamed of himself; the frustration transforms into rage. His rage becomes
evident when he pounds on the counter about the weather or roars up Nickel Mountain. Then, after the storm, all is calm:

“It's a funny damn world.” He would turn and squint out the window a while, trying to think about it, sensing the profundity of it but unable to find the words to express it even to himself. Vague images would come: children, trees, dogs, red brick houses, people he knew. He felt nothing, a heaviness only, a numbness in the chest. (5)

Why is Henry not able to strike a balance, achieve wholeness? The answer is simple. He refuses to accept his physical condition and moreover refuses to accept his emotional status too. The result is despair. And unless he comprehends that the world is not a damned place, that there is more to life than he can see he will continue to miss the “holiness” of things.

Henry does try to unravel the meaning of life, and the meaning of human relationships. His thoughts reveal that he is determined to change his life. Whenever he is placed in an extremely unhappy or depressing situation his first impulse is to escape but at the same time he meditates upon it. At times he even behaves like a lunatic. On such occasions he talks of things mystic and sublime. When he comes to know that Callie is pregnant he decides to do what he thinks is morally appropriate. “The stirrings
of a resurrection” have begun to become apparent. He goes to George Loomis, a man who has seen the worst side of this world:

[George Loomis] had more troubles in his almost thirty years than any other ten men in all the Catskills – he’d gotten one ankle crushed in Korea so that he had to wear a steel brace around one of his iron-toed boots, and people said he’d broken his heart on a Japanese whore so that now he secretly hated women; and when he’d come home, as if that wasn’t enough he’d found his mother dying and the farm gone back to burdocks and Queen Anne’s lace. But there wasn’t a sign of his troubles on his face, at least not right now. (23)

Henry asks George Loomis to marry Callie so as to save the baby from being labelled illegitimate. But George cannot rise to the situation. The darkness of Crow Mountain, where he has been living for what seems ages now has him under his control. He cannot see light: he cannot recognize life when it passes by him. He refuses to marry Callie; with good intention of course. In refusing to marry Callie, George has denied himself the chance to affirm life. Instead he makes Henry face the fact that he himself loves the girl. The realization leaves Henry shocked and confused. The result is that he gets yet another heart attack. This is Henry Soames – a man born with “more heart than he knew how to spend.”
Henry is clear about what is moral and what is not. Physically he is very weak but morally very strong. Like Fred Clumly in *The Sunlight Dialogues* Henry trusts his intuition. He marries Callie. However he cannot evaluate the action; he is far too confused. This is Henry's attempt to correct a sin, turn the immoral into moral. Callie does not fail to understand Henry's sacrifice. Callie is too shocked and perplexed to voice a view. Having been stripped of her teenage innocence and flung into a serious world full of cares and worries, she does not know how to interpret Henry's action. Deep inside her there is a sigh of relief which she does not make very apparent. She knows that Henry has saved her soul: "I will love him, she thought. *I don't know whether I love him or not but I will*" (80). She is grateful to him for saving her from disgrace: “Callie had glanced up at him sideways and had seen again, as if it were a new discovery, how much she truly admired him, comical as he might seem to some, and she'd felt awe that he should be going through all this for her" (63-64).

Gradually, however, a new pain, a new thought begins to trouble Callie – the pain of having lost her youth; the pain of having lost the chance to enjoy and experience a young man's love. Her respect for Henry begins to translate into hatred. She also begins to fear him: “Panic filled her chest. *It's a mistake*, she thought. *I don't love him. He was ugly*" (70). On the one hand she could not understand the many contradictions that Henry was and on the
other hand she could not tell herself why she had accepted to marry him: "Her marring Henry Soames was almost vicious, an act of pure selfishness: she was pregnant, and he — obese and weak, flaccid in his vast, sentimental compassion — he had merely been available" (71). It is quite natural to have such thoughts. Callie cannot learn to love Henry simply because it was not love that brought them together. In fact "Henry's proposal of marriage to Callie is never expressed directly in the book nor her acceptance; words seem unnecessary; her need is clear to him, his generosity is evident to her and so they act."10 The wedding, for Callie, is nothing short of a funeral:

They had done everything they could, had swarmed to her side as they might in a time of tragedy, some of them hardly knowing her... and they would join her celebration of the ancient forms — the ride to church with her mother's oldest brother, the lighting of the symbolic candles, the pure white runner now walked on, stained, her father's words, signifying to all the world (she understood now for the first time, is alarm) that she had lost forever what she'd never realized she had. There would come the magical exchange of rings, the lifting of the veil, the kiss, and then Aunt Anna would play that organ maniacally, tromping the pedals not caring how many of the notes she missed, for Callie (poor Callie whom we all knew
well) had died before her time and had been lifted to Glory — and the rice would rain down...rice and confetti raining down like seeds out of heaven...and then the symbolic biting of the cake, the emptying of the fragile glass....They would join her in all this, yet could no more help her, support her, defend her than if they were standing on the stern of a ship drawing steadily away from her, and...she, Callie, on a small boat solemn as a catafalque of silver, falling away toward night.(79)

Callie is confused and is unable to decide whether to describe Henry’s actions as a moment of weakness. Once again reality stands before Callie like a monster all set to devour her. It threatens to wipe out her youthful existence. Callie finds herself suddenly transformed into a woman, into an adult. The certainty with which this new reality had come to stay seemed to Callie in a way massive as well as mysterious. Morris compares Callie to “a medieval legend at first rescued from shame and blemish, later ironically and tragically doomed to an improvident death-in-life. She can neither accept the heroism of Henry’s action nor rationalize her own willingness to partake of a life that tastes sourly of ashes.”11

The weight of reality begins to suffocate Callie. Even nature seems to have turned hostile towards her: Winter comes and covers the ground with snow. Life is locked up like the baby inside Callie.
As the days go by, Callie begins to feel the weight of the world on her. She begins to drift away from Henry. All that Henry gets to hear from her is silence, a sort of bitter silence, filled with rage, agony and disregard. Finally one day, she bursts out, almost like a demon: “I hate you. It doesn’t matter. I hate you. I love somebody else” (114). This leaves all of Henry, a man “burned with an overwhelming love for humanity but little skill for its expression,” devastated.12

It is difficult to describe the kind of love that there is between Callie and Willard. While Callie is just an innocent young girl who is too young to understand what love really means Willard is an unsympathetic egoist. If it really is love then why does Willard fail to come to her when she needs him most? He does not care to come and see her pain. The anger and frustration make it even more difficult for her to bear the labour pains. And consequently, “Willard Freund wouldn’t show himself again as long as he lived. Callie wouldn’t see him either, or if she did it wouldn’t matter, because it was too late now.... You had to be there, and Willard Freund hadn’t been, and now there was no place left for him, no love, no hate – not in his father’s house, even. Willard would see. No place but the woods...” (123). Henry’s “act is a sacrifice of love and an attempt to correct a sin, and Callie understands that, as she tries to sort out the maze of feelings that have beset her.”13

Till almost the middle of the book Henry remains to be an uninteresting fatso with one leg in his grave. However once Callie
begins to work for him at the Stop-Off he experiences a kind of regeneration. Callie "awakens new possibilities" in him. His despair begins to disappear. Thus Callie makes resurrection, rebirth possible for Henry. She disproves Henry's belief that, "You can't teach an old dog new trick." In loving Callie, Henry has begun to love himself. And from there, there is no going back. Callie too plays her part. She understands his feelings - his calm as well as his anger. She does not find fault with him when he turns violent or screams like a mad man: "She seemed for the most part not to mind, or rather to forgive, the weak, sentimental Soames in his blood" (28). This begins to change his opinion about his "inheritance." Callie's presence begins to work wonders for him. He begins to look at himself as, "not little Fats and not Henry Soames but someone who had been cold and dead for a long time - his father, perhaps, or someone whose life Henry Soames had lived hundreds of year ago. He was making it up, of course, and he knew it." (46)

It is clear that Henry is "not on the visual road" (46). Callie brings with her new realizations, new awakenings and new possibilities. He undergoes a kind of rebirth, a resurrection so to say. It is as though he begins to look at himself with new eyes. The series of changes that Henry witnesses in Callie's life and in his own life - after her arrival - make him realize that change is inevitable: "The birth of her son further opens Henry's eyes to elements of change in the world, and these universal rituals infuse
his life with new responsibility and inter-dependence.”15 According to Ray, “The birth of the child introduces a passionate new dimension, the dignity of the blood and suffering attendant upon the advent of life. It is an ordeal for Henry Soames as much as it is for Callie and he loses his isolation.”16 The boy's arrival sensitizes Henry to the joys of life, the feeling of ecstasy for simply being “alive.” He realizes that in order to make sense of life one must connect to the world around.

But it is not all that easy for one to make such connections. There is George Loomis who lives all alone on top of a mountain. George is more dead than alive. He has been beaten, tortured and mutilated by life. His house is almost like a tomb. It is full of all sorts of “things” and the only light that there is, is what comes from the television. He collects and hoards all kinds of things. One can easily see that he is far too materialistic. Clocks and old magazines lie just about everywhere in the house – on the floors, in the shelves. Of course he doesn't really use them:

“What in hell do you use them for?” Kelsey was amazed. Impressed, too, but mostly amazed. He stood tipped forward, looking, his thumbs hooked inside the bib of his overalls.

George had said ironically, closing the door again, “Use them for? Sometimes I go in and touch them,” and he winked. But it was true. It was the
richest pleasure in his life, just picking them up, knowing they were his, safe from the destroyers who cut the woodcuts from great old editions like his illustrated Goethe, or saw down hand-crafted Kentucky pistols and weld on modern sights. (130)

Thus, George derives some kind of solace, some kind of reassurance in the concreteness, stability and permanence of objects – the kind of permanence that stands out against the fragile nature of the human body. One can never say when one could lose an arm or a leg.

The truth is nothing in this world is permanent. The various things that George takes pleasure in collecting are as easily perishable as his body. And it is this realization that grieves him. George has a constant fear of thieves who could try to steal his treasures. In fact he is obsessed by the thought to such an extent that it harbours within him a deep sense of fear and suspicion. On one occasion, he was going up a quiet-looking valley in Korea:

It was as though a sense keener than the ordinary five had caught some unmistakable signal. He'd kept on walking, that night, cautious, but not giving in to the feeling that there were rifles trained on him; and then suddenly, crazily, he was staring into lights, and McBrearty was falling back against him, dead already, and he felt the hit, and the next minute he was coughing blood and couldn't breathe and knew for
certain he was dying, thinking (he would never forget):

Now I'll find out if this horseshit about heaven's really true. But he'd lived, and now he was no kid anymore, he knew what he couldn't have imagined then: If they wanted to kill him, they could do it — he was mortal. Everything on earth was destructible, old books, guns, clocks, even book-holders of bronze. (138)

Like all things in the world, human beings too are vulnerable to transience, destruction and of course death. George Loomis exemplifies this. In order to be able to deal with transience, with mortality, George consciously begins to depend a lot on things; in the bargain he fails to make connections with the people around him. Consequently he fails to understand their feelings and affections. He therefore lives in constant fear and leads a solitary life. Of course, "he recognized with terrible clarity the hollowness of his life" (141). Now, the only thing that can save George Loomis from damnation is his willingness to accept and deal with his past; that has been of course cruel to him. He must learn that only community has the power to heal one's wounds. He must begin to share the burden of his past with his fellow beings.

George Loomis is a farmer. The piece of land that he owns now is what belonged to his ancestors long before the Revolutionary War. He is aggressively independent and adores self-sufficiency. This and the terrible things that he had to face in his life — some of
it real and some of it imagined – have sort of tethered George to the past. Like Peter Mickelson in *Mickelson’s Ghosts*, he refuses to let go of his past and yet at the same time tries to hold on, now and then to the values of the present world, a world which he outright hates, a world which is for him “shit.” Therefore his old house and many things in there are what he clings to, desperately. His house is “as isolated as any to be found.” It is “a high, old brick house with balustered porches, round-arched windows, lightning rods, cupolas, and facing the road a Victorian tower like a square, old-fashioned silo” (128). In it are “things that had been in the family for two hundred years” (129). George’s world has come to a standstill; it’s almost frozen. George does not allow the feelings inside him to come to life. Also, he refuses to accept defeat at the hands of his physical disabilities. He refuses to accept the idea that with his kind of physical disabilities it is difficult to be on his own. The work on the farm is too much for one like him to handle alone. He cannot cultivate the land like he once used to:

Even after he’d come back from Korea, one foot smashed and his breathing bad from the mess-up in his chest, the ploughing was good, he could handle it. But now it was changed. He plowed one-handed now fighting the steering wheel left-handed now, fighting the steering wheel left-handed, jerked off balance whenever the front wheels climbed over a rock, his
right hand no longer there to anchor him....The accident had left him hard-up as hell....It was the fucking antique corn binder that had taken off his arm. (A long time ago, it seemed by now. A different life.) (132-33)

Like Henry Soames, George too is very much attached to his land. But while Henry is able to adopt himself to the changing times, George cannot see anything beyond his past, a past that is dead and gone. He cannot accept the present; he cannot accept change and therefore cannot accept even his mutability.

There is yet another character in *Nickel Mountain* who leads a lonely life – Simon Bale. Simon Bale is a religious fanatic. He is intolerant of people who are not like him. He is dogmatic to the point of no return. According to him people’s “wickedness was one with the general corruption of the times, one of many signs that the end was at hand. They would burn for eternity, it went without saying, but so would most of the rest of mankind – for pride, for covetousness, for forgetting the Sabbath, for believing the devil to be dead” (146). In fact people around him even hold him responsible for the fire that destroyed his wife. Naturally then, people lived in constant fear of him: “Simon Bale had no friends. He was not only an idealist but an ascetic as well, both by conviction and by temperament, and the death of his wife...meant the end of all ordinary contact with humanity – or would have except for Henry Soames” (150). When no one cares for Simon, it is Henry who takes
him into his house. George warns him otherwise, saying, "A man that thinks he's righteous is deadly, you know it. He takes credit for things he's got nothing to do with — accidents like his living where he happens to live and knowing exactly the people he knows. He thinks he's Jesus H. Christ and it makes him arrogant" (192).

The constant urge to be always on the right, to always do what is moral, is what spells doom for Simon. It is this very adoration for righteousness that almost destroys James and Sally Page in *October Light*, and almost Henry too. It is Simon Bale who awakens Henry to the not-so-bright side of life, which until now Henry has not in its completeness understood or even witnessed. Simon Bale's dogmatism has pushed him away from community. Bale looks at everything around him in terms of what the Bible says — most of it misread. All he can talk about is religion and not a word beyond that. In over doing it he has sort of forgotten the very purpose of life.

Bale's section of *Nickel Mountain* is entitled "The Devil." This does not directly refer to Bale — like most critics think. It is not to say that Bale is all evil, or that he is "the devil." It would be ungenerous to describe Bale in such terms. At no point does Bale lose his humanity. The loss of his wife grieves him endlessly. He is even grateful to Henry for giving him shelter in his house. Everybody in the neighbourhood thinks that Bale is "evil;" evil in the sense that he is painfully moral, painfully self-righteous.
Through his unwavering righteousness he is awakening people to their sins, their guilt. And according to Gardner an overdose of a sense of guilt can kill a person. It is in this sense, and this sense alone that Bale is evil. Even Butts states quite emphatically that, “Bale is never allowed to lose his humanity.”

Henry Soames understands Bale’s partial understanding of the world. He understands Bale’s need for attention, care and love. This understanding moves Henry closer to his own self. He learns to respond to his inner voice. He learns to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad. He therefore allows Bale to stay in his house though he knew the decision would upset Callie, to whom Simon is a serpent, a “rattlesnake behind glass.” It is with the same faith in Heaven that Henry decides to give Simon’s wife a decent burial. Simon has walked away from his responsibility. But Henry’s heart won’t let him act irresponsibly. He knows that it is easy to “turn into an animal.” To be human, is to be responsible for one’s actions. In this way like James Chandler in The Resurrection, Henry too affirms the “buzzing, blooming confusion.”

Henry is however apprehensive about Simon’s behaviour. One evening he finds Jimmy pointing out to a figure in the darkness and screaming, “Daddy! Daddy! It’s the Devil!” The figure is Simon Bale. It is quite evident that it is Simon who has etched the pictures of demons and devils on Jimmy’s young imagination. Henry
is grieved by the damage done to his little boy. His anger breaks through his tolerance:

“You!” Henry yelled, and it came out as much like awe as like rage. His rage came slowly – or so it seemed to Henry’s suddenly racing mind – but when it hit it was like a mountain falling. He might have killed him if he could have done it (so Henry Soames would say later, dead calm, at the coroner’s inquiry), but he couldn’t even hit him because he was holding Jimmy in his arms; he could only advance on him, howling in his fury, feeling his neck puffing up and throbbing. The room around him was red and his lips felt thick. Simon was whispering, “Forgive, forgive,” again and again and smiling as if his brain had stopped running...and suddenly he turned and bolted toward the stairs.

Henry shrieked, driving, as the man reached the top. He did not seem to step down but to leap, looking over his shoulder with a fierce grin, as though he thought he could fly, and Henry rushed toward him in alarm and hate or was rushing toward him already by the time.... He saw him hit halfway down and tumble and fly out in all directions, reaching. At the bottom he lay still a minute, upside down, his arms flung out and one knee bent, the light from the kitchen door like a halo.
on his murderous face, and then his body jerked, and quickly Henry turned his back so that Jimmy wouldn’t see. (207-8)

Simon’s death is merely an accident. It seems to be nature’s way of protecting the innocent from the perverse. In the struggle between innocence and perversity, between the human and the demonic, innocence will win; the human shall reign supreme. That is how the world is designed to be.

Simon’s death leaves Henry distressed. The moral must suffer. Henry’s heart refuses to see Simon’s death as an accident. Henry holds himself responsible for Simon’s death. This sense of guilt drives Henry mad. He begins to eat like a monster, slowly but surely pushing himself towards death:

Now, perhaps partly because of the heat – weather unheard of in the Catskills, a sure sign of witchcraft at work, or miracles brooding – the nervous eating that had troubled Henry Soames all his life slipped out of control, became a mindless external power against which it was impossible for him even to struggle, a consuming passion in the old sense, a devil (but blind, indifferent as a spider) in his guts. (211)
Now there is no hope for Henry. The weight of guilt is crushing him. He begins to lose his reason and slowly drives himself towards suicide, towards complete devastation.

This craving for death in a moment of despair is what Gardner has constantly focused on time and again in his novels. There comes a time in everyone’s life when death begins to look beautiful, when it becomes difficult to resist the pull of the abyss. Richard Page in October Light gives in to these very emotions and ends his life. But for Henry, redemption comes through Callie.

Henry’s monstrous behaviour shakes Callie out of her pastoral simplicity. It awakens her to reality, to responsibility. She realizes that she must act: “One night she exploded, ‘Henry, you act like a crazy person.’ As the words came out...she saw the truth... that a child should have a father, that a wife should have a husband, and that a man trying to kill himself should be stopped” (213). Callie is too young to understand much of what Henry is going through. It is difficult for any one of her age to make sense of Henry’s anguish. She decides to take stock of the situation and begins to reassess her relationship with Henry:

She must act, she saw (wearily and angrily, flushed and spent, past all endurance), but how she must act would not come clear. And...now, though abstractly, now, she “loved” him, for lack of a better word. She could think about her love – still there, she knew
perfectly well, but dormant, an emotion locked up, waiting for September – as she might think about a pain she'd felt long ago and would one day feel again. (213-14)

Callie has the ability to love and also the desire for it. Yet she deliberately controls her emotions; she fears that if it is not kept under control it can turn “obscene.” But she is unable to decide what's to be done with this “huge, blubbering Jesus.”

It is not Henry alone who is haunted by ghosts. Callie too is surrounded by them. She sights Simon Bale's ghost moving around the house. She knows with certainty that Simon's ghostly presence in the house spells disaster and damnation. She is not sure what it is but she knows that “Something is coming.” Callie has begun to believe – in that which makes no sense, in that which is simply unbelievable:

One had no need for faith in what was reasonable, because they would survive. Faith was for what made no sense. She said again, with conviction: “He'll destroy us.”

But Henry shook his head, squinting at her, “No, he'll save us.”

And instantly Callie knew, in the mind-fogging heat, that he was right. (247)
Henry's distress is profound. He refuses to accept that Bale's death was accidental. Though unable to put his thoughts into words, deep inside he believes that he has contributed to Bale's accident, and by doing so he has acted in an irresponsible, inhuman way. What hurts him most is the thought that chance had used him to push Bale down the stairs and he had gone ahead and done exactly that, helplessly of course. And according to him there is no greater sin than this one. The fact that he is merely a mechanism in the huge complexity of chance is killing him. This simply implies that man has no life of his own. His beliefs and his choices are of no consequence. The existential dilemma begins to gnaw at him and he too finally loses contact, like George, with nature as well as humanity.

If there is anyone who can understand Henry's state of mind, it is George Loomis. Callie gets him to talk Henry out of his insanity. Turning to Callie George says,

It's true. He says he made a choice, the choice to go on yelling, which makes him to blame for Simon Bale's dying. But he knows that's only word games. He didn't know Simon would fall downstairs, and even if he did, it's one time in a thousand you kill yourself that way. It was an accident, Henry was the accidental instrument, a pawn, a robot labeled *Property of Chance*. That's intolerable, a man should be more than
that; and that's what Henry's suffering from - not guilt. However painful it may be, in fact even if it kills him, horror's the only dignity he's got. (239)

Henry Soames is not God. He too like any other human being has a few weaknesses. Whenever he has to act Henry listens to his inner voice. However the moral choices that he makes are decisions taken after a lot of doubt, fear, and guilt. Some of the dilemmas that he has had are - to marry Callie or not, to pay for Simon's wife's funeral or not, to take Simon into the house or not. Now it is time for him to take yet another decision - should he hold himself responsible for causing Bale fall down the stairs or not. The choice is too difficult for Henry to make. Unable to decide he simply pushes himself closer to death.

To George, Bale is "uncivilized" and to Bale, George is "evil." Both George Loomis and Simon Bale hold a particular view of the world and each one considers his version to be the right one. They cannot love unconditionally; they cannot love completely because they believe themselves to be righteous to the core. Their self-righteousness has crippled them. They cannot affirm life, cannot celebrate life. They blindly adhere to their belief in certain absolutes. Henry is different. He does not consider "good" and "evil" as absolutes: "I don't believe there is such a thing as pure meanness," Henry would say, 'or pure anything else'" (148). Henry welcomes ideas and quite flexibly adapts himself to the changing
circumstances in his life. Henry is constantly groping for the truth. He explores problems from all possible angles. And as he goes about it he moves towards a moral vision. Henry loves to see things happen. He craves to be at the centre of life – from where he can have the best view of life, "and he would be sorry for people who weren't caught up, as he was, in the buzzing, blooming confusion" (193). The "buzzing, blooming confusion" is what Henry must affirm, must celebrate, if he wishes to be part of the world, if he wills to unite with the world. He does it. He succeeds in viewing life in its totality.

The gathering of family and friends at the Stop-Off helps solve Henry's existential dilemma. The Indian Nick Blue had predicted that the drought would be over, that it would rain. And people had gathered at the Stop-Off to witness the magic moment. The drought is symbolic of Henry's life that has been paralyzed by guilt. The whole of Catskills farming community was desperately waiting for rain because without rain their normal life had come to a standstill.

The gathering of family and friends at the Stop-Off to witness the rain predicted by Nick Blue provides an occasion for Henry to solve his existential dilemma. The summer drought had been just too long enough to upset the farming community. There was no normal routine that they could talk of anymore. The drought is meant, by Gardner, in many ways to symbolize Henry's life that has
been paralyzed by guilt. The wait for the rain ends on a note of despair. With no rain coming the men and women gathered at the Stop-Off are enraged by the indifference demonstrated by the forces of nature. This experience leaves them determined to carry on with life, come what may. By refusing to take money for the food and drink consumed by his friends, Henry in his own little way sneaks in a little joy into the mood of despair.

What happens after the crowd leaves is what stops Henry from destroying himself. Like Henry, George Loomis too carries guilt deep inside his soul. He has been responsible for the death of the Goat Lady. But he has managed to cover up the evidence. The strange gypsy-like old woman in search of her “lost son,” introduced earlier in the novel, wanders around the towns selling goat cheese and milk and at the same time asking about her son. She lives on charity. The Goat-Lady, also known as “Mother” disappears from Catskills as mysteriously as she arrived. We soon learn that George Loomis had accidentally mowed her down with his truck and explained away her disappearance. However it is not easy to bury someone “like a cat and forget it.” The realization dawns upon George Loomis not too late:

Then George said: “But I'll tell you something. I'm beginning to believe in the Goat Lady.” He said it lightly, but a hint of uneasiness came over him as soon as it was out.
"You saw her, didn't you," Callie said at once, knowing the direct accusation would shock him but suddenly not caring.

George went white.

“What happened?” Callie said.

They sat like people precariously balanced over a chasm, and everything depended on what George decided....He could tell them and be free ... but then he would never be free again, because then there would be somebody who knew his guilt, shame, embarrassment, whatever it was. Except that maybe that was what it was to be free: to abandon all shame, all dignity, real or imagined....

At last George said, “No, I never saw her.” He stood up.

Henry looked at him, pitying him, George Loomis no more free than a river or a wind, and, as if unaware that he was doing it, Henry broke the cookie in his hand and let the pieces fall. She realized with a start that it was final: George had saved them after all. (260-61)

Thus George Loomis manages to bury his guilt within himself. By doing so he has once again made Henry see that whether we like it
or not chance does play a large part in our life. The old woman's death does not benefit George in any way. But by nearly admitting his guilt to Henry and Callie he indirectly "saves" Henry. Henry forgives George his inability to confess. And in doing so Henry accepts that Simon Bale's death was merely an accident and nothing else.

George simply cannot confess his crime and seek forgiveness. He is too proud to let others into his sinful secret. The old woman's death is merely an accident. Yet his pride does not let him make it known to others. All this forces George to live the life of a recluse, totally cut off from the community. And now the past resides forever with him on Crow Mountain. The best part of this whole episode is that George's sacrifice does not go waste. It serves a purpose: it helps Henry and Callie to look at life in its true colours, to affirm life in all its shades and by doing so are able to continue their journey of life together. When George leaves, the past leaves with him. Ghosts disappear. Henry is purged of his guilt and pain of the past. And "Sometime during the night, while they all slept, missing it, or missing anyway the spectacular beginning that they'd surely earned the right to see...thunder cracked, shaking the mountains, and it rained" (262). The cleansing act is complete.

At one time Henry had feared that Willard Freund would come and claim Callie and the baby. Now the thought does not worry Henry any more. Like Henry and George, Freund too has a
figure to fight – the image of his father. He feels ashamed of his father who knows nothing of love and humanity. All this has made him a cynic. He believes that he was “nicked in the balls from the beginning.” Freund has lost his ability to love. His cynicism is intolerable. He is too much of a devil to understand Henry's divinity.

Freund too, like most characters in the novel, gets involved in an accident, which brings about a change in him. The change comes because the accident kills a man but leaves Freund untouched. This gift of life by chance begins to torment Freund. A new feeling of guilt and remorse begins to trouble his mind. The thought of his father's moral ugliness adds to his suffering. He is left with no choice but to run away from Henry's magnanimity. The forgiving of past sins by the present wake him to the truth that there is nothing like love. His past – Callie and their son – was being accepted by the present – Henry. The generosity and magnanimity of Henry's acceptance of him are not really within Freund's understanding. Yet he is left purified.

Henry's understanding of life is still not complete. He still has got to come to terms with the harder realities of life – death and the grave. Towards the end of the book, Henry Soames is still in many ways the same fat man living on the edge of life but he is also a changed man. His mountainous size is more acceptable to him now and he is no more ashamed of himself. Moreover he has come to
accept the world and its people around him; all of it, the good and the bad. Like James Chandler in _The Resurrection_ he realizes that one must celebrate life, celebrate the world. Change is inevitable and true happiness lies in accepting that change and thereby affirming life. Henry also realizes that there is no point in resisting the flux of life: "So he'd given in, and when he'd done it, not just in words but totally, freely choosing what he couldn't prevent, he'd felt a sudden joy, as though the room had grown wider all at once...or as if he'd finally shoved in the clutch on the way down a long straight hill it was no use resisting" (300).

Thus Henry realizes that fighting change results in only pain, sorrow and disappointment whereas accepting it frees one from the shackles of depression and disillusionment. By now even the Stop-Off has grown into a more complete restaurant, The Maples. Henry's affirmation of the entire process of life is now truly life-size: "With the passing of time he became in reality what he was, his vision not something apart from the world but the world itself transmuted" (301).

Henry's life has changed completely. He is a resurrected man: "Henry Soames is a man whose world has changed, and whose life has been resurrected. He has been lifted up and turned around by his wife Callie – the regenerative, restorative, pastoral force." Henry looks at his life as a "long train of trivial accidents, affirmed one by one, that made a man's life what it happened to become. It
was a good life, he had to admit it” (300). At last Henry has begun to perceive “the holiness of things and the idea of magical change” (302). Love, and only love has the power to alter reality. Love is the spirit that keeps creation on its feet, going strong. Love alters everything that it comes in contact with. Love is in a way a vision, a way of looking at things, a divine way of looking at things. Henry comes to see all this and furthermore he also begins to experience the tranquility of love.

The final scene of the novel is set in a graveyard near Nickel Mountain. Henry and his son Jimmy come here hunting for rabbits. What they witness here leaves Henry tied down to not just his community but also humanity in general. Henry came here often as a boy accompanied by his father. He often came there to reflect. Here he was now with his son, hunting rabbits. When finally Henry kills a rabbit Jimmy bombards him with questions about death. Soon they come across an aged couple exhuming their son buried fifty years earlier. They are leaving the town forever and wish to take their son's body with them. The two are having an argument and Henry and Jimmy wait and watch. “I believe in the resurrected Lord,” (307) the old woman said, very religiously. But the old man retorts, “He's dead and rotten” (306). Their views of life and death are poles apart. Still, their love for each other is very strong, and they love their son just as much. Henry is moved by their actions. Thus Gardner “ends Nickel Mountain with a parable of love
connecting Henry Soames not only to the people in his community and his family but also to the world at large.” 19 Henry’s words have never been able to match his emotions: “‘Love—’ Henry began at last, philosophically, but he couldn’t think how to finish” (309). Henry’s affirmation is complete.

Gardner’s message is clear — men may come and men may go; but their memory stays on. Everything in nature must die, must decay. Human beings are a part of nature too and so they too die and rot. Life becomes meaningful only when we unconditionally and completely accept the process of change, accept death and decay as wholeheartedly as we welcome birth. We must realize Gardner seems to say, that it is only the mortal body that dies, the memory of it and the love held for that memory are not perishable. Henry sees that “life goes on.” He leaves the gravesite a new man, a resurrected soul. Henry and Callie are resurrected, are reborn in love: “Henry and Callie’s willingness to connect themselves — to accept responsibility for their acts and for others lifts their lives above those around them.”20

Like James Chandler, Henry affirms not the beauty of the world but the world itself. Gardner meant Henry to be a saviour. No wonder he is so often compared to Jesus Christ. Driving up Nickel Mountain makes Henry “feel like Jesus H. Christ charioting to heaven” (31). At his wedding George Loomis tells him that he looks like “Good King Jesus” (81). Later when Henry brings Simon Bale
home, George says, "I guess that makes you Jesus, don't it" (225).

Henry lives up to what his friend Kuzitski once said: "A man wants
something to die for" (11). Talking to Callie and Willard Freund,
Henry repeats his friend's words: "It's finding something to be
crucified for. That's what a man has to have....Crucifixion" (42).

Early in the novel Henry is mentally ill and physically sick.
But towards the end of the novel he takes on, like George says, the
responsibilities of an absentee-God and becomes God-like. In short
Henry's story is the story of a fat blubbering Holy Jesus making a
deliberate effort to resemble the original in as many ways as
possible. It is no overstatement. The transition is natural. It is
simply the result of Henry's refusal to accept despair.
Notes

1 John Gardner, *Nickel Mountain* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill, 1973) 3. (Subsequent references will be to this edition.)


4 Morris 100.

5 Morris 99.

6 Morris 100.

7 Butts 33.

8 Morris 10.

9 Butts 33.


11 Morris 104.


13 Morris 103.

14 Butts 33.

15 Butts 34.

17 Butts 35.

18 Morris 113.

19 Butts 41.

20 McWilliams 68.