Chapter I

Introduction
John Gardner versus American Fiction
The defeat of Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire marked the end of World War II. For America it signalled the beginning of a new era. Thousands of young servicemen came back home from the war zones saddened by the ravages of war, but nevertheless, with a determination to start life afresh. They looked for new homes, new jobs, and started new families. America witnessed the birth of a record number of babies never experienced before. The multicultural nation was bustling with life. One could literally see America growing. However, the recovery was still not complete when the Korean conflict developed. The Cold War created a sense of anxiety deep down in the American consciousness. America's claims to being the greatest country in the world began to sound shaky. Life in America now was not what it had always been. People became skeptical about the values that America had until now stood for.

This mood came to be reflected in the literature of the times. Books like *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale, and *Life is worth Living* by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen proclaimed that the power to steer one's life towards success lies solely with the individual. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* raised questions about conformity. Writers like Gregory Corso, Neal Cassady, and Gary Snyder voiced anti-establishment sentiments. With space travel becoming a reality

Rock and Roll changed the way people related themselves to music. Artists like Bill Haley and Elvis Presley came to be idolized by youngsters who began to show resentment for America's conservative middle class value system. Television became a very important medium of entertainment. It became fashionable to copy the lifestyles of popular characters on television shows. And of course the radio became portable. The signals could be accessed anywhere between the coasts.

Over the next decade, the post-war generation of nearly seventy million young adults brought about a tremendous change in the American way of life. The youth dominated the culture of the 1960s. All rules were broken. Conservatism went out of fashion. The hippie movement edified drugs and sexual freedom. It became fashionable to think "differently." Homosexual rights groups emerged. The unequal treatment of women began to be questioned, giving birth to Women's Liberation. The Civil Rights Act was amended to include gender. The
birth control pill became widely available. Abortion became legal. These revolutionary ways of thinking came to have a great impact on almost every aspect of American life and culture – education, relationships, values, laws, lifestyles, movies, literature, art, and entertainment. The space age brought with it a strong desire to experience the new and the unknown. Thus, the America of the sixties is characterized by a great desire to get to the modern age, to get to the future.

Young girls began to idolize film actresses. There was Marilyn Monroe and then came Audrey Hepburn, the leading lady of *My Fair Lady*. Sex became not just more explicit but also non-traditional, like in *Midnight Cowboy*. Movies that combined sex and violence became extremely popular – James Bond movies for instance. The MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) drew up a new film code to accommodate the new trends in film-making as well as to ensure creative freedom.

The literature of the period reflected the political and social issues of the times. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* was about race relations. African-American women writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker wrote about race and gender. Works like Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique* inspired women to take up roles beyond the wife and the mother.
Books like *Catch-22* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* reflected the general disillusionment of the times.

America's participation in the Vietnam War sparked debates and discussions on college campuses. Thousands of people took to the streets to protest against the war. But nothing changed. This resulted in a wave of unrest throughout the nation. A general disrespect for authority set in. Crime rate soared. There was disillusionment, despair, fragmentation, and violence everywhere.

All these dramatic changes in the life and culture of post-World War II America had a great impact on the philosophy, and thereby the literature, of the times. The major theme of fiction writers during this period was the horror and meaninglessness of contemporary American life.

As an ambulance driver in World War I, Ernest Hemingway, saw carnage and death first-hand. The cruelty of war impressed upon him to focus on the here and the now. He did not allow himself to be swayed by illusions of a fantastic world. He maintained that no matter what one must never lose one's humanity. His protagonists – usually expatriates, soldiers, and the likes – fiercely adhere to this moral code. Having worked as a war correspondent in World War II gave him an insight into the lives of these men. *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* reflect Hemingway's impressions of the devastating effects of war.
In his novels, William Faulkner created the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County in the Mississippian region and filled it with people of varied natures. He used the “stream-of-consciousness” technique in order to record the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters. The recordings are structured in a chaotic fashion so as to mimic the emotional and psychological state of the characters leading chaotic lives in contemporary America. Lack of sequence and direction are built into the novel in a way that aids multiple layers of meaning to emerge from the text. He is best known for his path-breaking novel *The Sound and the Fury*.

Some of the best American war novels were written in the wake of World War II. Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five* give horrifying accounts of the gruesomeness of war.

Mailer was drafted into the Army in 1944. He served in the Philippines in an infantry regiment. The first hand experience of war became the material for his novel *The Naked and the Dead*. In this book Mailer describes the incongruities of war and the inability of the man on the battlefield to make peace with himself. *An American Dream*, published in 1965, narrates the story of Steve Rojack, caught in the middle of the staggering reality of life in urban America. The journalistic accounts of factual events in *The Armies of the Night* and
The Executioner's Song won him great critical acclaim. Mailer's books are crude and violent portrayals of the desperation that had become so much a part of life in America at the times.

Joseph Heller joined the army in 1942. He flew sixty combat missions as a wing bombardier. His conception of *Catch-22* is based partly on this experience. *Catch-22* is about a World War II bombardier, Yossarian. The obsession of his officers for making profits claims the lives of his fellow soldiers. This leaves Yossarian frightened and frustrated. Demoralized by the moral bankruptcy of the American military, Yossarian strongly desires to avoid flying more missions. One of the definitions of "Catch-22" in the book refers to control that the bureaucracies exercise over the people who work for them. *Catch-22* specifies that anyone who is insane cannot continue flying missions. The "catch" is that anyone who asks to be excused from flying missions cannot be insane because the demonstration of fear in the face of danger is in itself proof that the person has not lost his senses. In an attempt to be excused from flying combat missions, Yossarian tries to feign madness. He even sabotages a plane. Thus the darkly humourous *Catch-22* is a caustic satire of modern warfare that has grown into one of the biggest commercial establishments of modern times. The book is ostensibly an antiwar protest novel.
Heller's 1968 novel *We Bombed in New Haven* written in the wake of the Vietnam War, again strongly expresses antiwar sentiments. Heller's vision of modern life is tragicomic. The focus is on the chaotic nature of contemporary existence and the attrition of humanistic values.

Similar depictions of modern society – pungent and satirical – can be found in the works of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who is considered a major voice in American Literature. His books are about the fruitless search for meaning and order in an inherently meaningless and chaotic universe. They are also about finding ways to cope with life, with the unexpected, the absurd, and the incurable. He is best known for his books *Cat's Cradle*, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, *Slaughterhouse-five*, and *Slapstick*.

Like Mailer and Heller, Vonnegut too served in the Second World War. He was taken prisoner by the German army. As a prisoner in Germany, Vonnegut witnessed the bombing of Dresden by the Allies, which left the city completely destroyed. More than 1, 35,000 people lost their lives in the bombing. Vonnegut, along with a few of his captors dug up the bodies from the debris and burnt them up in huge bonfires. These painful wartime experiences compelled Vonnegut to write *Slaughterhouse-five*, an intensely antiwar novel. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the novel, has witnessed, like Vonnegut, the
bombing of Dresden. The traumatic experience leaves him a nervous wreck. His emotional instability leaves him staggering between his past, present, and future. This gives the novel its non-chronological character. The book was published in 1969, at a time when the American involvement in Vietnam was being vigorously cried down upon. Vonnegut vehemently criticized political corruption and militarism in the United States. He died on April 11, 2007, around the time I was drafting this section.

In his novels John Updike attempts to mirror the despair caused by race riots, drug culture, AIDS, terrorism, and death. His novels are about those very American experiences that have rendered life insignificant. His 1960 novel *Rabbit Run* chronicles the life of Harry Rabbit Angstrom. At 26, Rabbit finds himself stuck to an odd job in a dime store. While at school Rabbit played first-rate basketball. At the time, he was greatly admired for his skill. Now he begins to feel that his life has reached a dead-end. Disappointed and frustrated by his situation, he decides to run, leaving his wife and family behind. Rabbit's run ends on a tragic note. Rabbit hungers for an illustrious life and flees responsibility. The fleeing act, considered from any angle, is simply an act of sheer irresponsibility. One can sympathize with Rabbit but certainly cannot come to like him. The other novels in the
series *Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich,* and *Rabbit at Rest* too depict the bleak American landscape.

Truman Capote, America’s major figure at the time, is best known for his novels *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *In Cold Blood.* His first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is about a young man’s search for his father. While on his mission the boy encounters violence, murder, rape and homosexuality. The young boy himself finally lands up in a homosexual relationship. Capote’s frank descriptions of the homosexual arousals in the young lad made the book an instant success. Every element of the grotesque and the sinister finds a place in the book. The book paints the picture of a Gothic world inhabited by narcissistic people. *In Cold Blood,* Capote’s highly successful “non-fiction novel” combines fact and fiction. It is a journalistic account of a true life incident wherein a Kansas farmer and his family are tied down, gagged, and ruthlessly murdered, by two ex-convicts. The humanistic treatment of the entire episode renders the novel its fictional quality.

Philip Roth wrote in the tradition of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. His novels are about Jewish American middle-class life and the agony of people caught in the web of sexual and familial love. The sexual frankness of *Portnoy’s Complaint* made Philip Roth a literary celebrity. *Portnoy’s Complaint* is Alexander Portnoy’s autobiography as
“told” to his psychiatrist. Portnoy has a “complaint.” He seeks relief from the guilt inflicted by his over-possessive Jewish mother by indulging in compulsive masturbation. While some found the scandalous subject matter lewd and obscene others found it revolting. 

*My Life as a Man* recounts the sexual adventures of Roth’s fictional surrogate Nathan Zuckerman. His Zuckerman trilogy, *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*, relates the life-story of a writer struggling with the uncertainty of existence, a typical feature of life in the twentieth century.

William S. Burroughs, along with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, is generally considered to have inspired what is called the Beat Movement. The “Beat” writers showed no regard for moral or artistic conventions. Burroughs’s first novel *Junkie* is an autobiographical account of his drug addiction and homosexual experiences. In describing his experiences as a heroin addict Burroughs fictionalized, probably for the first time, the drug subculture of postwar America. His effective rendering of the paranoia experienced by a drug addict is incomparable. *Naked Lunch* is again a hallucinatory story of the adventures of a drug addict. The novel defied all definitions of narrative. The world depicted in *Naked Lunch* is dark and sinister. It is grotesque; sadomasochistic homosexuality is a way of life here.
Burroughs's fiction is violent and bizarre. Sexuality and drugs form the themes of most of his novels, including *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket that Exploded*, and *Nova Express*. His works inspired counterculture groups such as hippies and punks. His books read like pulp fiction. Some critics have likened Burroughs's works to pornography. His fiction came under heavy attack for its obscene and misogynistic tone.

Burroughs's fiction redefined not just the style of the novel but also what went into it. In his novels Burroughs employed a montage technique of assembling the pages in random order. His flamboyant style clearly indicates Burroughs's rejection of conventional realism. Influenced by artist Brion Gysin, Burroughs developed "cut-up" and "fold-in" techniques in his novels to bring about a collage effect. Randomly selected pages would be folded vertically so as to juxtapose them with parts of other pages that would in effect render new meanings.

Thus much of the fiction that was written in the wake of the Second World War and after was largely about the spiritual and emotional emptiness of contemporary American life. It was as though the ugly and the sinister was the only valid depiction of reality. At a time like this came along a writer John Gardner who set out to fling despair and frustration out of the window and proclaim that life is a
celebration. Fiction had to be rescued "from [the] quagmire of nihilistic gamesmanship" and Gardner took the responsibility upon himself.  

John Champlin Gardner, Jr., was born on July 21, 1933, in Batavia, New York, near Buffalo. His father John Champlin Gardner was a dairy farmer and lay preacher. His mother Priscilla Jones Gardner was a former high school English teacher. Gardner was the eldest of four children. Gardner's childhood home was full of books. Reading aloud was the family's favorite way of spending their leisure time in the rural farm home. Quite often, John Sr. and Priscilla even performed at community gatherings. All this had a great influence on Gardner. He began reading very early. He was eight when he began writing. Gardner was greatly influenced by music too. His mother allowed him to stay off from farm work on Saturdays so he could listen to Classical music on the radio. She even enrolled him in French horn lessons.

An accident that occurred when Gardner was eleven changed his life, forever. Young John was driving a tractor to the farm, towing a cultipacker (a set of huge rollers made of steel weighing nothing less than a ton). Sandy, his 4-year-old sister, and Gilbert, his 6-year-old brother were with him at the time. John had Sandy on his lap and Gilbert balanced himself on the rod between the tractor and the cultipacker. While on an incline, the tractor ran out of gas and lurched
forward. Gilbert lost his balance and fell to the ground. The giant cultipacker rolled over him crushing him to death.

Gardner held himself responsible for Gilbert's death. Talking about it later, Gardner said that when he looked back his brother was already half way under the rollers and so made a split-second decision not to apply the brakes: Gilbert would rather be dead, he thought, than be paralyzed. But since the tractor was on an incline applying the brakes wouldn't have made any difference. But Gardner refused to accept that it was not his fault. This feeling of guilt remained with Gardner till his death. The accident, in a way, shaped Gardner's views on life, love, and morality. Through his writings and through his teaching Gardner sought to inspire others to do what is right: an attempt at, what Gardner biographer Barry Silesky describes as, "compensation, an expiation of that sin."

Gardner graduated from Batavia High School in 1951. He attended college at DePauw University for some time before moving on to Washington University. As a student of DePauw University nineteen year old Gardner published a journal called *Lies! Lies! Lies!* Anyone who read the journal could see that a writer was in the making – the journal contained among many other things potential plots for novels to be written later.
In June 1953 he married his cousin Joan Louise Patterson. He did his M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Iowa. He studied old and medieval English language and literature. Gardner stayed on at Iowa for his PhD program in Creative Writing. He submitted a novel, *The Old Man*, for his dissertation. He received his doctorate in 1958.

Gardner started his teaching career at Oberlin College, Ohio, in 1958. The very next year he joined the Chico State College (now the University of California at Chico) where he helped establish Chico's Creative Writing Program. Joel and Lucy, Gardner's two children, were born here. Gardner loved to teach. Writer Raymond Carver, his former student at Chico writes,

[Gardner] would have marked up my story, crossing out unacceptable sentences, phrases, individual words, even some of the punctuation; and he gave me to understand that these deletions were not negotiable. In other cases, he would bracket sentences, phrases, or individual words, and these were items we'd talk about.... And he wouldn't hesitate to add something to what I'd written.... We'd discuss commas in my story as if nothing else in the world mattered more at that moment — and, indeed, it did not.”6
At a time when Carver had no place where he could sit and write undisturbed, Gardner had handed him the keys to his office! Thus Carver had come to spend his Sundays "amidst boxes of typescript labelled with the titles of novels that Gardner later published."7

Talking about teaching fiction in the classroom Gardner makes a very interesting observation. He says that when you teach a book like

...Antony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*, you have hardly anything to say. That's because the book is perfect in all ways. The student understands the characters, their actions, the setting – just about everything. There is nothing else left for the teacher to say. However, when you walk into the classroom with *Gravity's Rainbow* there is so much to talk about – there is modern history, existentialism, Freud, Marx, and so on: There are millions and millions to talk about. The book may not be a very good story, it may be philosophically unsound, it may be psychologically unsound, it may be over wrought, it may be boring.... But whatever the case, the fact is that it's much easier to teach.8

Gardner is strongly against this kind of teaching, "this kind of valuing of novels for their intellectual difficulty rather than for their art."
In 1961 Gardner launched a professional literary magazine MSS. The magazine published works by writers like William Gass, John Hawkes, Joyce Carol Oates, W.S. Merwin, George P. Elliott and William Stafford. At around the same time, Gardner also published The Forms of Fiction which he wrote along with his colleague Lennis Dunlap. The book contains critical introductions and analyses of selections from various works of fiction. Gardner's definition of good fiction as a manifestation of moral values emerges in the book now and then. Reminiscing about his experience of collaborating with Gardner, Dunlap says,

John liked to work all night. He would buy a loaf of some Pullman bread and fan the slices out like a deck of cards. Then he'd coat each slice with peanut butter and stack them – no waxed paper or anything. Then he would produce a box of Baby Ruth or Snicker Color's bars and put on a thirty-cup pot of coffee. He could go for three days, but around dawn I'd be exhausted I'd get cold and start to shiver. Twelve hours was my limit.  


In the summer of 1974 Gardner delivered his first lecture at the Bread Loaf Writers' conference. He became an instant favourite. Students loved him for his generous critiquing of their writing. He kept returning every year until his death in 1982. He was flamboyantly
opinionated and loved to exchange ideas with students and colleagues. Between 1974 and 1978 Gardner taught at several colleges. In 1976 his marriage with Joan was dissolved. In 1975 Gardner was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Between 1975 and 1977 Gardner wrote several books for children—*Dragon, Dragon and Other Tales*, *Gudgekin the Thistle Girl and Other Tales*, *King of the Humming birds*, *In the Suicide Mountains*, and *A Child's Bestiary*.

*October Light*, Gardner's next novel, won the 1976 National Book Critics Award for fiction. In 1977 Gardner's Chaucer biography, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* and *The Poetry of Chaucer* were published. Most of *The Life and Times of Chaucer* is a recounting of already established facts about Chaucer. However, Gardner's "insight into the personal meaning of many lines of Chaucer's verse is quite persuasive and ingenious."10 His opera libretto *Rumpelstiltskin* was first performed in January 1977. In the same year Gardner was diagnosed with colon cancer. He drafted "The Art of Fiction," a guide for aspiring writers, while recuperating from the surgery. Recalling the events Liz Rosenberg, his second wife writes, "I have memories of John, hooked up to an intravenous machine, minutes before his surgery, typing away on that manuscript."11 This book, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, and *On Becoming a Novelist*, a book in which Gardner offers advice and practical tips to those who
wish to make a career in writing were published posthumously. So also was *Gilgamesh* a poetic rendering of the centuries-old Akkadian epic.

Gardner holds strong opinions about the nature of art. He is a severe critic of contemporary art. He argues that contemporary art is "not uplifting. It doesn't inspire. It doesn't celebrate." On *Moral Fiction*, a book-length essay on Gardner's definition of art was published in 1978. In wanting to formulate a distinction between good art and bad art, between moral fiction and immoral fiction, Gardner chose to name major writers like Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, John Updike, E. L. Doctorow and Saul Bellow, whose works he considered debauched. This outraged the literary community. Liz Rosenberg writes: "Nearly overnight, he turned from the darling of the literary establishment to its pariah. I often wished he had not named so many names in his attack on contemporary writing – but John felt that he had to be specific." One critic described it as "a thoughtful, amusing, and arrogant little book designed to pick fights."

In the same year Gardner took over as the director of the Creative Writing Program at State University of New York at Binghamton. Gardner married Liz Rosenberg, his student at Bennington College, in 1980. *Freddy's Book* was published in 1980 followed by *Mickelsson's Ghosts* in 1982. His divorce with Liz Rosenberg came through. On September 14, 1982, two weeks before his
planned wedding to Susan Thornton, Gardner was killed in a motorcycle accident near Susquehanna, Pennsylvania. He was 49 years old. *Stillness* and *Shadows*, an unfinished novel, were published posthumously. In a career that spanned over nearly twenty years Gardner tried his hand at a lot more things than what one would have expected a writer to have attempted. A business card from the early 70s, hints at his versatility. The card read, "Prof. John C. Gardner, Jr., A.B., M.A., Ph.D., D.V.P.; Medievalist, Novelist, Banjoist, Lyric & Epic Poet; consultant on All subjects." The services he offered were "Occasional Poems for all Occasions. Lectures for Ladies Clubs, Etc. & General Good Advice." 15

After his death, Gardner's books went out of print for a while. Very recently New Directions Publishing brought some of his books back into the bookstores. One may find Gardner's works long and winding, but never uninteresting. The interest emanates from the life affirming philosophy that is at the center of his work. One can see in Gardner's fiction the same sense of purpose that pervaded the novels of Melville, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. His work is intensely philosophical. It primarily deals with the struggle between good and evil. In his long posthumously published interview with *The Paris Review* he says, "I read a man like Collingwood, or even Brad Blanchard or C.D. Broad, and I get excited – even anxious – filled with suspense. It's as if I
actually think philosophy will solve life's great questions – which sometimes, come to think of it, it does, at least for me."\textsuperscript{16} In his books Gardner always looks for “clear questions to work through.” He attempts to find answers to serious philosophical questions: “The human dramas that interest me – stir me to excitement and, loosely, vision – are always rooted in serious philosophical questions.”

Gardner was greatly disturbed by the sense of amorality and indifference that formed the crux of postmodern fiction which he thought was life-denying and evil. He felt that American fiction had lost its way: “I think that if you’re wrong, philosophically, your stories always end up hollow.”\textsuperscript{17} He believed that it was “necessary to keep an eye on what’s good and what’s bad in the books of a society.”\textsuperscript{18} He dismissed the postmodernists and the existentialists as writers of immoral fiction. His objection was to the self-destructive despair and cynicism that these writers had managed to smuggle into the realm of fiction: “I hate nihilistic, cynical writing. I hate it.” He did not hesitate to make his resentment obvious. This anger translated into \textit{On Moral Fiction}. The fable he narrates at the beginning of the book is nothing short of a defining statement of what he intends to say in the rest of the book:

\begin{quote}
A book as wide-ranging as this one needs a governing metaphor to give it at least an illusion that all is well:
\end{quote}
It was said in the old days that every year Thor made a circle around Middle-earth, beating back the enemies of order. Thor got older every year, and the circle occupied by gods and men grew smaller. The wisdom god, Woden, went out to the king of the Trolls, got him in an armlock and demanded to know of him how order might triumph over chaos.

“Give me your left eye,” said the king of the Trolls, “and I’ll tell you.”

Without hesitation, Woden gave up his left eye. “Now tell me.”

The Troll said, “The secret is, watch with both eyes!”

Gardner revered “ancient forms and permanent truths.” He favoured the traditional view of art, the kind espoused by Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Dante. And as such to Gardner art, and art criticism, is inherently moral. He says “to me art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not to debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a little while, the twilight of the gods and of us.” The “wholeness of vision” is what Gardner is pleading for.
Gardner's definition of "morality" is nowhere near the religious connotation of the word. To him morality is "doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted, and doing it with at least a reasonable expectation that in the long run as well as the short we won't be sorry for what we've done, whether or not it was against some petty human law." In short, "Moral action is action which affirms life."

It's not as though Gardner is trying to formulate moral imperatives for writers to follow. All he is insisting on is responsibility on the part of the writer to identify and make a distinction between what is moral and what is not:

I don't think real morality can ever be codified. You can't say "thou shalt not," and you can't say "Thou shalt." What you can say is how people feel and why they feel the way they do. My argument in Moral Fiction is this: that immoral fiction is indifferent to the real issues. I'm saying that there's good and evil. And in particular situation, may be the only healthy situation is universal destruction. I would never set up a morality that's goody-goody. Sometimes morality is awful. Fiction can never pronounce ultimate solutions, but it can lead to understanding. It leads, and that's all. It gives visions of what's possible.
What Gardner calls "moral fiction" is not fiction that "preaches," not in the least didactic: "Didacticism and true art are immiscible." The didactic writer is not even remotely moral. That's because he is constantly working towards making the argument simple, allowing no room for objections, however valid they may be. His vision is myopic: "The didactic writer is anything but moral because he is always simplifying the argument, always narrowing away, getting rid of legitimate objections." True art, is "not didactic because, instead of teaching by authority and force, it explores open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach." In other words, Gardner uses the term "moral fiction" to refer to

...works of fiction that are moral in their process. That is to say the way they work is moral. Good works of fiction study values by testing them in imagined/real situation, testing them hard, being absolutely fair to both sides. The real moral writer is the opposite of the minister, the preacher, the rabbi. In so far as he can, the preacher tries to keep religion as it always was, outlawing contraceptives or whatever; his job is conservative. The writer's job on the other hand, is to be radically open to persuasion. He should, if possible, not be committed to one side more than to the other – which is simply to say
that he wants to affirm life, not sneer at it – but he has to be absolutely fair, understand the moral limits of his partisanship. His affirmation has to be earned. If he favors the cop, he must understand the arguments for life on the side of the robber.  

If it were possible Gardner would have asked for the whole of history to be “rewritten from a humanistic point of view.” Gardner refuses to buy the argument that the decadence that has set in, in contemporary arts, is a result of the sickness of society. It is, to him, the other way round. Of course moral art may not solve all the problems of the society, but it definitely equips the individual with the strength and courage to face the problems head-on and emerge a winner: “Moral art tests values and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and the worse in human action.” In other words, “The premise of moral art is that life is better than death; art hunts for avenues to life. The book succeeds if we’re powerfully persuaded that the focal characters, in their fight for life, have won honestly or, if they lose, are tragic in their loss, not just tiresome or pitiful.” Gardner’s essential premise was certainly sound. It may not be the only way of defining fiction, but definitely one of the most commendable. As Kathryn VanSpanckeren rightly says, Gardner “endeavored to demonstrate that certain values and acts lead to fulfilling lives.”
Gardner compares writers to scientists. A scientist validates theories through experiment. Similarly a novelist uses character and action to test ideas. He writes, "...when I write a piece of fiction I select my characters and settings and so on because they have a bearing, at least to me, on the old unanswerable philosophical questions. And as I spin out the action, I'm always very concerned with springing discoveries - actual philosophical discoveries. But at the same time I'm concerned - and finally more concerned with what the discoveries do to the character who makes them, and to the people around him." Gardner seems to have been greatly influenced by Aristotle's peripatetic school of philosophy. A peripatetic novel is that which records an author's search for truth:

The incidents of plot, the moral choices of heroes and villains, all of it becomes a working out of ideas, a process of discovery in which the author finds out what she really thinks. Whenever the results seem stale, when the paths are too predictable, too familiar, the peripatetic novelist backs up and tries again, dealing as much as possible with raw materials avoiding pre-manufactured characters and plots.
The most distinguishing feature of a peripatetic novel is "a high order of creative engagement between the novelist and his work, and a willingness to discover unanticipated conclusions."

The meaning and the expression of that meaning, in a peripatetic novel are inseparable. This renders the truth clear yet indescribable. "A truly moral book," for Gardner, "is one that is radically open to persuasion, but looks hard at a problem, and keeps looking for answers. It gives you an absolutely clear vision, as if the poet, the writer, had nothing to do with it, had just done everything in his power to imagine how things are."34

In On Moral Fiction Gardner "presents the conflict between traditional and intellectual approaches to fiction as an almost biblical battle between right and wrong."35 He remains fully convinced that "no novel can please for very long without plot as the center of its argument."36 He strongly argues for the revival of the traditional strengths of fiction – plot, character, and action. He writes, "The decline of the closely plotted novel is hailed as an appropriate artistic reflection of our discovery that the universe is not orderly. But this is... misleading."37

Character is as important to Gardner as is plot: "What happens in real fiction is identical to what happens in a dream – as long as we have the right to wake up screaming from a nightmare, we have the
right to worry about a character." He does not believe in forging the characters to fit into his design. In fact he sees it as a big flaw: "I certainly wouldn't ever take the actions, or the characters, or make people say what they wouldn't say. The writer must allow the people in his book to take charge of their lives, to do what they would do in a given situation and not force them to do what he thinks they would have done. Gardner says, "What I do is follow the drama where it goes; the potential of the characters in their given situation. I let them go where they have to go, and analyze as I'm going along what's involved, what the implications are." Aristotle calls it "the energeia - the actualization of the potential which exists in character and situation." 

Gardner despises what he calls "the elaboration of texture for its own sake." He decries the fact that his fellow writers care more for words, rather than emotions; care more for texture, rather than content:

Fiction as pure language (texture over structure) is in. It is one common manifestation of what is being called "post modernism." At bottom the mistake is a matter of morality, at least in the sense that it shows, on the writer's part, a lack of concern. To people who care about events and ideas and thus, necessarily, about the clear and efficient statement of both, linguistic opacity suggests indifference to the needs and wishes of the reader and to
whatever ideas may be buried under all that brush. And since one reason we read fiction is our hope that we will be moved by it, finding characters we can enjoy and sympathize with, an academic striving for opacity suggests, if not misanthropy, a perversity or shallowness that no reader would tolerate. Where language is of primary concern to the writer, communication is necessarily secondary.  

Gardner believed that the novel must “embody ethical values rather than dazzle with empty technical innovation.” He says, “I try to be absolutely direct about moral values and dilemmas. Read it to the charwoman, Richardson said. I say, make it plain to her dog.”

Gardner “deplored the tendency of many modern writers toward pessimism.” He clarifies his stand in his interview to Paul Fergusson:

I think the difference right now between good art and bad art is that the good artists are the people who are, in one way or another, creating, out of deep and honest concern, a vision of life in the twentieth century that is worth pursuing. And the bad artists, of whom there are many, are whining or moaning or staring, because it’s fashionable into the dark abyss. If you believe that life is fundamentally a volcano full of baby skulls, you’ve got two
main choices as an artist: You can either stare into the volcano and count the skulls; your baby, Mrs. Miller.” Or you can try to build walls so that fewer baby skulls go in. It seems to me that the artist ought to hunt for positive ways of surviving, of living. You shouldn't lie. If there aren't any, so far as you can see, you should say so.... I think it's possible to make walls around at least some of the smoking holes.44

In *On Moral Fiction* Gardner brutally and recklessly ransacks the writings of his peers. He calls Philip Roth “creepy”. He dismisses Saul Bellow as “an essayist disguised as a writer of fiction.” Norman Mailer, Edward Albee, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth come in for a verbal crucifixion from Gardner for writing fiction that is nothing less than dangerous. Their indifference to ethical concerns hurt Gardner the most:

Fiction has gotten boring and stupid and depressing, and shoddy, in many ways....I criticize books like those of Tom Pynchon and those of John Barth, and some other people, as books which are held up as true and noble works of art when in fact they're not.... They have very specific faults in them – faults of execution, faults of conception. They are sometimes a reflection of personalities which are
forgivable and lovable in everyday life but ought not to be held up as models because they’re just not that good as human models; and my objection, really, is not to the fact that these writers exist, but to the fact that academics so often praise them.\textsuperscript{45}

According to Scott Rosenberg, what Gardner argues for in \textit{On Moral Fiction} is simply this: “Western Civilization is burning, and its artists are fiddling away. They must put down their bows and start fighting anew the good fight, for morality, and for truth, lest darkness engulf mankind.”\textsuperscript{46} Gardner vehemently rallies for “artistic responsibility.” According to him,

Moral fiction can exist in only three forms. The lightest form is moral fiction in which you see absolutely accurate description of the best people; fiction that gives you an idea how to live. It's uplifting: You want to be like the hero. You want to be like Jesus, or Buddha, or Moses, whatever. Tolstoy does it. Everybody wants to be like Pierre in \textit{War and Peace}. Everybody wants to be like Levin in \textit{Anna Karenina}. In the next form of moral fiction you see an evil person and you realize you don't want to be like that. Like Macbeth. You see there's an alternative. You don't have to be like Macbeth. It's kind of negative
moral fiction, or moral fiction in the tragic mode, where you want to be different than the protagonist – you want to be better. Then there's the third form, wherein alternatives don't exist. Not for fashion's sake or for the cheap love of gruesomeness, but from anger and concern, you stare into the smoking volcano.... You understand exactly why a wife would want to kill her husband, saw up the body, and put it in a suitcase.... That doesn't tell you what you should do. It doesn't tell you I don't want to be like that. But it makes you understand and, understanding, hunger for a world not like this.47

On Moral Fiction was widely derided when it made its debut in 1978. More so because it came at a time when people had begun to edify junk – junk food, junk entertainment, junk relationships and junk behavior. It's not over yet. America's biggest hallucination – Saddam Hussain's Weapons of Mass Destruction – is not over yet. The result? A junk war, a junk economy, and yes, a junk execution too! There is so much at stake – money, credibility, good will and worst of all, lives. America's august position as the world's supreme power – both physical and moral – is severely compromised. America is powerful, but the power is tainted.
According to Gardner fiction must help identify the evils in the society. That is the biggest challenge a writer must take on:

Some of us who are sort of more or less liberal would like to think that the fascists are the bad guys; some who are more conservative would like to think that the terrorists are the bad guys, or the other side.... I mean, everybody’s a bad guy, but you have to keep saying. “These are the bad guys this minute.” Naming them and dramatizing what’s happening.... I don’t think the evils in America are either liberal or conservative. I don’t think that people who want to build up our military budget at the cost of economic stability in the United States are either conservative or liberal. They’re people who are beyond and outside of politics; they’re money people.48

Gardner asserts that writers of fiction have a very important role to play: “Not only should we be affirmative, not only should we write for life, but we should write with knowledge and with concern about the things that seem to be mounting against life, and in this country more than any place else.” According to him, “Nothing that’s happening in the world is more important...for the ultimate welfare of the world than what’s happening in the United States. The really big troubles start right here.” “It seems to me,” he goes on to say, “that our
situation is hopeless, and everything we fear is being brought upon us by ourselves.”

It is obvious that Gardner was keen on pushing “the novel in a new direction, or back to an old one – Homer’s or the Beowulf poet’s.”49 Novel after novel Gardner wrestled mightily with absurdity, with meaninglessness. Gardner wrote fiction with a Wordsworthian agenda: His books are permeated with his deep-rooted faith in the goodness of nature, in the nobility of mankind. He believed firmly in the curative powers of fellowship, duty, and family obligations: “With the advent of John Gardner’s old-fashioned saga, the American novel [was] once again ... dragged from its premature grave and shoved back on the heroic, albeit dangerous, course initially charted by Herman Melville during an earlier renaissance.”50 Gardner published eight novels in all before his death in 1982. Three of them, *The Wreckage of Agathon*, *Grendel*, and *Freddy’s Book* are fabulous in nature: they are about giants and monsters and mythical figures. *The Resurrection*, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, *Nickel Mountain*, *October Light*, and *Mickelsson’s Ghosts* are non-fabulous in nature: they are set in America, and are about America and Americans. Being about real people and real situations I consider the latter not just more relevant but also more readily applicable to the contemporary situation. Hence, in the following chapters I wish to discuss his non-fabulous novels, *The*
Resurrection, The Sunlight Dialogues, Nickel Mountain, October Light, and Mickelsson's Ghosts in the light of Gardner's assertion that art plays the role of a pathfinder leading the reader away from the abyss, to light and to life.
Notes

1 Contemporary Literary Criticism 3:185.


9 Quoted in "Like Boulders Rumbling by."

10 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 10:220.


12 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 10:223.

13 Rosenberg, “Remembering John Gardner.”

14 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 10:223.


17 Renwick, "An Interview."

18 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."


20 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 3:187.
21 Gardner 5.
22 Gardner 23.
23 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
24 Gardner 19.
25 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
26 Gardner 19.
27 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
28 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 3:185.
29 Gardner 19.
30 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
32 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
34 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
35 Stanton, "Between the Lines."
36 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
37 Gardner 10.
38 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."
39 Gardner 23.

40 Gardner 9.

41 VanSpankeren, "An Outline."

42 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."

43 Stanton, "Between the Lines."

44 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."

45 Renwick, "An Interview."


47 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."


49 Ferguson, "Art of Fiction."

50 *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 3:185.