Chapter VII

Conclusion
John Gardner is one of America's most commendable writers. His faith in the traditional values of America is unyielding. What distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his unflinching faith in the goodness of mankind. He swears by the nobility of mankind. Profound concern for man as well as society is the distinguishing feature of Gardner's fiction. Gardner is greatly saddened by the loss of virtues that has become the overriding feature of the modern man. In his fiction Gardner makes a sincere attempt to impress upon mankind to affirm life, to live morally responsible lives. To even think of affirmation in a world plagued by despair and alienation needs courage. Gardner derived this courage from his unwavering faith in the divinity of mankind. He believes man to be the best, the most noble of God's creation. The true essence of life lies in accepting both the beauty and the monstrousness of the world.

Gardner's "heroes" are morally degenerated people. By leading his heroes through certain experiences and relationships Gardner helps them understand the true meaning of life; after the various encounters they make a conscious effort to make reconciliation and reintegration possible. They shed the nihilistic and existential attitude and embrace life for what it is. They cease to fear chaos; they cease to shy away from disorder. They make a new beginning. They strive to live meaningful and responsible lives.
Gardner believes that true art must advocate moral values. It must move people to guide themselves to become morally upright. Gardner demonstrates an undying faith in the healing power of art. He says, “I believe absolutely that art always affects life. If a creative work of art has no effect on life, then its effect on life is that it tells the reader that life is not that important.”

Fiction has the power to convince the reader to let go isolation and once again connect with society. Gardner declares,

True artists are possessed...they are messianic egomaniacs. They believe that what they do is unspeakably important: it is only that conviction that makes the writer himself important....So Beethoven does draft after draft of his works, scrutinizing, altering, improving them long after anyone commonly sane would have stopped, delighted....Only the absolute, stubborn conviction that with patience enough he can find his way through or around any obstacle – only the certainty solid as his life that he can sooner or later discover the right technique – can get the true artist through the endless hours of fiddling, reconceiving, throwing out in disgust. If he does his work well, the ego that made it possible does not show in the work....He builds whatever world he is
able to build, then evaporates into thin air, leaving what he’s built to get by on its own.... 2

Gregory Morris marvels at Gardner “for the valiant effort he puts forth in his art; the effort to keep the world sane and loving and convinced of its own moral value. It is the philosophical consistency and quality of this luminous vision which is Gardner’s hallmark.”3 Gardner’s major concern in his fiction is affirmation, reconciliation, and reintegration. What positive values of life can one hold on to in a world full of despair and disappointment? Gardner dismisses this dilemma outright. According to him there is no meaning to life sans the values it asserts. We must cease living in isolation. We must come out of our self-imposed alienation and mend our ties with the world. We must consciously make choices that are moral, choices that are life-affirming.

Life is full of contradictions. Most of Gardner’s fiction is an answer to the question, “What is the meaning of Life?” Life is a series of chaotic, absurd, and meaningless exercises. Yet out of these “heap of broken images” one image, one moment, one experience emerges and then everything in life begins to make sense, begins to make meaning. Then all of a sudden life gathers seriousness and momentum.

Gardner believes in the power of love – it is love, and love alone that can make our search for meaning fruitful. To get this message across Gardner is constantly on the look out for new forms of
expression. When new forms are difficult to find, he resurrects old ones only to wake us out of our slumber. The real and the unreal, the magical and the mythical are fused together to resonate the power of love and understanding. The comic and the serious operate some times against each other and at other times join forces to give life its seriousness. Order and disorder, heroes and anarchists collide head on resulting in wounds and pain. Who wins is not what matters. Both could be right, both could be wrong. Order can be as painful as disorder; it is the fusion that matters. Such a fusion forms a large part of Gardner's fiction and is usually a result of accidence, from which emerges the positive value of disorder.

Not one of us is sane. All of us are deluded, mad. But celebration of life lies in the celebration of that lunacy; in the celebration of the chaos that surrounds us. Life is definitely absurd. But one must never tire from looking for meaning. Everything in life must make sense – a terminal illness, suicide, even a murder.

In *The Resurrection*, James Chandler learns that he will soon die of leukemia. The discovery torments him. But when he realizes that the people who are grieving for him are struggling to smooth his journey toward death, he feels resurrected. Through Viola he comes to understand the meaning of death. He comes to peace with himself. He affirms life, affirms the world. Making this kind of affirmation is
difficult but not impossible. His death leaves Viola too, beautifully changed.

Our vision of life is rather limited. Therefore we are unable to comprehend the meaning of life. There is meaning. And the meaning will come through only when we are able to look at ourselves, look at our world, from the outside and see where we are going wrong and set things right. Only then shall we all become heroes.

Fred Clumly in *The Sunlight Dialogues* is one such hero. As the Police Chief of Batavia he considers himself responsible for the law and order situation in the town. His biggest challenge is arresting the Sunlight Man who seems to have appeared from nowhere and has begun to create havoc in the small town. Clumly's various encounters with the Sunlight Man leave Clumly a more magnanimous man than he already is. He sheds his narrow vision of the world and embraces a broader vision where order and disorder co-exist as complements of each other.

According to Alison Payne, "both Clumly and The Sunlight Man are 'seeking truth' but from 'opposing directions.'" The Sunlight Man's "sensitivity to injustice is heroic in vision, [but he] is demonic in action, for he tries to achieve freedom through the violent upheaval of conventional ethics." Talking about the design of the novel Gardner explains:
In *The Sunlight Dialogues* I wanted to tell a story which had the feel of total fabulation, total mystery – magicians – strange things and impossible tricks – so that everybody would have the sudden feeling at some point in the novel that he's caught inside a novel.... I wanted to make people in the novel just as much like Batavians as possible and yet create the feeling that the whole novel is taking place in Oz.5

Like *The Resurrection, The Sunlight Dialogues* too is about affirming life. However, while in *The Resurrection* the protagonist James Chandler moves towards affirmation, The Sunlight Man, the protagonist of *The Sunlight Dialogues*, fails to affirm life, fails to make life art, but helps others move towards affirmation and an understanding of the meaning of life. The prison cell in the novel is Gardner's metaphor for the control exerted over man's life and experiences. According to Charles Johnson,

The dialogues [between Fred Clumly and the Sunlight Man] set up a distinction between acting through intuition in accordance with an impersonal universe of random accidents and acting in terms of arbitrary human laws and custom, rules imposed on human experience in a cosmos that is inherently mysterious and indifferent to
human longings and aspirations. Between the vast cosmic order and the limited, temporal one. Between the Babylonian belief in the holiness and separateness of body and spirit, for which they sought no connection and from which they experienced no guilt, that "Jewish product," and the Judeo-Christian emphasis on codifying the spiritual realm into rules and laws.⁶

Gardner's heroes and anti-heroes search for meaning and permanence in a world that constantly demonstrates their insignificance. In his fiction, Gardner examines the notion of meaninglessness from the viewpoint of passionately opposed characters. He is interested in the lessons they learn. His heroes are plain men who are forced by life to walk on paths never tread before. On the way they encounter forces that test their endurance. They finally emerge successful in the encounter and become heroes. His books can be read as attempts to bring together the values of the past and the absurdity of the present.

Gardner's stories are about the voyages by his heroes in search of truth, in search of knowledge. At the end of the voyage the hero inevitably is humbled into accepting his limitations. In Nickel Mountain Gardner gives us,
the pastoral of the truck stop, with large diesels always roaring dangerously in the background, with massive tractors for plowing and reaping and tearing their passengers to pieces, with wars in the not too remote distance sending home their maimed. But Gardner incorporates all the violence and industrial destruction into the mock pastoral retreat in order to reaffirm the values of the pastoral and to tell a story—really—of redemption through love."⁷

Henry Soames in *Nickel Mountain* refuses to accept despair. Thus in *Nickel Mountain*, “Gardner chose to...revitalize the common truths that twentieth century writers had for the most part deliberately avoided.”⁸

For Gardner goodness is real. Man needs to know that his own actions matter in order to make sense of the world he lives in. After their encounter with life Gardner's people realize that life is not one big dream. Gardner demonstrates this unique ability of being able to sneak in the divine into ordinary things. This, for Gardner, is redemption; the way the divinity works in our lives to affect our salvation. Gardner argues for fiction that helps improve life through a positive vision and by creating characters that one would be moved to emulate. Unlike for instance, Gardner points out, in the works of Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, where the
characters stand grossly unrelated to the entire drama: "They exist for the sake of the predetermined message, not as subjects for the artist's open-minded exploration of what he can honestly say."9

In order to be at peace with one's present, one must first know, understand and accept one's past, one's history. Life is a wonderful fusion of loves and hatreds, victories and failures. In *October Light* Gardner takes us on a bicentennial trip around old Vermont. The book is full of symmetries, juxtapositions, symbolism, and prophesies. The trashy novel brings Sally closer to life. The "unlocking" of the stubborn, uncharitable old man, James Page, forms the crux of the novel.

Gardner wrote the trashy novel in *October Light* in collaboration with his wife. The 150 pages of *Smugglers*, keeps us constantly awake to the fact that what we are witnessing is just plain fiction. This is reinforced by the constant comparisons that the characters in both the novels make to characters in novels. By interspersing the two novels Gardner is trying to drive home the point that life in Vermont is not very different from life in the decadent California. Violence, suicides, and lawlessness are prevalent in both the worlds; and also love, affirmation, understanding, and collaboration. *October Light* is seeped in hope; hope and conviction that life in America will continue beyond the bicentennial year. Gardner is right: life in America has continued not just beyond the bicentennial year but even beyond September 11.
Gardner is an old-fashioned novelist in the sense that his books don't leave you despairing. In *Mickelsson's Ghosts* Gardner gives us a detailed account of the highs and the lows in the life of an academician. Peter J. Mickelsson is a self-proclaimed idealist and ethicist. As the plot unfolds, we see Mickelsson run into more problems than he can handle: he impregnates a teenage prostitute; inadvertently commits a murder; his son takes to terrorism. According to Rodman, "Mickelsson's moral stature is, at best, dubious. Nevertheless, he is a survivor. Retribution through suffering is his strongest claim to a happy ending. Anyone who gets through so much misery, Gardner seems to be saying, is entitled to whatever he can salvage."\(^{10}\)

According to Gardner, "the artist's affirmation, or, more precisely, his search for affirmation, is the work of art."\(^{11}\) A truly responsible storyteller is one who, like an actor, can get into the shoes of his characters and know them from inside. Understanding without compassion is of no value. Basically his intention as an artist was to demonstrate that "There are only two kinds of books in the world....There are books that desperately struggle to prove there's some holy, miraculous meaning to it all and desperately deny that every thing in the world's mere belts and gears...and there are books that say the opposite."\(^{12}\) The bottom line is, "If there are real values, and if those real values help sustain human life, then literature ought
sometimes to mention them."13 A writer needs to know that "Everybody can't be a brute!"14 Even Gardner's criticism was never mechanical. According to him, fiction must be judged on moral grounds because basically art is for us, human beings. He always aimed at uncovering the central vision, the philosophy at the centre of the book.

Gardner is against over-intellectualization of fiction. Valuing books purely for their intellectual complexity infuriates him. He clarifies,

Probably a book that influences American people more than any other is Gone with the Wind. Whether it's great art or not, it has moved enormous numbers of people, which gives it at least a claim to be some kind of art. And I would argue as a writer that it's not badly put together, that the sentences are rather good sentences, that in fact it has a right to stand as one of our important American novels. It certainly does try to tell the truth about a very important period of American history, and it does create lasting characters, as we know by the very fact that every girl who reads it wants to model herself on the central character of that book for a while at least. And yet it's vary rare to find Gone with the Wind in a college classroom, whereas it's regular to find Finnegans Wake in
a college classroom, although very few people in American
were ever deeply moved by anything in that book.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Cowart, "Gardner speaks of existentialism as
irremediably nihilist and even paranoid, but he defines the term more
or less exclusively in reference to Sartre with scarcely any regard to
the more optimistic, even 'moral' existentialism of Camus."\textsuperscript{16} Gardner
has no regard whatsoever for existentialism because he feels that the
nihilism ingrained in it is irreversible. About Sartre Gardner says,
"Sartre writes like an angel. That's the kind of thing that fascinates
me. Sartre is my great love-hate, kind of because he's a horror
intellectually, figuratively, and morally, but he's a wonderful writer
and anything he says you believe, at least for the moment, because of
the way he says it."\textsuperscript{17} However, E.E. Eller argues that Gardner shares
Heidegger's thought. He quotes the following lines from Albert Camus'
description of Heidegger's thought: "For him, too, one must not sleep,
but must keep alert until the consummation. He stands in this absurd
world and points out its ephemeral character. He seeks his way amid
these ruins,"\textsuperscript{18} and concludes, "Is this not John Gardner?"\textsuperscript{19}

I strongly disagree. Gardner was aware of the ethical limitations
of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy; aware that such a
philosophy can "denigrate life to nothingness and encourage man to
the ultimate meaninglessness of compulsive greed." As opposed to this,
a strong "value system affirms life and affords man a reason to hope and act." 20

To Gardner existentialism is nothing short of paranoia; it is ferociously self-centered. This is what Gardner attempts to demonstrate in *Grendel*, the best of his fabulous novels. Ruth Leslie calls it "a prose-poem of extraordinary beauty, complexity, and virtuosity." 21 *Grendel* is a retelling of *Beowulf* from the monster's point of view. Gardner explains, "What Grendel does is take, one by one, the great heroic ideals of mankind since the beginning and make a case for these values by setting up alternatives in an ironic set of monster values. I hate existentialism." 22 In *Beowulf* Grendel is a monster killed by the hero Beowulf. Gardner's monster is "complex, fascinating, and even lovable...." 23 Grendel's world in *Grendel* is full of absurdity and meaninglessness. His search for order and meaning finally leaves him devastated. Why did Gardner choose to retell the myth from the monster's point of view? It is, I understand, to prepare the ground for the collision and fusion of the monster's chaotic world and man's very ordered world; just as Grendel's world is dark, horrifying and chaotic, so is man's world. Gardner seems to believe in the central theme of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that there can be no progression without contraries: "Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." 24
The message is clear – the search for order is necessary even if that order is as disorderly as disorder itself. Thanks to Freud, and Nietzsche, mankind has fallen away from reason and righteousness. The modern man's notion of freedom is selfish. In *On Moral Fiction* Gardner writes, "In the name of democracy, justice, and compassion, we abandon our right to believe, to debate, and to hunt down truth."25

The *Wreckage of Agathon* is the story of Agathon and his disciple Peeker. Agathon lived in Athens at a time when Athens was ruled by Solon, and the neighbouring Sparta was ruled by Lykourgos. Agathon is greatly saddened by a death he has caused in the Athenian war against Megrarians. As a young philosopher, Agathon had been so moved by the words of his king Solon that he perpetrated the act. The death of his friend Konon, the result of a political conspiracy, saddens him further. He has now come to believe that all life is doomed. He hates people. He lives in a world of ideas. He intentionally keeps away from society. He strongly believes that evil and death are the only realities in life. Having been trained as a seer, Agathon arrives in Sparta as the councillor for Lykourgos, who is working towards transforming Sparta into an ideal state. What ensues is a political conflict between Agathon and Lycourgos. While Agathon's imbalanced vision of the world leads to his decline and disintegration, his
disciple Peeker learns from his master's mistakes and embraces life for what it is.

In *Freddy's Book* Gardner emphasizes, yet again, that what sustains life is human values. Freddy is a young recluse thoroughly alienated from the world around him. The alienation is self-imposed, a result of Freddy's inability to communicate with others. He locks himself up in his room. What has driven Freddy to this state is his grotesque appearance, something the young boy is too shy to come to terms with. He spends his time reading and writing. He writes a book narrating the story of Lars-Goren, the trusted knight of King Gustav of Sweden. The middle-aged knight is loved and respected for his enormous courage. But the truth is he lives in mortal fear of the Devil that appears in Sweden on alternate days. How Lars-Goren destroys the Devil and restores peace in the country forms the crux of the story. The story in a way reflects Freddy's own encounter with life and how deep inside him there is a strong desire to kill the "devil" he fears, and embrace the world.

Life is definitely absurd. But one must never tire from looking for meaning. Identifying the absurdity of existence is not enough. One must be able to overcome this hurdle and celebrate life. One must strive toward order, toward peace. Gardner is consistent. He never loses sight from of the values that must be affirmed. From *The Forms*
of Fiction through his last published book Gardner was concerned with only one problem — that of affirming values. In his books Garner attempts to give a new lease of life to those tenets of fiction that he thinks fiction cannot do without — goodness, truth, and beauty; tenets that twentieth century writers had conveniently chosen to ignore. He says, "...true art treats ideals, affirming and clarifying the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Ideals are art's ends; the rest is methodology."26 The absence of these ideals renders fiction meaningless. Minus truth, goodness, and beauty all that will be left of life will be horror — intellectual and moral horror.

There is more to mourn in life than to celebrate. But the soul is always in pursuit of life. One must never undermine the importance of life. No reason is good enough to let go goodness all together. In fact the circumstance in which we live now make it all the more crucial for the writer to go look for that goodness and upon finding it, which he inevitably will, hold it up for the world to see. Yes, life is beautiful. Weaving morality into art is analogous to battling with darkness. It is as if Gardner is out on a rampage to uncover all that was thought to have been lost — truth, goodness, and beauty. Even as a critic he was never mechanical. He always looked to uncover the central vision, the underlying philosophy. The perception of the artist is clearer and more acute than that of the ordinary man. An artist has faith in the power of
art. He “believes that art reflects something which is real in life, [and] tries to see and reveal to others what life is in his own time by making it art.”

To be able to write moral fiction one needs to have sufficient faith in the goodness of mankind. How an artist pursues affirmation is what constitutes his work of art. Values that affirm life are indispensable because it is these values that keep man’s hopes alive: “Of course, a beautiful affirmation is meaningless if it doesn’t recognize all the forces going against it.” In On Moral Fiction Gardner acknowledges that life is a series of dismal conjunctions but the best thing about art is subordination. Throughout his work Gardner makes that deliberate effort to reiterate that art is beneficial; that it must wage a war against the negative forces in life.

The “humanistic venture that [pervades] Gardner’s fiction, scholarship, and criticism” is the finest aspect of his fiction. Even in the posthumously published novel Stillness, Gardner reiterates the value of love and understanding. Towards the end of the novel, Martin Orrick and Joan move towards each other, more in love now than ever before.

Gardner was never impressed by modernism. Charles Johnson points out that Gardner never felt attracted to “the trendy experiments in fragmentation and arbitrariness as novelty.” He refused to share
the "critic's fascination with displacement, nihilism and discontinuity."

Undoubtedly, Gardner "is the only writer... whose fictions offer us the achievements of the past – artistic and metaphysical – as models for the future." About the manner in which Gardner wrote fiction Johnson writes, "To write well for Gardner is to obliterate for the duration of your fiction your own pettiness, to surrender your prejudices in order to seize another man's way of seeing – his truth, the way world appears to him, then faithfully present it in the story." Therefore fiction to Gardner must present not just "the modern derailments of faith and reason, which lead to despair and paralysis but also the triumphs." 30

What the Time Magazine says of The Sunlight Dialogues is true of all his novels: "They are all compassionate portraits of America." 31

Jeff Henderson is in awe of Gardner's "coherence and consistency of Gardner's vision and message" According to Henderson, "great and lasting literature" is characterized by "a deliberate and complicated 'layering' of multiple meanings and levels of meaning." 32

"Impermanence, entropy, death, and the inevitable collapse of civilizations as well as the universe—and what all that augurs for art and all our moral beliefs," was always on Gardner's mind. 33 John Gardner seems to share the insight of Oswald Spengler in The Decline of the West, of Arnold J. Toynbee in A Study of History, of Sigmund
Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, and of Morris Berman in *The Twilight of American Culture* and *Dark Ages America*. In an interview to *The Southern Illinoisan*, he said,

"I think a certain kind of America is doomed, though something greater may be coming. The novelist and only the novelist thrives on breakdown, because that's the moment when he can analyze the beauty of the values that are falling and rising....When the old England at the end of the nineteenth century fell, along came Dickens; when Russia fell apart, along came Tolstoy."34

Fiction to Gardner was like the lighthouse to the man lost at sea: "It's made my life, and it made my life when I was a kid, when I was incapable of finding any other sustenance, any other thing to lean on, any other comfort during times of great unhappiness. Art has filled my life with joy and I want everybody to know the kind of joy I know. Gardner believed that "God put [him] on earth to write." His faith in the power of fiction is invincible. "Fiction is the only religion I have," he declared.35 He couldn't have said it better.

Gardner's fiction has been and will continue to be the guiding light to generations of writers. Gardner begins *The Sunlight Dialogues* with a line from the *I Ching*: "The earth in its devotion carries all things, good and evil, without exception."36 The line sums up Gardner's
entire philosophy of life and art. Towards the end of the novel Gardner reaffirms the message but in a more secular fashion: "God be kind to all Good Samaritans and also bad ones. For such is the Kingdom of Heaven." So be it.
Notes


7 Contemporary Literary Criticism 7: 114.


11 Gardner, On Moral Fiction, 163.


19 Eller 132.


34 Quoted in Charles Johnson, “A Moral Fiction.”


36 Gardner, *Dialogues*, xvii.

37 Gardner, *Dialogues*, 672.