
Pro Rege

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1986

John Gardner and the Morality of Choice

James C. Schaap

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (1986) "John Gardner and the Morality of Choice," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 15: No. 2, 2 - 8.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol15/iss2/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

John Gardner and the Morality of Choice

James C. Schaap

Associate Professor of English



*Dr. James Calvin Schaap has been a member of the English department at Dordt College for fourteen years. His stories and articles have appeared in a variety of magazines and journals. His latest book, a novel entitled **Home Free**, was published this spring by Crossway.*

I can't begin to count the hours I've spent writing in the last ten years. I can tell you that I've started seven novels, completed three; written four full-length plays, four one-acts, a book of devotional readings, a book-length collection of feature interviews, maybe fifty short stories and as many essays. It's likely that I've begun a score of other things that never really made it at all. But after all that work, I find myself no closer to grasping a full intellectual understanding of what it means to be a Christian writer than I was ten years ago, when I started a novel as a means of teaching myself to write. This may be discouraging news to some who believe that the Christian view of any subject is less than a year's study away. And it may be the confession of an institutional agnostic at a college which sells itself on Christian perspec-

tives. Nonetheless, it is the truth.

I believe in God. I worship him and I write. Just exactly how my faith and my work are related remains to me very much of a mystery. My own fiction illustrates my own confusion, I suppose. Just recently a New York agent said this about my work: "I feel the strong, religious tenor of the work would make the collection more salable to a [religious publisher]. The problem with religious publishers is that they find it difficult to publish any work that might offend *any* [emphasis his] of their readers, and it's nearly impossible to tell the truth without offending someone in the congregation."

I understand the difference between aesthetic questions, and sociological or ecclesiastical questions. I know that use of profanity and vulgarity, or depicting sexuality in a work of

fiction may offend readers with whom I regularly worship. But I believe that problem is not so much an aesthetic problem as it is a sociological, ecclesiastical, or, if you will, tribal problem. When Dr. Henrietta Ten Harmsel said last year that she assumed that a first-rate Christian novelist would not be able to live within the Christian Reformed church world, she was referring not to an aesthetic problem—that is, not a problem within the texture of the novel itself—but a church problem.

Such issues are worthy of our consideration at some other time and place, but what I wish to address here are the questions that pertain to the work itself, not those which arise from our reaction to it. The question that plagues me then is this: what is the shape of fiction which glorifies God? what should it look like?

Lacking a clear and practical answer to that question, I've simply looked to others to do my theorizing. In the process I've stumbled on the late John Gardner, a fiction writer, academic, and pain-in-the-neck to much of today's literary establishment. I don't know whether Gardner was a Christian. I know that he treated wives with less respect than he did his motorcycles, divorcing three of them, I believe, through forty-some years of a life that ended when the last of his cycles went off the road somewhere in upstate New York.

Whatever understanding I have of what it means to be a Christian writer is probably, at least as of today, based on John Gardner. It is his work that I intend to look at in this article, not only because he is central to what I see as the task of a Christian writer, but also because it is his work that stands at the center of any discussion of "morality" in fiction, or even of the purpose of literature, as that discussion occurs today among writers I know.

I met Gardner at the 1980 Bread Loaf Writers Conference, where he was one of the featured writers. Gardner explained the two basic plot forms into which he felt most novels and short stories could be divided. In the first form, one he characterized as "a stranger comes to town," the action of the story is initiated by an outsider. In such stories, the protagonist and reader stand as spectators before the driving

force of the story—the stranger, that force about which we know very little.

The second form, one he characterized as "a man goes on a trip," works in an opposite fashion: the main character's quest initiates the action. In this story readers know the nature of the protagonist's desire or goals, and the story's suspense results from the pursuit of those goals.

Most stories, Gardner claimed, fit into one of those two forms; but the second, he argued, was the superior form since only in that type of story is the reader allowed to empathize with the character and his or her quest.

What I would like to do is present Gardner's view of literature's role as a model, and in the process define more fully the nature of the difference he drew between those two plot forms by showing that the basis for his claims goes to the very roots of his view of fiction, a view he has set down most clearly in his very controversial *On Moral Fiction*, and in two later volumes on the craft of fiction, *On Becoming a Novelist* and *The Art of Fiction*. In explaining Gardner's view, I intend also to lay out a view of writing which I believe to be as close to a "Christian" view of fiction as any I've ever encountered.

It is important that we see his distinctions as emanating from character and not plot, however. These two story-types are less "story-types" than they are "character-types." According to Gardner, character, "the very life of fiction," is the animating force in any story, especially when the protagonist carries a clearly understood motivation for acting, when he is "a man going on a trip." "I think in a good book or movie," he says in an interview, "you present people struggling heroically for what they value, and the reader's natural response to a well-written story about someone heroically struggling for what he believes to be good ends, the reader sympathizes with that character and wants to be like that character. . ." (Mendez-Egle 102).

Suspense, he claims, is created when that heroic struggle encounters obstacles; suspense originates in what he calls elsewhere the protagonist's "driving force": "Suspense, rightly understood, is a serious business: one presents the moral problem—the character's admirable

or unadmirable intent and the pressures of a situation working for and against him" (*On Moral Fiction*, 114). The key word here is *intent*; Gardner wants his readers to see that protagonists must have purpose or drive—that is, they must be characters going on a journey, not those who simply receive the action created by someone or something else.

The kind of suspense I am interested in is that which arises when the reader is given all the information, good solid information. He knows what the character's problem is and what his goal is and what the opposition is and the suspense is, what will he do, what will happen to him if he does that, what will she say, etc. (Mendez-Egle 98).

In *On Moral Fiction* he explains how he wrote his novel *October Light*, and in the process shows us the same kind of cause or force animating his own protagonist. Clearly, the character he describes fits the "a man going on a trip" pattern:

One begins a work of fiction with certain clear opinions—for instance, I myself in a recent novel, *October Light*, began with the opinion that traditional New England values are the values we should live by: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty, and so on—and one tests those opinions in lifelike situations, puts them under every kind of pressure one can think of, always being fair to the other side..." (114).

If we rephrase the Bread Loaf distinctions, we may see the lines he has drawn more clearly. He is talking in the first instance ("a stranger comes to town") about characters (the town itself) who are acted upon. In this situation such characters are the passive recipients of the action. On the other hand, when he speaks of the second type ("a man goes on a trip"), he is describing characters who have intent, pur-

pose, or "driving motive." In essence, Gardner claims that good fiction features characters who act, not characters who are simply acted upon.

But what makes active characters superior to passive characters? The answer lies in a value judgment which Gardner makes in *On Moral Fiction*.

What Gardner meant by "moral fiction," certainly has little to do with happy endings or the triumph of good over evil. Gardner begins the second chapter by warning against such misplaced notions: "By 'moral' I do not mean some such timid evasion as 'Not too blatantly immoral.'" Furthermore, he does not mean "that art should hold up cheap or cornball models of behavior." He warns the reader against associating the word with didacticism: "I do not mean, either, that what the world needs is didactic art. Didacticism and true art are immiscible; and in any case, nothing guarantees that didacticism will be moral" (18-19).

What Gardner does mean with the use of the word *moral* has as much to do with the means by which art is created as the ends it accomplishes. "The morality of art is, as I've said, far less a matter of doctrine than of process," he says later in the book. "Art is the means by which an artist comes to see: it is his peculiar, highly sophisticated and extremely demanding technique of discovery" (91). He argues that artists rely on imagination as a test of truth. When the writer works, all the information and experience he or she has is filtered through the imagination in order to create, in an evolutionary manner, the life of the character. Throughout the process of writing a story or novel, the writer asks questions and makes judgments based on his or her discoveries, and the result is a process by which both writer and reader make order out of chaos. The writer's imagination, at work in the process of writing, in its greatest moments, links him with the imagination of the reader. Gardner's theory is rooted in the Romantic belief that the artist's imagination touches some line of shared intuition in all of us. When the artist's vision fails to reach that deep base of what Faulkner called "the eternal verities," then the survival of his

work cannot be assured, even though he may attain some immediate critical success.

Gardner makes a claim for this notion of the understanding reached by the reader in "moral fiction," when he says that "fiction is thus a convincing and honest but unverifiable science (in the old sense, knowledge)." It is unverifiable because "it depends on the reader's sensitivity and clear sense of how things are, a sense for which we have no tests" (116).

A protagonist with an idea worth advocating or a cause worth following, even if that cause has meaning only for himself, encounters a series of obstacles which may force him to adjust his values or change completely; but in the process, he will come to a more comprehensive understanding of himself and his predicament. This pattern—a series of adjustments, forward then backward then forward again—is similar to the pattern by which writers create fiction, Gardner says. Thus, fiction itself is a unique means by which both writer and reader come to understand themselves and their values. When the protagonist's quest, through the writer's creative process, strikes a resonant chord with the reader's imaginative sense, the fiction is "moral": "True art is by its nature moral. We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of values" (19).

The result of such "morality" in the process of writing is fiction which is life-giving, both in the means by which character is created and in the effects it creates in the readers. "I have claimed," Gardner says, "that art is essentially and primarily moral—that is life-giving—moral in its process of creation and moral in what it says" (15). A few pages later, he returns to the idea: "No one seriously doubts, surely, that Tolstoy's essential argument is right: ideals expressed in art can effect [sic] behavior in the world, at least in some of the people some of the time" (27).

Yet, art's potential for positive effect on public morality is not predicated on what it "teaches" us, but instead on the "morality" of its creation. "I agree with Tolstoy," he says, "that the highest purpose of art is to make people good by choice" (106). Here again, the emphasis is upon "choice." In the same way that

the writer exercises options for the characters and creates plots through the reliability of his or her own imagination, the reader feels the possibility of those choices, and that effect, he says, is "life-giving" and "moral," art's moral gift to man.

"Moral fiction," then, is that which allows readers to make choices about the values in their own lives. "True art," he claims, "by specific technical means now commonly forgotten, clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns" (100).

Perhaps the clearest example of what Gardner assumes to be "moral fiction" occurs in *On Becoming a Novelist*, in a section in which Gardner creates a plot and characters to aid young writers in understanding what happens in the process of writing. The characters, named Frank and Wanda, are a father and a daughter who, unaware of their familial relationship, happen to live as neighbors. Gardner creates a situation in which Wanda begins to feel sexual attraction for Frank. He then goes on to describe the possibilities for the characters and the story:

If Frank is clearly drawn and interesting, a lifelike human being, the reader worries about him, understands him, cares about the choices he makes. Thus if Frank at some point, out of cowardice and indecisiveness, makes a choice any decent human being would recognize as wrong, the reader will feel vicarious embarrassment and shame, as he would feel if some loved one, or the reader himself, were to make such a choice. If Frank sooner or later acts bravely, or at least honestly, selflessly, the reader will feel a thrill of pride as if he himself or some loved one had behaved well—a pride that ultimately expresses pleasure in what is best not just in the made-up character but in all humankind. If Frank finally behaves well, and Wanda shows unexpected (but not arbitrary or writer-

manipulated) nobility, the reader will feel even better. This is the morality of fiction. The morality of the story of Frank and Wanda does not reside in their choosing not to commit incest or in their deciding they *will* commit incest. Good fiction does not deal in codes of conduct—at least not directly; it affirms responsible humanness (49-50).

What he argues for, then, is "responsible humanness," and what that phrase seems to mean is that characters be endowed with the opportunity of real choice in their lives. Characters who have choices about themselves and their relationship to the world they live in are the ones, he would say, who are most human. When we understand this belief, we can see why Gardner regards characters who have no choices (as in "a stranger comes to town") as less human than those characters whose attitudes or goals give them something to carry into the press of life. Characters who lack free will are passive characters, victims of powers greater than themselves. Thus, they are characters who lack the morality of choice. To Gardner, such characters not only carry less potential for our sympathies as readers, they are simply less human, since true humanness means having the opportunity to make choices.

If Gardner is correct, one cannot help but ask why so many writers insist on creating characters who lack the humanness of choice? Or, if we use the Bread Loaf distinctions, why aren't more writers creating the "man goes on a trip" characters?

The answer lies at least partially in Gardner's assessment of the temper of our times. He points out that characters who lack free will are simply in literary vogue today. "We have seen since World War II," he says in *On Becoming a Novelist*, "all over the world, a rise of non-profluence (actions leading nowhere, as in the plays of Samuel Beckett) and unended fiction (as in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*)" (84).

But why are such styles in vogue? Gardner says we have reached a period characterized by

intense groping for new forms and modes of art. This search is occurring and is observable in many fields by such related phenomena as a de-emphasis on melody in modern music, on plot in the modern novel, and on identifiable image in photography (10). Art's continuous search for new insight necessitates innovation in form. Today, he says, fiction writers, like musicians or sculptors, are abandoning old forms in hopes of discovering new opportunities elsewhere.

He argues that such searches do little more than uncover something left abandoned in the past, however. His call for "moral fiction," he would say (like his assertion that "good" literature has characters who act and make choices), is an attempt to bring back, refurbished somewhat perhaps, an old verity—that "art is as original and important as it is precisely because it does *not* start out with clear knowledge of what it means to say" (13). It proceeds instead, powered by the imagination, by the writer's making choices in the very flow of the process of composition, choices which become embodied in character and thereby serve to affirm life itself by verifying that all human beings can and do make such choices.

One of the reasons Gardner's idea of "moral fiction" incites such controversy is, quite likely, that affirming his ideas about character in fiction necessitates a belief in man's free will—a leap of faith which, we might assume, some writers and editors may be reluctant to take. Why? Again, because doubt is, he claims, part of the marrow of our culture. The effect of doubt is crippling, he says, since it appears to make us unable to make any judgments whatsoever and leaves us in a moral vacuum: "If we are unable to distinguish between true morality—life-affirming, just, and compassionate behavior—and statistics (the all but hopeless situation of most of humanity) or worse, trivial moral fashion, we begin to doubt morality itself." Such confusion results, he says, in Norman Mailer's hailing Charles Manson as "intellectually courageous, . . . for the brave pursuit of truth changes utterly when truth becomes whim. The man so infected may begin to feel guilty chiefly for possessing a

moral code at all. Confusion and doubt become the primary civilized emotions" (*Moral Fiction* 76).

It seems clear from such critiques that Gardner has a specific ontology of his own. Yet, he is less clear about his gods than he is about the necessity of belief. Like William James, Gardner seems unsure of the reality of free will, but he is clearly convinced that not believing in its reality is less useful than believing.

In *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner appears to cling stubbornly to the necessity of belief—if in nothing else, in the power of art:

That art which tends towards destruction, the art of the nihilists [and] cynics, . . . is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. It is a tragic game, for those who have the wit to take it seriously, because our side must lose; a comic game—or so a troll might say—because only a clown with sawdust brains would take our side and eagerly join in (6).

Thus, according to Gardner, the practical necessity of belief itself warrants our faith. If Gardner appears to believe that anything be true, it would seem to be that, simply, humanity *must* believe or else die.

At least one more substantive reason exists for Gardner's distaste for characters who lack free will—and "the stranger comes to town" formula. In an early discussion in *The Art of Fiction*, Gardner argues that those who are serious about writing need to be very serious about education. Education, he claims, functions in such a way as to teach us the other side of our own arguments, thereby helping us realize the dignity and worth of those we might consider enemies.

He then goes on to use Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* as an example of a book which has a potential it never reaches. Gardner claims Steinbeck knew all there was to know about the Oklahoma farmers and their new lives in California, but

he knew nothing at all of the California ranchers who employed and exploited them; he had no clue to, or interest in, their reasons for behaving as they did; and the result is that Steinbeck wrote not a great and firm novel but a disappointing melodrama in which complex good is pitted against unmitigated, unbelievable evil (10).

Gardner claims that Steinbeck didn't care about the characters on the other side of the argument. He didn't understand the story that the ranchers would have told, because he didn't want to hear it. He knew the Okies, and he understood them; but he never knew the ranchers. Gardner implies that to Steinbeck the actual ranchers were stock figures of evil, not at all human. Because he failed to see them as human beings, the ranchers in the novel are not human.

Gardner's point is that any writer's ability to create human characters is dependent upon the degree of concern and care which he or she has for them. In *On Becoming a Novelist*, he explains what he sees as the psychological requirements for being a writer:

To be psychologically suited for membership in what I have called the highest class of novelists, the writer must be not only capable of understanding people different from himself but fascinated by such people. He must have sufficient self-esteem that he is not threatened by difference, and sufficient warmth and sympathy, and a sufficient concern with fairness, that he wants to value people different from himself, and finally, he must have, I think, sufficient faith in the goodness of life that he can not only tolerate but celebrate a world of differences, conflicts, and oppositions (32).

Few writers have ever embodied that kind of care as fully as Chaucer, according to Gardner. "I think a good artist has to be fair to all his

characters. He has to be a generous human being, and Chaucer of course is the absolute model of it" (Mendez-Egle 104).

Gardner's Bread Loaf plot distinctions, thus, follow clearly from his basic assertions about the way which fiction, and art itself, operate. According to his doctrine, characters can be truly human only when they have goals ("a man goes on a trip"), when they act through choice. The source of that choice-making is inherent in the writing process, a process through which the writer's own imagination discovers options and chances and thereby endows the characters with will. When characters have the morality of choice-making, Gardner claims, they have the humanness which readers want to discover in fiction.

On the other hand, if the writing process itself does not allow for discovery on the part of the writer, his or her characters will lack the morality of choice and readers will not find themselves drawn to those characters. "Insofar as we're unable to care about the characters," he says in *On Moral Fiction*, "we can work up no interest in the issues; or if we do care about the ideas, it is only because we accept the writer's value judgments" (73).

For Gardner, it is the morality of choice, implicit in the process of writing and thereby manifest in the lives of fictional characters, which makes stories both good and lasting. "A man goes on a trip" is a formula for character which is naturally superior to "a stranger comes to town," because a character with a goal is, according to Gardner, the character whose humanity can and will be verified in the creative process undertaken by the writer, and, as a result, by the reader as well.

Those of you who know anything at all about literary theory will recognize that there is nothing at all new in Gardner's ideas about the place and task of imaginative writing. They belong to Aristotle and Sydney, and they likely belonged to just about everybody up until the Modern Age. Whatever their origins, I find them helpful in describing the writer's task, his or her obligation to choice, and thereby, to hope, in today's world. Furthermore, I find that his commitment to accuracy, to felt life, to be

the most important characteristic of literature itself. I am not blind to the fragility of some of Gardner's distinctions, and I understand that his ability to score a whole lot of points in the dialogue is partly attributable to his reluctance to play defense. Nonetheless, I find him an inspiration in the process of my own work.

And I sometimes wonder if there really is such a thing as the "Christian perspective": perhaps it can only be some vague and nebulous thing, some inspiration. Sometimes I wonder if those who claim to know "the" Christian perspective on anything—politics, the arts, psychology, sports and recreation, social work, or European history—aren't kidding themselves. Sometimes I wonder whether those who claim answers aren't building their own theoretical Babels.

Perhaps all the Lord requires of us is that we continue to ask the question—how does my work stand as a revelation of my faith in the Almighty? Although there may be no one answer, that fact does not absolve us of continuing to ask it.

For the time being, I like Gardner.

And what has he taught me? Simply, this. That *morality* in fiction does not reside in the prescription of a certain mode of living or the prohibition of certain words and scenes. It resides primarily in accuracy, the "felt life" of characters whose existence appears on the page, created there by the process of writing itself, as if by magic, characters fully human. Christian writers cannot settle for fabrication, for characters whose attributes, dialogue, reactions to events appear any more or less than human.

And what do we mean by *human*? Simply, characters endowed, as all of us are, with the capability of choice.

Works Cited

- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
———. *On Becoming a Novelist*. New York: Harper and Rowe, Publishers, 1983.
———. *On Moral Fiction*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978.
Mendez-Egle, Beatrice, ed. John Gardner: *True Art, Moral Art*. Living Author Series, No. 5. Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University School of Humanities, 1983.