

What is Moral Art?

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By : Xavier Morrison

Hello Dear Booksie Friends! I greet you after long absence, but things go on. I am deep into second novel 'Square Grouper Sandwich' and also writing essays and shorts. This book review is one of those ah, exercises.

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# What is Moral Art?

## On Moral Fiction / John Gardner

A book review by Xavier Morrison:

True art is moral. We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for an analysis of values. It is not didactic because, instead of teaching by authority and force, it explores, open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach. It clarifies like an experiment in a chemistry lab, and confirms. - John Gardner / On Moral Fiction

I have of late been on a kick of reading everything I can about writing, expanding my sparse understanding of art and craft, the business of it. Seeking ten best lists to guide me in the right direction, avoiding pitfalls of the trite and repetitive, looking for seminal work, the singularity. Those lists more often than not holding up On Moral Fiction as a must read. With little previous knowledge of Gardner, having only read Grendel in high school, I gleaned what I could from general sources, Okay. The title at once revolting and enticing, expectations of a preachy diatribe, subjective, anachronistic values; then again taken in morbid curiosity as to what that proposed morality might represent, at least in its entertainment. Or maybe a proposition morality is the fiction, another argument. A title too suggesting profile of a button pusher. It was not what I expected.

Gardner's use of "moral" was not constrained in context of religious or cultural "morality," but rather that fiction should aspire to discover, inspire and promote those human values that are universally sustaining. Values he believed innate in the human animal, not just a product of experience; values necessary for our advancement. Values biblical and epic, love of fellow man to community service.

His statements, his very beliefs (and he always said what he believed) were exasperating to many of his people, readers, friends and followers alike, agreed or disagreed. Poor brilliant Gardner! What will he say next? Yet, he's described as warm and generous with his time, willingly engaged in debate. Against the grain of the old adage - It's not what you say that counts; it's how you say it. To Gardner it was indeed what you say that counted, and it better be honest. The what was the construct, and vice versa. He longed for a return to the discussion of rational morality that his (Sartre's) outburst interrupted. J.G. Damn existentialists!

I typically skip introductions, forewords and prologues. I'm glad I didn't. Lore Segal's introduction is a far cry from the typical patronage, trivial and uninteresting anecdotes, mushy accolades raising the author to deity sprung full blown from the head of Zeus. Instead, taking occasion to point out positions faithfully held by Gardner proven flawed by more than thirty years of inconvenient history. (Not that Gardner wouldn't have been quick to point out shortcomings.) Specifically his attitudes toward modern art and music, and predictions of their ultimate demise, a natural selection of sorts, victims of their own hollowness and disingenuousness, their celebration of the trivial and nihilistic, the freaks, victims of their own immorality.

Her personal relationship with Gardner gives her a special insight into his beliefs about what constituted moral art, and as importantly what didn't, to which he would rail, captured in his words - Honest feeling has been replaced by needless screaming, pompous foolishness, self-centered repetitiousness, and misuse of vocabulary. Does that sound like screaming, or is it just me? An exclamation mark should be added, it

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deserves it.

I will not be so presumptuous to put in a few words what Gardner extends. But I will say Gardner believed it was an artist's, and critic's, responsibility, even obligation to society and its betterment that they zealously pursue morality in the process and the product, morality as a search for truth. Good art is always in competition with bad art. J.G. It was good versus evil, black and white for Gardner. Moral art exerts influence on society, proposing, holding up models of behavior. Bad art did the opposite, it was not benign. The artist only has intuition in place of scientific hypothesis, so it must be just as carefully examined, within integral laws and tradition - the morality of art is far less a matter of doctrine than of process. Moral fiction communicates meanings discovered by the process of the fiction's creation. J.G.

It is also clear he had an uneasy alliance with criticism, conceded as necessary element of process, helping to figure out what worked and what didn't, he himself a critic. He believed it should be approached with the same integrity and thoughtfulness of process as the original fiction's creation. He had little tolerance for those contemporaries he felt promoted bad art (and he thought it was most of them), purveyors of the seeds of social discord, his true colors showing in Chapter 2 / Moral Criticism - The trouble with present criticism is that criticism is, for most part, not important. It treats the only true magic in this world as though it were done with wires. J.G.

Gardner's writing voice solicits sympathy, irresistible, at the same time despairing and hopeful, enraged and joyous, controversial and reaffirming, and always immediate. Something should be done! Mind you, it is not to say I could swim in the depths of his philosophy, missing much nuance in the cloudiness, but his ideas, skillfully argued, guided and textured, will take you as far you can or want to go, whether limited by capacity or disagreement. There is something for everyone, artist, critic and enthusiast.

If Gardner were alive today he would surely dismay with society's trend toward the devaluation, even demonization of critical thinking. The state of personal communications, bits (a descriptive he would have certainly got a kick out of) of data exchanged poorly formatted, the rise of a didactic morality happier in provocative sound bites and expedient answers: Instead of one welcoming of a thoughtful, and civil, discourse aspiring to genuine solutions, to truth itself. John Gardner we miss you, and your brutal honesty.

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