

## Chapter 4

### **The Reflective Argument--A Holistic Approach: How the Rhetoric of the Primitive-as-Savior Tradition Enables Moral Fiction**

#### ***4.1--Introduction: How does the Rhetoric of the Primitive-as-Savior Enable Moral Fiction?***

While the previous chapters analyzed different rhetorical techniques of the primitive-as-savior tradition (i.e. ethos, pathos, and logos), this chapter will attempt an explanation of how the rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior tradition enables each novel to qualify as works of literary excellence-or more specifically what novelist and critic John Gardner terms works of moral fiction. Before engaging in further discussion of how the rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior tradition enables each novel of this study to qualify as a culturally significant literary work, a clear definition of John Gardner's moral fiction must be presented.

When Gardner first published On Moral Fiction, the popular media often misrepresented Gardner's work as a novel praising literature that encourages people to follow traditional conservative values of morality. This however, was not the subject matter or goal of Gardner's On Moral Fiction (Butts xi). When Gardner proposes that a novel is a work of moral fiction, Gardner is not stating that the novel exhibits in its characters, or encourages in readers, proper or ethical behavior. Rather, Gardner's definition of morality may be described as synonymous with discovering truth. Moral fiction is writing that allows readers to discover universal truths that make life more fulfilling (Butts xvii).

In On Moral Fiction Gardner uses the terms 'moral fiction,' 'true art,' and 'Literature' interchangeably. It is important to

recognize that writings of propaganda do not qualify as 'moral fiction' (Gardner 15). Although works of literature may contain many elements of classical rhetoric designed to manipulate reader emotions, these elements do not preclude the novels that contain them from qualifying as moral fiction. The rhetoric of a propagandist work is designed to persuade readers to accept the ideals of a political party or ideology, the rhetoric in a work of moral fiction guides readers to question accepted truths. As Gardner states in On Moral Fiction:

True art is too complex to reflect the party line. Art that tries hard to tell the truth unretouched is difficult and often offensive. It tears down our heroes and heart-warming convictions, violates cannons of politeness and human compromise (15).

Works of moral fiction are those that depict characters honestly. The heroic or central character in a work of moral fiction grapples honestly with the universal challenges—those that transcend time and culture. These universal challenges faced by the hero of moral fiction may be seen as synonymous with those the hero faces in the theory of the monomyth proposed by Joseph Campbell in his The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Campbell 30). Although there are many mythological patterns associated with the archetype of the hero's journey that fulfill John Gardner's requirement of moral fiction that the hero grapples honestly with, the subject matter of this study has focused on how the heroic character is represented in facing the challenges posed by the character of a primitive savior.

This chapter will discuss how the rhetoric surrounding the primitive-as-savior character type, (the rhetoric of ethos, pathos, and logos) enables novels such as The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance to qualify

as moral fiction. What are the qualities of moral fiction? Although it has already been mentioned that Gardner uses the word moral as a synonym for truth, and that moral fiction depicts a hero grappling honestly with universal challenges, two elements must occur during this honest grappling for a work to qualify as moral fiction. The hero must grapple honestly with universal challenges in a way that is (1) life affirming and (2) socially redeeming.

In reflecting on these two qualities one may ask what Gardner means when he describes a work of fiction as life affirming. A life affirming work of fiction is one whose fictional world has order, and that embraces Gardner's philosophy of affirmism. According to Gardner's theory of moral fiction, for a work of fiction to be life affirming-order is needed. As Wayne Booth asserts in A Rhetoric of Fiction that a work of literary fiction "must be realistic", Gardner affirms this idea in his criticism that a work of fiction must be true to the human condition (Booth 23, Gardner 9). "True art is a conduit between body and soul, between feeling unabstracted and abstraction unfelt," declares Gardner (9).

The rhetoric of the primitive savior discussed in the previous six chapters helps innately in the achievement of this order, as each rhetorical process of ethos, pathos, and logos is crafted to manipulating reader emotions. Gardner's philosophy of affirmism embraces this view that things happen for a reason. Gardner's affirmism is the opposite of and a reaction to the philosophy of nihilism. Nihilism is a philosophy that suggests there is no God, and that things happen randomly in the universe without reason. While affirmism does not necessarily assert the

existence of God, in applying the philosophy to fiction, it does suggest a divine plan—it suggests that the happenings of a story happen for a reason.

Having reviewed what Gardner means in describing a work of fiction as life affirming, the reader may also question what Gardner intends when he says that a work of moral fiction must be socially redeeming. When Gardner writes that “art, in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers by process what it can say,” Gardner is talking of the socially redeeming qualities that fiction can achieve (Gardner 14). The act of social redemption for Gardner is about discovering truth. Gardner scholar Leonard Butts writes that in Gardner’s theory of moral fictional truth “... is not discovered in a novel’s final lines, nor is it revealed entirely in any one character’s actions. [T]ruth is discovered in the process of creating and in the process of reading fiction. It is the sum of a novel’s ... effect, what Aristotle calls its ‘exegesis,’ that determines its moral qualities...” (xii). This process of social redemption, that Gardner describes as vital to a work’s qualifying as moral fiction, occurs both as the hero comes to realizations during a story’s evolution, and in readers as they reflect on a story’s meaning after its conclusion (Butts xii).

This quality of social redemption is achieved through the primitive saviors in the The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance as each of these novels affirms the social value of the marginalized individual. All four novels may be described as socially redeeming. Each novel reveals the fragility of life. Each novel affirms the value of the marginalized individual. Each novel affirms the necessity of

the hero to maintain connections with both with the natural world and human society. This connectedness encourages both the hero and reader to see more clearly that it is not only necessary to have the ability to love and care only for oneself or another individual, but also "encourages compassion for all of humanity in all of its various guises (Butts xvii)."

John Gardner's theory of moral fiction first published in 1977 with its emphasis on the value of literature that is life affirming and socially redeeming, embodies the basic qualities that humanist psychologist Abraham H. Maslow attributes to the self-actualizing individual. In humanistic psychology the self-actualized individual is one who has fully reached his or her potential. Humanistic psychologists are concerned "with the fullest growth of the individual in the areas of love, fulfillment, self-worth, and autonomy," and consider maturation as "a process during which one establishes and follows one's own system of values" (Humanistic Psychology, "Encyclopedia Britannica"). Maslow in The Third Force proposes a hierarchy of needs—basic needs and growth needs, that every individual must gain to achieve self actualization. The basic needs of the hierarchy include those of the psychological (food, air, and shelter), safety and security, love and belongingness, self esteem. The higher psychological needs for self-actualization (growth needs) include those such as truth, goodness, beauty, individuality, justice, order, self-sufficiency, and playfulness (Maslow 50).

Jack Heitner's The Search for the Real Self: Humanistic Psychology and Literature published in 1978, a year after Gardner's On Moral Fiction, uses the terms of humanistic

psychology to analyze self-actualization in a number of major American novels. There are strong parallels between the socially redeeming and life affirming experience that Gardner describes readers as experiencing in works of moral fiction, and that which readers encounter when they are examining novel's as described by Heitner when a self-actualized hero has a peak experience. Although Gardner's examples of moral fiction, do not mention or require that the hero or reader approach a peak experience, it seems that works of moral fiction-works that are life affirming and socially redeeming, more often than not involve the hero's mastering of growth needs, if not achieving a peak experience.

Gardner speaks of the need to return to the old more human criticism that existed before the complex language of criticisms such as structuralism and formalism. Heitner also feels that the "renewal of old values is clearly the answer" (128). He writes,

The eternal human values have been deeply eroded by the culmination of civilization in the modern world. An ecology of human spirit is what Humanistic Psychology and its marriage to literature should be about in a new and difficult but better time. ... The emphasis in self-actualization is on a moral evolution that leads us out of the trap of relative values in which we so often find ourselves immobilized. The self-actualizing hero can act in the midst of the relativity whirlwind because his being is rooted in the eternal human values (128).

In discussing how the rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior tradition enables The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance to qualify as moral fiction, this study will present a list of valuable human qualities occurring in moral fiction based on a modified list of qualities of self-actualizing people provided in Maslow's Motivation and Personality (150). Seven life affirming and socially redeeming qualities will be discussed as they occur in the four novels of

this study: (1) The novels are inclusive in nature; (2) appreciate life as fragile, (3) show that life has a purpose, (4) demonstrate the need for human connectedness and love, (5) value selflessness, and (6) do not depict suffering without a reason (Maslow, Motivation and Personality 150).

#### ***4.2--The Novels are Inclusive in Nature:***

The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance all incorporate marginalized characters into their storylines who function as primitive-as-savior figures. The casting of a marginalized character that readers initially assume of little social value as a social savior is a socially redeeming experience. Each author engages in the rhetoric of logos, presenting the reader with examples and demonstrations of how the marginalized character provides the hero with the guidance or model of behavior needed for physical and psychological survival.

Characters of each novel initiate a hero into the American frontier, and teach the hero life lessons. In Cooper's Deerslayer the Native American Chingachgook, and the mentally challenged Hetty act as primitive-as-savior characters to Natty Bumppo. In Moby Dick the Pacific Islander Queequeg acted as the primitive-as-savior character for Ishmael. In The Scarlet Letter Pearl (the child of an adultery) functions as a primitive-as-savior figure to her mother Hester, and on a secondary level to her community. In The Blithedale Romance the impoverished and lower-class female character Priscilla acts as a primitive-as-savior figure modeling the behaviors necessary for the Blithedale community's physical and psychological survival.

#### ***4.3--The Novels Show the Fragility of Life:***

All four novels are sensitive to the fragility of life. Prominent characters die in all four novels. Although the death of a major character can be a powerful rhetorical source of pathos (the appeal to emotion), such death can also be life affirming, causing readers to reflect on the role of the character who has died, and by making life seem shorter, and, therefore, more precious. In Cooper's The Deerslayer readers experience the accidental death of Hetty and learn of the death of Chingachgook's beloved wife Wah-ta!-Wah. In addition, many of Cooper's readers experienced their reading of The Deerslayer having experienced the other four novels of the Leatherstocking Tales. The readers, therefore, have knowledge of how Chingachgook and Natty will die. While these readers experience The Deerslayer with the knowledge that Chingachgook and Natty will survive threatening situations facing them, the experience of these characters has a nostalgic power because they have experienced their adventures and death.

In Moby Dick readers experience the death of Queequeg, and the crew of the Pequod. It is through Ishmael's survival, and the tragic destruction that befalls the crew of the Queequeg in their quest for Moby Dick, that Ishmael gains the strength to recognize his life as valuable, and to seek his reconnection with society.

In Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, by the conclusion of the novel the reader learns of the death of Pearl's mother Hester, and her father Dimmesdale. Thanks to Pearl's presence her parents have achieved spiritual salvation before death. From the

death of Hester's husband Chillingworth, the reader learns what darkness befalls a man who lives a life consumed by vengeance.

In Hawthorne's Blithedale Romance the death of Zenobia is a source of pathos. Zenobia's death marks the end of the experiment of the Blithedale community. Zenobia's death shows readers the consequences of jealousy, greed, and obsession with oneself, and one's social status. The Blithedale community's members, especially Hollingsworth, are forever psychologically scarred by Zenobia's death.

#### ***4.4--Life has a Purpose:***

Cooper's Deerslayer, Melville's Moby Dick, and Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and The Blithedale Romance are all life affirming works. They are all works whose basic philosophy declares that life has meaning. The hero of the Leatherstocking Tales Natty's life has purpose. As a white child adopted by Native Americans, Natty's reason for being is to exist as a mythic guide, living on the edge of the frontier, helping the Anglo-American society to settle the West.

In Moby Dick, Ishmael's philosophy of life undergoes a reversal. Ishmael starts the novel on the verge of a suicidal depression. He signs onto a doomed whaling ship, and travels far into the Ocean on a quest to escape society. In the isolation of the whaling ship, Ishmael under the mentoring of Queequeg, gains a new respect for life—for his own life and for the lives of others. Being the sole survivor of the Pequod's destruction, Ishmael returns to society feeling that his life has new meaning.

In The Scarlet Letter Hester's child Pearl brings her life meaning. Pearl gives Hester the opportunity to take

responsibility for her adultery, and grow spiritually. Hester's efforts to protect Pearl from the psychological dangers of the Boston community's hatred and isolation allow Hester to achieve spiritual redemption.

In The Blithedale Romance, Coverdale as the work's narrator reveals to his audience that he has failed (as has the Blithedale community) to grow psychologically from Priscilla's lessons on the meaning of life. The example set by Priscilla's character shows that life has purpose. To achieve that purpose however, one must be able to separate oneself from one's ego. Priscilla's character demonstrates the virtues of humility, loyalty, and compassion. Priscilla's humbleness and goodwill allow her to connect with other members of her community, to understand them, and seek for their betterment. Her life gains meaning through her selflessness.

#### ***4.5--The Novels Value Human Connectedness:***

Each of the four novels examined in this study depict the bond between hero and primitive as something valuable. The Deerslayer and Moby Dick both depict the development of a deep cross cultural bond between a heroic character and a primitive one. In The Deerslayer this bond is developed between the white hero Natty and the Native-American Chingachgook. This connectedness between a white hero, and a Native-American hero, depicts the relationship of Native American and White hero as being essential for the survival of the Anglo-American civilization, and that civilizations expansion across the American frontier. In Moby Dick the relationship between the White hero Ishmael, and the Pacific-Islander Queequeg, provides

Ishmael with a different cultural perspective that gives Ishmael the desire to survive, and the need to reconnect and share his newfound knowledge with his society.

In The Scarlet Letter and the Blithedale Romance the pairing of contrasting characters in the primitive mode with characters in the heroic create a message promoting the importance of human connectedness. In The Scarlet Letter the novel's heroine Hester Prynne is a worldly woman guilty of the sin of adultery. Her daughter Pearl as a character in the primitive mode is cast in thematic opposition to Hetty. Pearl like all children is born in a state of moral innocence. Despite her innocence, Pearl is separated from her society because of her mother's sin. Pearl is thus influenced more by her experiences with the natural world and the forest, than from the social workings of the Boston colony. Pearl's natural awareness provides Hester with strength to face her sins and dedicate her life through acts of charity for the betterment of her society.

The Blithedale Romance links the primitive character Priscilla to the opposing characters in the heroic mode of Coverdale the poet, and Zenobia the wealthy and fashionable magazine editor and heiress. Priscilla models for both these heroic characters the unrealized virtues that are essential for the Blithedale community's survival. Although neither of these heroic figures realizes the value of Priscilla's message, Coverdale's narrative proves the value of this message modeled by Priscilla's humility and acceptance.

#### **4.6--The Novels Value Selflessness:**

Each of the four novels promotes the quality of human

selflessness. In The Deerslayer, Natty is willing to sacrifice himself to recover Wah-tah!-Wah the woman engaged to his best friend Chingachgook, and to save the lives of the white settlers living on lake Ostwego. In Moby Dick Ishmael is willing to endure the prejudice of white society by befriending the non-Christian Queequeg. Queequeg is shown on several occasions to sacrifice himself by jumping into dangerous water to save those who are not valued by society or those who have spoken poorly of him. In The Scarlet Letter, Hester's willingness to sacrifice herself for the betterment of her daughter and to doing good work in her community enables her salvation and the social salvation of her daughter.

***4.7--In the Novels Suffering exists for a Reason:***

All of the novels examined in this study do not depict the suffering of its heroic or primitive characters without a moral reason. When a novel depicts the suffering of a character there is a structural reason that develops each novel's story line, and presents the reader with a life affirming value judgment. Natty's suffering allows the advancement of the Anglo-American civilization across the frontier, and allows for his Native-American companion the sole survivor of the Delaware people to continue his bloodline. Ishmael's depression and fated voyage on the doomed Pequod, leads to realization of his need to reconnect with society. In The Scarlet Letter, Hester's suffering the social prejudice of giving birth and raising a child conceived through an adulterous relationship, allows for her salvation and the betterment of her daughter and community. Priscilla suffers poverty, and social ostracism at the start of The Blithedale

Romance, so that her character's virtuous qualities may be contrasted against the flawed qualities of the other socially established and affluent members of the Blithedale community.

#### ***4.8--Chapter Conclusion:***

This section examined how the rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior tradition enables The Deerslayer, Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, and The Blithedale Romance to qualify as significant literary works under novelist and critic John Gardner's theory of moral fiction. While the previous six chapters focused on the rhetorical aspects of the primitive-as-savior tradition of the American novel, this chapter attempted to illustrate how the rhetorical elements of the primitive-as-savior tradition can enable the literary potential of a work of fiction.

The rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior that occurs in these four novels enables each work to achieve and exhibit life affirming and socially redeeming qualities associated with Gardner's definition of moral fiction. For Gardner moral fiction is fiction that seeks the truth. In moral fiction characters grapple honestly with complicated problems and themes faced by humanity. The rhetorical process of the primitive-as-savior tradition, incorporating different strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos, helps affirm the image that life has meaning and order. Each rhetorical strategy of the primitive-as-savior tradition exists for a purpose—the purpose of manipulating reader emotions. In reviewing the rhetoric of the primitive-as-savior tradition, it is evident that the challenges that each novel's central character faces in interacting with a primitive character occurs with authorial purpose and intention. The sense of order

contributed by the rhetoric of the primitive savior enables each novel's central character and each novel's reader to engage in a socially redeeming process.

Together these four novels foster in readers a sense of the fragility of life, a respect for the value of individuals marginalized from mainstream society, and a sense of the individual's need to connect with, love, and respect all peoples of society, both for the purposes of seeing clearly and for the purpose of humankind's physical and spiritual survival.