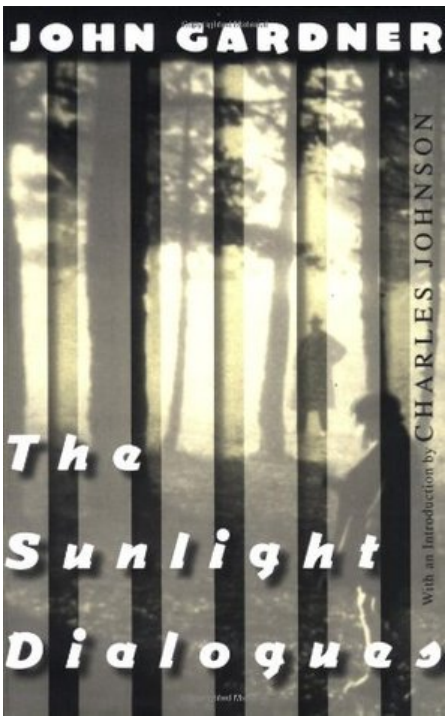

The Sunlight Dialogues

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In *The Sunlight Dialogues*, John Gardner's vision of America in the turbulent 1960s embraces an unconventional cast of conventional citizens in the small rural town of Batavia, New York. Sheriff Fred Clumly is trying desperately to unravel mysteries surrounding a disorderly, nameless drifter called "The Sunlight Man," who has been jailed for painting the word "LOVE" across two lanes of traffic, and who is later suspected of murder. The men battle over morality, freedom and their opposing notions of justice, leading each to find his own state of grace. Their conflict is mirrored in the community of middlebrow politicians and their church-going wives, Native Americans, working-class immigrants, farmers, soldiers, petty thieves, and even centenarian sisters too stubborn to die. Gardner's alchemy is existential: from the most raw, vulnerable, and conflicting characters in the American melting pot, he transmutes common denominators of human isolation and longing. With unnerving suspense, his acute ear for American speech, and permeated by his deep-rooted belief in morality, this expansive, sprawling, and ambitious novel is John Gardner's masterpiece: "A superb literary achievement," noted *The Boston Globe*.

The Sunlight Dialogues Details

Date	:	Published April 4th 2017 by New Directions Publishing Corporation (first published 1972)
ISBN	:	9780811216708
Author	:	John Gardner , Charles R. Johnson (Introduction)
Format	:	Paperback 720 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Literature, Classics, Novels, American

From Reader Review The Sunlight Dialogues for online ebook

Laura says

I'm a fan of John Gardner, but reading him does feel to me like listening to a manic depressive: sometimes he rises to heights of brilliance unimaginable, but he often hits lows, too, of boring passages, flat and irrelevant characters and plodding prose. In Grendel, those lows are forgivable as the novel hooks you with its premise and voice and doesn't let go. In Sunlight, however, I feel Gardner abused his audience. Too many characters and too many plots that start and come to no end. After following so many densely written interior monologues, not always interesting (Esther's voice is exasperatingly maudlin, and Will Hodge Sr. is a seal, a character you can neither like nor dislike, to shut off into himself to offer any handles), I expected to have a big payoff, where somehow I would understand why we'd spent so much time on these secondary characters. Forget it, it doesn't happen. Nor do we ever really understand what the Sunlight Man is, exactly. His death is anti-climactic. His "crimes" amount to juvenile pranks turned dangerous. If the whole point was to show that there is no point, a la Poe, then, well, 750 pages of truly dense prose doesn't exactly render me grateful. This was one book to skip. With so many good books out there, not worth wasting your time.

Cheryl says

When a book starts with a family tree and several pages listing the various characters, you know it's not going to be an easy read and this book isn't. At almost 700 pages, it takes a while and you need those lists and that tree to keep people straight throughout the book.

I have mixed feelings about this book. It revolves around two main characters--Chief of Police Fred Clumly and The Sunlight Man, aka Taggert Hodge.

Fred Clumly has devoted his life to serving Law and Order in the small New York town of Batavia. Law and Order is the solid ground on which the rest of his life stands. But now, in the early '60s, that ground is beginning to shift under his feet, moved by the shock waves traveling from the Watts riots, Vietnam anti-war protests, hippies, drug use, etc. The ground begins to disintegrate when a stranger, known as The Sunlight Man, is arrested for painting the word LOVE on one of Batavia's streets.

Unknown to most of the residents of Batavia, The Sunlight Man is actually one of their own--Taggart Hodge, the youngest son of a formerly prominent family in Batavia. With the death of the patriarch, the Congressman, the rest of the family disintegrates--unhappy marriages, lives far beneath their potential--with Taggart's life turning the most tragic. The loss of his wife--first to insanity, then to a fire that she sets and that claims the lives of their sons (she survives) undoes Taggart. He returns to Batavia to exact revenge on his former father-in-law (who had opposed the marriage and forces an annulment when his daughter goes insane), but Taggart's insanity drives him far beyond his initial impulse.

Most of the book revolves around the interaction of The Sunlight Man and Clumly--both outcasts in a world they no longer recognize--Taggart because he's insane and Clumly because he's no longer respected by his men or the city in which he's devoted his life. After Taggart escapes from jail, he returns, frees another prisoner and kills one of Clumly's men in the process. Clumly meets with Taggart several times, during which the two carry on extensive dialogues (The Sunlight Dialogues)--which is more Taggart than Clumly because the talks are over Clumly's head--there is never a move made to try to arrest Taggart, which leads to

more tragic consequences. When Taggart's identity is figured out by several Hodge family members, there is no move to alert Clumly to who The Sunlight Man is--which also allows the manic to continue on his rampage.

Some of the problems with this book. One of the cultural references to the sixties--if you are unfamiliar to them (I knew most, but one or two escaped me), then parts of the book lose their meaning. The dialogues themselves--there are four, I think--can become tedious after the first two pages. I think part of the problem I had was the format in which they are written--they are formatted like a play and I loathe reading plays.

Is this a book worth reading--yes. But, it will take time to work through because of it's multiple layers and multiple sub-plots. Several characters make brief appearances, and I'm still not sure why they were there, but because of names that cause them to stand out, they are still sticking with me. This is a book that really needs to be read multiple times in order to fully appreciate all it's layers and subtext, and I'm not sure at this point if reading this book again is something that I will want to do.

Trilety says

This is the first book I read by Gardner - it was an old copy and smelled faintly of must - and has already been passed onto another. If you have time this is a must read. The book is heavy with characters - all well developed - and the full meaning of it doesn't really hit until a few days after finishing. Written in the 1970's it is most intriguing to see the way Gardner deals with issues of the time, ie Vietnam, racism, religion, etc and see how little times have changed. Oh, and the analogies are spot-on, sticking with the reader, ie, the description of a large woman walking like a domino!

DJ Dycus says

Ugh! So glad to be through this. Finally. I've read several books by Gardner that I've really enjoyed, so I had pretty high expectations for this.

Reading this was like 700 pages of a William Faulkner whose passion is philosophy, but he's insecure so he's got to demonstrate his IQ throughout the novel. 700 pages of this tedious, dense, convoluted, multi-generational mess. Is Gardner brilliant? Yes. Does this novel demonstrate an ability to engage an audience? Definitely not. (You know, the first part of dulce et utile?)

If you're smarter and more patient than I am, and you thoroughly enjoyed this novel: kudos to you!

I still have quite a bit that I'm looking forward to with Gardner, so I haven't given up on him. But the few outstanding passages I found littered throughout this work don't justify a recommendation on my part. Look elsewhere.

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mark says

I picked up this book because I enjoyed the unique perspective and voice Gardner had found in "Grendel". I ended up being immersed in the small-town yet universal world that has created in this book for nearly a month. It is a long book and very dense. The cast of characters is large (I was happy to have the list of characters summarized at the beginning of the book for reference.) If you are looking for a page-turner, this is not the book. But if you are looking for fully developed characters that step out of the book and into your life, universal themes framed by the small details of life, and a sense when you are done that you are not the same person as the one who first picked up the book, then this is a book you will like.

Andrew says

I keep coming back to this book. It's a classic that is always worth reading again.
A strange visitor called The Sunlight Man with a mysterious past and some serious behavioral issues drops into a suburban community in upstate New York and begins to wreak havoc. His invasive and anarchic presence there comes to the attention of Clumly, the chief of police. Thus begins a series of confrontations between the two, which eventually evolve into clandestine meetings between them, and the "dialogues" (really lectures), of the title, given by the Sunlight Man. With all this surreal disruption of his formerly normal life, Clumly's rational world begins to unravel. Around Clumly and The Sunlight Man is a huge cast of characters, and this book lists them at its opening, as they would be listed in a play program, just in case you can't tell the players without a scorecard. TSD is about as beautiful a treatment of the concept of the balance between order and chaos in society (and the need for both), as one could hope for.

Monica says

The Sunlight Dialogues started my love affair with John Gardner's work followed by October Light which was not as incredible, but lead me to buy everything he wrote. Those who knew his work became saddened by his loss at such an early age. This is the original Ballentine edition for which Paul Bacon did the cover art. Jessica, it's for sale here for $1.10, plus shipping. http://cgi.ebay.com/The-Sunlight-Dial...
The SBN number was not on any of the listed editions, nor could I locate it on the net. If a librarian would please combine this edition to the others, I'd be grateful.

Julie says

I agree with the New York Times Book Review (I usually do), this book is "large and beautifully written." It is those things in the extreme. I wish I could write like this: expansive in scope, deep in character. The craft! The skill! The architecture of the sentences and paragraphs! The 1960s!

Also, this book is about 750 pages. A long book. It took me longer than I'm used to to finish it. And I admit, there were passages I skimmed toward the end. That might have undermined the final impact of the novel.

So, I loved reading it, but I'm not entirely sure what to make of it.

I am, however, brilliantly excited to read another of Gardner's books. Maybe Grendel.

Maciek says

According to the quotations on the back cover of the 1983 Ballantine paperback, *The New York Times* hailed John Gardner as "a major American writer whose promise...seems unlimited". The work itself, *The Sunlight Dialogues* has also been praised by *Time* as "A compassionate portrait of America in the uneasy 60's" and "A novel in the grand line of American fiction...a superb literary achievement" by *The Boston Globe*. Although it isone of his better known works, Gardner remains best known for Grendel, a retelling of the Beowulf legend from the point of view of the monster.

Since his death in 1982 few seem to remember and much less read John Gardner. He died in 1982 near his home in Pensyllvania, in a tragic accident: he lost control over his motorcycle and hit the dirt shoulder. He was just 49 years old, and his novel Mickelsson's Ghosts which was published that year became his last. His fiancee stated that he had been drinking the night before the accident, and the autopsy revealed a a blood alcohol level of 0,075 - just shy of the legal limit for driving at 0,080. Tragedy ended John Gardner's life, but in a way also began it - as a boy he rode a tractor and ploughed the fields, while his younger brother Gilbert sat in the rear on the cultipacker. Gilbert fell, and John turned to see his brother being crushed under the wheels of the cultipacker. Both boys knew that Gilbert should never have been riding in the back, but everybody agreed that John could never have stopped in time to prevent his death. At that time, John was only twelve years old. After this incident he would not work on the tractor again; he would park it in the field, sit under its shade and write novels.

The Sunlight Dialogues is a long and meandering work, originally published in 1972. It is set in Batavia, a town in Western New York, a place which the author knows well because he was born and grew up there. The novel features an extensive cast of characters, with a list and family trees provided at the beginning. The novel osciliates around two distinct personalities - chief police officer Fred Clumly, and a nameless vargrant who requests to be called "The Sunlight Man". Batavia police has arrested The Sunlight Man for writing the word "LOVE" across the highway, and suspect him for murder; he escapes from the town jail, but keeps confronting Clumly and talking to him. The men contrasts their views and stances on a variety of issues. Sunlight Man's vargrancy is contrasted with Clumly's traditionalism and prejudices - since he has a beard and looks like a hippy he must be from California, a place which Clumly detests. Sunlight speaks in parables, and shows fluency in almost every field of knowledge, from history to mythology; his presence affects the whole town, which provides for a myriad of side stories and subplots devoted to the characters provided in the beginning.

Gardner makes a formidable effort into creating individual characters and a vividly detailed setting as a stage for their interactions, and pursuing the undercurrents which run through the society of Batavia. Still, the novel is very much set in the time it was published - it attempts to reflects the uneasy time the country was going through then. In 2012 it feels dated, and the disturbing effect it once had on its readers is mostly gone; it feels largely provocative, and unnecesarrily so. The writing is obviously polished and well-crafted - yet the novel lacks the aspect of timelesness, something which would detach it from the chain of the period it was written in and allowed to stand on its own. The story is creative enough but takes way too long to get

anywhere; the character of The Sunlight Man is compelling, but as a whole it does not quite work. Still, it managed to make me interested in the author's other works, and remember him, his life and work.

For those interested, here is the beginning of *The Sunlight Dialogues* read by John Gardner's son, Joel. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/st...

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

It took me a long time to read this book and I'm still wrapping my head around it. More to come.

Perhaps you want to hear me discussed it on Episode 053 of the Reading Envy podcast.

Jude says

The stars are from memory - it has been so long. Enough to say that from that moment on i bought everything of his in hardback til he died. His generosity, insight and brilliance were the counterpoint i was hungry for when my college teachers were drooling over Barthe. Not to put Barthe down, but I wanted confirmation that brilliance did not require disdain in order to shine.

Dana says

Death has not been kind to John Gardner. My high-school English teacher assigned us this book, because I'm sure Gardner was seen at the time as an important American writer. But Gardner's motorcycle ran off the road, literally, and somehow his ascension to the American literary canon veered off track as well.

I loved this book as a high-school student. Here's what I wrote about it in my diary in 1975: "The Sunlight Dialogues is turning out to be a very good book. An extremely good book. To think I would never even have heard of it if I weren't taking English 513... The plot is both complex and very intriguing, and it hovers quite effectively between fantasy and shocking reality -- with each blending into the other until it is impossible to distinguish them."

Half a lifetime later, I'm not so sure. Here's a synopsis: Mysterious hippie (aka "The Sunlight Man") meets slow-witted small-town cop and gives him long lectures on ... well, I don't know what exactly. The meaning of life, or something. The whole thing sounds rather Unabomber-esque, except that in this case we're supposed to sympathize with the Unabomber. When I was in high school it was easy to be on the side of the counterculture hero. Now, in the light of history, I think it would be a lot harder.

Bottom line: This purports to be a Big Honking Book about Big Important Ideas, but really it's just a writer showing off. Might be interesting to read as a period piece. I'm tempted to give it two stars, but I'm giving it three in honor of my high-school self who loved it.

Monty Merrick says

This book has lasting power. It got under my skin. I still remember the looks on character's faces, described in certain scenes, which I find so rare and magical for an author to pull off. John Gardner was an amazing storyteller.

C.G. Fewston says

The Sunlight Dialogues (1972) by John Gardner is a spectacular novel from a time when many true novelists devoted decades crafting skillful masterpieces of fiction, unlike more recent authors who spend one to two years writing forgettable books. Although Gardner isn't read or discussed by "mainstream" American readers, his books have continually withstood the test of time (which is the greatest test for any novelist).

As a patient and talented mentor, Gardner reshaped ancient myths into engaging narratives for contemporary readers and guided young writers in the art of storytelling with such wonderful works, fiction and non-fiction, as Grendel (1971), Jason and Medeia (1973), October Light (1976), On Moral Fiction (1978), On Becoming a Novelist (1983), The Art of Fiction (1984), and On Writers and Writing (1994).

Gardner's The Sunlight Dialogues was acclaimed as "an extraordinary accomplishment" by the Chicago Sun-Times. The Boston Globe called it "a novel in the grand lines of American fiction… a superb literary achievement." Even the Boston Evening Globe remarked: "The odds are strong that it will come to be discussed in relation to such major works as Moby Dick and The Sound and the Fury." So, what happened? Why has this beloved but forgotten American classic been shelved to the backs of cultural and intellectual discourse?

In many ways, The Sunlight Dialogues should have been a great American classic, but American literature shifted and surged with cultural and political agendas until literature by and for Americans fell victim to a tsunami of foreign investments (much like Hollywood in the twenty-first century) and publishing in America became a predominantly British-focused-dominated industry.

Beginning in 1878, and running for over 100 years, the Boston Evening Globe ceased publication in 1979. What happened to the Boston Evening Globe should've been a warning for American publishing and literature emerging into a new era of non-American publishing and literature soon to dominate the United States and its readers. Even among more recent young American-writers American spellings are often mistakenly replaced with British spellings, indicating a heavy influence of British reading material over its American counterpart. No wonder "New England" (mostly "New York," not to be confused with the original "York") is the arm and hand of control for "England" when it comes to American publishing and literature.

Looking at PBS's contest for the "Great American Read" (2018), the Pulitzer-winning To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) by American writer Nelle Harper Lee squeaked by as "America's Best-Loved Novel" against titles such as:

#2, Outlander (1991) by Diana Gabaldon (a sci-fi book about time travel set in 18th century Scotland; later made into a series); #3, Harry Potter & the Sorcerer's Stone (1997) by J.K. Rowling (a fantasy book by a British author about a young British wizard; later made into a series); #4, Pride and Prejudice (1813) by Jane Austen (a book by a British novelist set in the United Kingdom in c. 1812); #5, The Lord of the Rings (1954)

by J.R.R. Tolkien (a fantasy series by an English scholar and author); #9, The Chronicles of Narnia (1950-1956) by C.S. Lewis (a fantasy story by a British writer and theologian); #10, Jane Eyre (1847) by Charlotte Brontë (a book set in Northern England by an English writer); #11, Anne of Green Gables (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery (a story set in Canada by a Canadian author).

More American-focused-based books like (#6) Gone with the Wind (1936) by Margaret Mitchell (a Pulitzer-winning novel set during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Era by an American author), (#7) Charlotte's Web (1952) by E.B. White (a children's book, which won the Newbery Honor, set in rural America by an American author), (#8) Little Women (1868-1869) by Louisa May Alcott (a story set in Massachusetts during the American Civil War by an American author)—bet you're starting to see the point—are heavy and profound reminders of American history, American culture, and American identity (distinct from the Canadian and British).

One cannot fault the roughly 7,000 American readers in the initial survey for choosing from a list of 100 books for why these Americans chose mostly British books/stories, but one can begin to fault the thirteen advisory panel of experts who organized the list and who were likely politically and culturally biased. One could call these remarks nationalistic and nativist in nature, and to do so would further prove the above points to be true and accurate. Nationalism and Patriotism are not negatives, especially when they can be powerful economic drivers and motivators for unity.

Since the 1990s, which saw the emergence of "Political Correctness" in the United States (which after twenty years has started a stark decline into oblivion), more and more immigrants and foreigners began attacking Americans for the cherished belief of loving America for its traditions and its greatness, a patriotism that had never been considered to be ridiculed in the 1980s. Traditional and cultural phrases like "Merry Christmas" became demonized and Americans against their will were told, often forced, and shamed into saying "Happy Holidays," a truly international remark from speakers who have learned English as their second language. (Gardner would have detested the 90s Political Correctness if he hadn't been killed in a motorcycle accident in 1982.)

Regardless, American literature must, at some level, remain "American" in nature. One cannot fathom the idea or possibility of an American book by an American author winning a contest called the "Great Chinese Read" or the "Great Indian Read" or the "Great German Read." And what's happening in the cultural and political spheres (including the innocent patriotism in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in many European countries, often vilified by foreigners, immigrants, refugees) will further shape how literatures of these countries develop over the course of the twenty-first century and beyond. (That isn't to say there isn't a necessary and fundamental place for "Immigrant Fiction" or "Refugee Fiction" within any nation's literature, but readers—and voters—are starting to question the basis for "citizenship," "nationality" and "patriotism"—and what matters most is that people do not recklessly abandon dialogue for acts of violence.) Already Netflix has begun to dominate Hollywood with its original content (mostly created with Americans in mind) harkening back to the 1980s America and the nostalgia Americans long for with such titles as Stranger Things and other retro hits and cult(ural) classics. One can see Hollywood breaking down beneath the cultural weight of foreign-funded projects (often from Communist China, which includes Hong Kong) like Blackhat (2015) with Chris Hemsworth, The Great Wall (2016) with Matt Damon, or the more recent Skyscraper (2018) with Dwayne Johnson. One must look at where the money comes from, which dictates the content being created and the cultural implications this has, as to why certain films in Hollywood fail and become artistic and investment disasters. The same is true for literature being published in America.

Why is Netflix (an independent studio) so popular and profitable? Why have patriotism and nationalism made a positive comeback? Because most citizens of any country love their country. Because patriotism isn't

an evil word nor is it an evil idea. Because culture (any culture) is akin to a living organism that will fight for its survival, even in the face of foreign hosts like the invasion of globalization which came quickly but quietly in the guise of foreign cultures through the arts (film and literature, etc.) directed and driven by foreign money. Is this a bad thing? No. Nothing in and of itself is ever truly bad or truly good. But we must consider the impact concerning the death of one culture for another culture; or in this case, the threat of an American-cultural death at the hands of a multi-cultural invasion motivated by China and Great Britain, and its Common Wealth. We can all agree that the death of an American culture (a truly American culture) would not be a good thing for the world which has always looked to the United States as a moral-intellectual-cultural leader.

Gardner's historic The Sunlight Dialogues is set mostly in Batavia, New York (where Gardner was born), and the novel (as much as the Sunlight Man's "dialogues" in 1966 with Police Chief Clumly) speaks to the crises civilization and American culture were undergoing during the 1960s, and in many ways these "four dialogues," written and published in the middle of the twentieth century, have become even more relevant to the twenty-first century.

"The Sunlight Man," the main villain wanted for murder and the main cause for social chaos in and around Batavia, constantly escapes from the police while he provokes Chief Clumly in a series of discussions known as "The Sunlight Dialogues." These discussions, often containing lengthy monologues by the Sunlight Man, take place in a church ("The Dialogue on Wood and Stone"), in a tent suspended above train tracks in the path of an oncoming locomotive ("The Dialogue of Houses"), in a crypt ("The Dialogue of the Dead"), and in Stony Hill Farm's empty wooden silo (linking to the discussion on the "towers of Babylon," pg 696, in "The Dialogue of Towers"). During the meetings, Chief Clumly is amazed by the Sunlight Man's ability to manipulate, to deceive, and to distort reality through magic tricks and philosophical ideas. With his identity unknown (revealed to the reader by the end of the book), the Sunlight Man soon takes on a mystical-mythical status.

"He came to be known as the Sunlight Man. The public was never to learn what his name really was. As for his age, he was somewhere between his late thirties and middle forties, it seemed. His forehead was high and domelike, scarred, wrinkled, drawn, right up into the hairline, and above the arc of his balding, his hair exploded like chaotic sunbeams around an Eastern tomb…

"He talked a great deal, in a way that at times made you think of a childlike rabbi or sweet, mysteriously innocent old Russian priest and at other times reminded you of an elderly archeologist in his comfortable classroom, musing and harkening back. He would roll his eyes slowly, pressing the tips of his fingers together, or he would fix his listener with a gentle transmogrifying eye and open his arms like a man in a heavy robe. He pretended to enjoy the official opinion of the court, that he might be mad. 'I am the Rock,' he said thoughtfully, nodding. 'I am Captain Marvel'…

"He could quote things at great length (there was no way for them to know whether he was really quoting or inventing) and he had an uncanny ability to turn any trifling remark into an abstruse speculation wherein things that were plain as day to common sense became ominous, uncertain, and formidable, like buttresses of ruined cities discovered in deep shadow at the bottom of a blue inland sea" (pgs 63-64).

Along the 747-page journey, Gardner doesn't forget to transplant the reader into time and place, and one way of doing so is by continually evoking the images and sensations of sunlight:

"Beyond the machinery and toys, the hillside sloped toward pastureland, the broad valley, the basswood-shaded farther hill. The basswoods were yellow-green where the sun struck them, its light breaking in wide

shafts through glodes in the overcast sky. It was beautiful, sad and unreal, where the sunlight struck. You felt as though life would be different there, the air lighter and cooler, the silence more profound" (pg 180).

The four major dialogues center around ideas of social and individual mortality and immorality, among many other musings and ideas, which also connect to the story's back-history at Stony Hill Farm, a once proud heritage of the Hodge family, but now the farm lies ruined and desolate.

In "The Dialogue on Wood and Stone" the Sunlight Man speaks:

"You don't care to debate it, naturally. I must defend all points of view myself, my own antagonist. It's my training, however. The defense insists, ladies and gentlemen of the jury… Yes. The defense insists that this gargantua you see before you has his reasons. This cyclops. This grendel. He was poor in his youth. He suffered much. He saw those around him—his fellow poor—tossed blindly on the current of their uncertain emotions, saw them reach out in all directions, undecided, feeble. It came into his mind that a man must have a purpose—some single, undeviating, divinely inexorable purpose. Purity of heart" (pg 336).

In "The Dialogue of Houses" the Sunlight Man speaks:

"Let us make a distinction. Omen-watching, divination, has nothing whatever to do with magic. Divination is man's attempt to find out what the universe is doing. Magic is man's ridiculous attempt to make the gods behave as mortals. Divination asserts passivity, not for spiritual fulfillment, as in the Far East, but for practical and spiritual life. After divination one acts with the gods. You discover which way things are flowing, and you swim in the same direction. You allow yourself to be possessed. Soldiers understand it. The so-called heroes of our modern wars especially. A man runs up a hill with a machine-gun, gives up his will to live, his desire to escape: he has a sudden, overwhelming and mysterious sense that he has become the hill, the night sky, the pillbox he's attacking. The machine-gun fires of its own volition—he ducks, spins, turns as the gods reach down to duck him, spin him, turn him. A fact of experience. A question for science, possibly, but not to the man with the machine-gun: for him it's a thing done, sensual act: he's one with God" (pg 462).

In "The Dialogue of the Dead" the Sunlight Man speaks:

"Eleven of the twelve tablets tell of Gilgamesh's life and adventures during his unsuccessful quest for immortality… The poet sets up two parallel scenes—one at the beginning of the first tablet, the other at the end of the eleventh tablet—as a frame which symbolically establishes the futility of the quest. He focuses on an image of walls—the walls of the city Gilgamesh has built, Uruk. There are parallel lines, at the beginning and end—the poet's description and comment in the introit that the walls will be the hero's only immortality (but his name will cease to be connected with them)—and Gilgamesh's own description, an echo. The poet goes farther. The same walls that are the hero's only glory seal his doom. To get the walls built, Gilgamesh is forced to make all the inhabitants of his city work for him like slaves. The people cry out to the gods, the gods are enraged and resolve to destroy him. There you have the paradox. The rest of the epic elaborates it, describing the kinds of immortality Gilgamesh tries for and misses—eternal youth, lasting fame, and so on. The twelfth book tells of Gilgamesh pointlessly ruling the pointless dead. It's introduced—not by accident—by the tale of the universal Flood, the final destruction from which no one escapes except temporarily. Enough. One can't say everything. In Babylon—I leap to essentials—personal immortality is a mad goal. Death is a reality" (pg 587).

In "The Dialogue of Towers" the Sunlight Man speaks:

“Very well, then I say this. It’s a matter of fact that we can never control the secret powers of the universe or even match their force. Sexually, socially, politically—any way you care to name—our civilization is doomed, in the same way all civilizations have been doomed. And so I cannot join you. It’s not that I mind doom, you understand…

“Let me tell you a vision. The age that is coming will be the last age of man, the destruction of everything. I see coming an age of sexual catastrophe—a violent increase of bondage, increased violence and guilt, increased disgust and ennui. In society, shame and hatred and boredom. In the political sphere, total chaos. The capitalistic basis of the great values of Western culture will preclude solution of the world’s problems. Vietnam is the beginning. No matter how long it takes, the end is upon us, not only in the East but in Africa too, and South America. Civilizations fall because of the errors inherent in them, and our error will kill us” (pgs 697-698).

Despite being published forty-six years ago, The Sunlight Dialogues and the Sunlight Man continue to speak to modern times and perhaps we should listen.

In an age when novelists were far more prophets than simply writers, John Gardner reshaped the legendary myths of Grendel and Gilgamesh into a personalized story revolving around the Sunlight Man and the Hodge family struggle which deeply connects to the height of their former glory and a nostalgia for their lost Stony Hill Farm, a home that has been sold off to ruin and an ideal that speaks to the golden era for the American family which was headed by Congressman Arthur Hodge Sr. and his four sons—a reader might conclude one dialogue for each Hodge son.

Perhaps the Sunlight Man said it best to future generations:

“And which way will you go, my child? Either way, you have my blessing. So much revolution in you, so much hatred for order, so much hatred for anarchy—and so much love. How terrible! Where can you run to? I tremble for your soul” (pg 682).

Evan Kingston says

Awesome in every sense of the word; Gardner uses a diverse arsenal of writing styles to explore the lives of a sprawling cast, reveling in the minutia of American life in the 1960's to answer those big, timeless questions that literature was built to address. Full of a dozen conflicts that could each fuel their own novels, the police-mysteries, family-dramas, and philosophical battles that draw you from one chapter to the next don't end tidily with easy answers, but the sum of there conclusions is incredibly satisfying.

I shouldn't have read this 700 page masterpiece while trying to trim my own novel down to 300 pages; Gardner writes with such authority, such swagger, that I never paused to think this paragraph of description, that page of philosophy, or this chapter of subplot might not be worth my time. I'm glad to have spent as much time with this book as I did.
