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Influence of Art in John Gardner's Novel

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Fiction must be moral because it is powerful, capable of affecting lives and societies. In *October Light* this power is displayed in two fashions. First is the hostile, visceral reaction that James Page has to modern media, especially television. The second fashion through which Gardner shows is that of the power of literature by his device of a novel within the novel, a cheap crime/science-fiction thriller called *The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock*. **OBJECTIVE:** The objective of this paper is to present how fiction has its impact on lives and societies. The impact is so tremendous that it can drive an individual like Sally to plan for a cold-blooded murder. If such is the impact of a bad literature then what could be the impact that a good literature can shower on an individual?! Hence as Gardner implies, writer's prime objective should be to transform the reader to undertake good deeds after reading and try to be moral at least to some extent. **ABSTRACT:** Art reflects life. Art influences life in many ways. This paper discovers the influence of bad novel on individuals in real life. John Gardner, the American novelist, implies novel within the novel technique in his novel *October Light*. In this novel, the Character, Sally Page Abbot, happens to read the science-fiction thriller called, *The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock*. Sally finds this trashy paperback after she has taken refuge in her room. And as she reads its flashy tale of sex, brutality, and crime, her view of life and her perceptions are coarsened and dishonored. Ultimately she plans, with hardnosed but fortunately inept determination, to kill her brother. This attempted murder, Gardner implies, is caused as much by the book she was reading as by the situation in which Sally finds herself. **RESULT.** Quoting an imaginary review, *The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock* is "a sick book, as sick and evil as life in America. Gardner believes that such indeed would be the state of an America that could neither maintain its worthy traditions from the past nor recognize new strengths of the future. Gardner shows how characters lock their hearts against one another, often without realizing it. Perhaps unfairly, the priest, Father Hernandez, forces Sally the Yankee Protestant to think of herself for a moment as "one of the colorful minorities." The unfairness, however, is mutual; Sally is puzzled by what she sees as Hernandez's attack on her, since "He was a priest. . . . They were supposed to be gentle and understanding". **CONCLUSION.** Finally, there is the resolution of the conflict between James and Sally, past and present, America and Britain, through the power of nature as interpreted by art. As it is always the case in Gardner's fiction, isolation within one's self leads to despair; rejoining the larger community brings strength and joy.

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INTRODUCTION

Among contemporary American writers—indeed among writers anywhere at any time—John Gardner was one of the most prolific writers —thirty-three separate book publications—and one of the most loquacious—more than one hundred and fifty known interviews and speeches. His was, as well, one of the most varied literary Careers in recent years. Gardner also made a name for himself as a writer of short stories, children literature, as a critic, editor, translator, biographer, reviewer, medievalist, poet, editor, anthologist, and librettist.

2. Influence of art in *October Light*:

Gardner in *October Light*, explores the people's need for the indispensable morals of communication, perceptive and resolution considered to be fundamental for the American democracy. Anguished at the evaporation of the values of New England in modern American society, he resounds about the need for adopting

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them with the changing times. He lashes out against the contemporary literature for the bad influence it exerts on people to fall victims to sarcasm hopelessness and embarrassment which naturally result in the disintegration of the family and the society. Gardner's unambiguous message in *October Light*, a novel regarded to be his tribute to America on its bicentenary, is for a better living through inculcating in the people the positive values such as understanding, reconciliation and integration through the impact of art on man.

James Page, a 72-year-old Vermont farmer, is a patriot. Corruption in the society enrages him and he feels the pricking of his conscience. Like George Loomis in *Nickel Mountain*, James Page belongs to the family of farmers for generations. However James Page is advantageous to change while George Loomis resists any kind of positive change. As Leonard Butts says, the values James Page imbibes are the values one should live by. He states: "Gardner uses the old Vermont farmer James Page to embody values upon which America was founded: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty, and so on".

James Page is the embodiment of the immaculate values of New England. His sister, Sally Page Abbot, on the other hand, is politically and culturally her brother's opponent. Like George Loomis, James Page is isolated by tradition. He does not take kindly to the changes in the name of modernity. His observance to such values isolates him from the rest of the community. Being the embodiment of the values upon which America was founded, he is quite surprised when his sister talks on Equal Rights Amendment; though he knows from the magazines that some people believe and fight for the rights. To him all that is foolishness. His opinion is that women are not even complete human beings. He thinks that television is one of the principal causes for the cultural and social devastation of the American society. He justifies that the programmes on TV, panders to lust, and their programs were blasphemy and high treason. He assumes that agri business harms the small farmers, gradually turn them as workers in factories and industries and, finally, make them drunkards. As a true patriot, he understands that people like his sister are destroying the country with such modern issues. Sally Page, on the other hand, believes in changing with the times." She supports agribusiness, mass productions, nuclear power plants and equal rights for all the people irrespective of gender and colour differences. Thus Gardner productively portrays the inconsistency between brother and sister, as a conflict between America Past and America Present.

One evening, the conservative James Page shoots his sister's TV and chases her upstairs with a piece of Fireplace log and locks her up in her bed room. When the disagreement becomes more solemn Sally locks the room from inside and determines not to open the door until James Page admits his defeat and accepts her equal rights. Sally and her niece, Ginny (James Page's daughter), believe that Sally like James Page has a moral right to live in their parent's house. The major issues that divided America in the nineteen seventies—feminism, minority rights, Equal Rights Amendments, American war with Vietnam, are the issues that are persistently discussed by the brother and the sister without ever compromising their respective viewpoints. Sally spends two days and nights completely in her locked bedroom—locked by her brother from outside and by herself from inside—and refuses to come out, of living all the while on the apples on the attic, using bedpan and emptying it into the garden and reading a "trashy" novel, *The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock*, a paper-back damaged novel with several missing pages. Though Sally begins reading this novel to while away the time, later she develops interest and locks her mind in it and also compares the characters in the novel with herself and the persons around her.

Family members and friends try to bring reconciliation between the traditional brother and the open-minded sister. In this process, Estella Parks, a family friend becomes a mechanism between the central figures. She arranges a party, so that Sally Page may be tempted to come out and join all the friends. It indeed becomes a horrifying inducement for Sally. It reminds her of a thousand cheerful times; Estella's Piano playing drifting up the stairs, Estella, Thomas and Dr. Phelps singing. "They asked me how I Knooooo—and the glorious smell of cocoa and Cinnamon-toast, and in the kitchen people talking, Rev. Walker and some young people and possibly, she couldn't be sure, a stranger." (P-222) The guests including the priest try their best to make Sally come out of the room. But she resists the enticement and does not surrender to their desires "her mind was filled with a chaos of honorable annoyance and anguish flawlessly rational self-preservation and unmerited but true to life. Her second thoughts on their arguments make her feel guilty; still she decides to stay on in the locked room..

Finally her principle wins. Gardner justifies her action when he says: "The image of her cruel and unjust humiliation was stronger than the image of the child at the door" (p-230). At the end of the party, the gathering fails to solve the conflict between James Page and Sally Abbot. October, the season of the year, is also measured the locking time as the nature ceases all operations and prepares for winter. The congregation for the October party does not accomplish something in the reconciliation effort, but yet it lucratively dramatizes "the total process of life that James and Sally are missing by changing stubbornly their individual idealistic visions." (Butts 448)

Estella Parks likens the gathering to the old custom of barn-fire-parties which connote the need for cohesion and togetherness among people. Terence and Margie falling in love with each other and expressing the same represent the prolongation of life. Like Esther Clumly in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, Estella Parks represents the "heart" that James Page has come to neglect, which is now absolutely locked. It is unfortunate that James Page

who has inherited the ideals of the founding fathers of America forgets his own past.

As Vatsyayan says, the reason for James Page's suffering is "loss of memory—the failure of the imagination to reconstruct the past." (P-29) Such disability may be temporary, yet he undergoes the suffering of losing contact with his own past, personal life. "He couldn't remember very well how his wife had looked when they were young. Even when he studied the picture album—a thing he rarely did—it was no help." (P-14)

3. *Bad influence of art:*

3.1. *Bad impact on Sally page:*

Both the central characters become more violent in the process. James Page rigs up a gun in front of the door to fire on Sally if she comes out of the room and in turn Sally puts an applecart to fall on James Page if he comes into the room. Sally plots this death-trap under the influence of the trashy novel she reads while she is locked up in the room. This novel, *The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock*, is about marijuana smugglers. It is full of sex, violence, murder etc. This new technique of novel within a novel is Gardner's device to show the difference between good and bad art. This he reveals through one of the characters in *The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock*. "There are only two kinds of books in the world. . . . There are books that desperately struggle to prove there's some holy, miraculous, meaning to it all and desperately deny that everything in the world's mere belts and gears . . . and there are books that say the opposite." (P-273)

Sally is not at all engrossed in this novel in the beginning. On opening the novel, "She sighed bitterly, glanced down with distaste at the paperback book." (P-19) But while reading through it "quite imperceptibly the real world lost weight and the print on the page gave way to images, an alternative reality more charged than mere life, more ghostly yet nearer, suffered with a curious importance and manageability." (P-21)

Thus Gardner illustrates how bad art influences life through the character of Sally; while the other characters attack capitalism, Sally identifies herself as the third world and her brother as a capitalist. Sally is very much captivated by the world of the „trashy“ paperback. Though the novel is described as trash, it is more than trashy, "it is bubbling satire, rich in sex and sadism, and largely devoted to long conversations drawn from Plato, Bergson, Spinoza, and others on the meaning of life." (New Yorker 122). The wild adventures of the drug smugglers create dissatisfaction for missing the escapades in her life. She regrets to have been born in an age of strict morality.

What she wouldn't give to be growing up now, when a girl might go anywhere she pleased and do anything she liked! . . . There were even special magazines brought "Adventuresome adults" together magazines kept-locked behind the counter in grim old Vermont. She, Sally Abbot, has missed all that, such were the cruel mechanics of the universe, as her novel would say. (P-316)

Influenced by the novel, she does not move an inch from her stubbornness even after her niece; Ginny is hit on the head by the applecart with which she has planned to kill her brother. Very firmly she decides to stay in her room: "she must, she saw again, hold firm, stick tight to her principles." (P-272) Of her reaction and her state of mind Gregory Morris says:

When Sally sets her death-trap for James, and when chance intervenes once more and turns Ginny into the unintentional victim, Sally's moral accounting becomes more concentrated, more ambiguous, and more tedious. She has very nearly killed her niece—an accidental act perhaps, but the motive behind the act is complete retribution. Sally has so seriously duped herself, so deeply fallen in with the malicious magic of her novel with its wrapped notion of human nature, that she becomes a righteous murderess.

After his daughter's accident, James Page asks his sister to come out at least then. But Sally Abbot refuses. James Page accuses her of being obdurate, rancorous and hardnosed. She replies that his analysis might be true, while holding the paperback novel very firmly. When he says that his daughter Ginny, is in the hospital, Sally frankly admits that he is the intended target but not Ginny. She blames James Page for this accident and also for the admission of their friend Ed Thomas into hospital. She also accuses him by saying that had she not shielded herself by bolting the door from inside the room, she would have been a victim of his rage resulting in her death or at least hospitalization. He at first ties the rifle in front of her door and then only she arranges the applecart to kill him. She also emphasizes that she is an individual with independent thinking and she never gives up her principles.

I came into this room because you chased me with stove-wood and they would like to have killed me then and there if I hadn't stepped lively. That's how you do things that are all you know. You think the whole world's just a herd of milk cows that you can drive wheresoever's you please by hit-tin them with a stick or throwing some stones or maybe sock the dog on them. Well believe you me it won't work on Sally Abbott. (P-371-72).

By locking herself firmly in her bedroom, she eliminates herself from the social life and society. She becomes insensitive and shows no concern for the members of the family and friends. She completely loses the aptitude for coherent thinking and gives up true moral values.

3.2. *Bad impact on James Page:*

The party is going on in his house when James Page with full rage drives his truck down the Prospect Mountain to Mertons Highway. On his way he feels the Weather ice-cold and he thinks:

Locking time, his uncle Ira had called it. In a day or maybe a week—or then again a month; there was just no predicting the weather in Vermont—he'd look out his bedroom window and the fields would be frosty, and when he went out to chores there'd be thin panes of ice on the water-trough. Locking had begun. (P-283)

While still driving, his mind wavers on immigration of foreigners. He is not happy the way the foreigners use America in an unfair manner. He thinks: "Fair and just profit was no longer a part of the American Way, nor was dignified labor. The country was in the hands of usurers, and not even American Usurers, not even the miserable soft-fingered Jews but the God damned black-eyed Arabs." (P-286) He comes out of the house to have peace. But "his anger and frustration were escalating His cheeks were twisting, his legs were trembling, it was hard for him to get his breath." (P-287) Parking his truck outside a tavern at Merton's Highway, he enters it knowing very well that Bennigton College girls frequent it with a scrupulous function He begins to drink and talk to some of his old friends when Bill Partridge, one of them, enquires about Sally's strike. In their discussion, James Page makes it clear that she has no right to stay in the house with the idea of freedom. His anger increases when he watches the violence and commercials with half-naked women in a Television programme. When his rage multiplies: "Outside it was blowing, as if the weather had been following James Page's mood." (P-297) Still continuing his drink, he thinks of the changes in the time and he recollects that Sally's minister also talked on the same topic. Then he assumes that ministers. . . . It was as if there was a plot against the world's survival, disaster on its way irreversible as a rail road car broken loose on a twenty-mile grade. He filled his glass and drank, heartsick then excused himself and walked, bent over, to the toilet. His bowels were still jammed, tough as snake wood.

Bill Partridge tells him that he will shoot his sister, if he has one like Sally, who interrupts with James' phone calls and meddles with his affairs. Nevertheless, James Page has no objective of shooting her when he leaves the bar and only intends to confront her by "knocking the door down and belting her one." (P-309) When he actually starts to go up the mountain he is unable to drive easily. It is difficult for him to balance the truck on the road. He feels that the fences and trees on the roadside are shifting from one side to the other. He begins to see things in twos. Though it is difficult to drive fast and he is scared, he does not want to reduce the speed. The wine sours his stomach, gives him a head-ache and makes him imbalanced. And finally he meets with an accident and the truck bursts into flames. He doesn't know how exactly he has escaped from the burning truck.

There appears the black-eyed Mexican, Sally's minister, saying that it is a miracle that he is saved. James Page counters it by saying that it is his luck. He also rejects the minister's helping hand to get up. Sitting on the ground with wet J up next morning he feels sick and painful. He feels that something is wrong all around him. "All he saw was inexplicably motionless, unreal, as if it were a deceitfully built model of itself, or as if the world has gone through some catastrophe and, surviving, was at perfect rest, re gathering its strength.

While coming from the stairs, he calls his sister but there is no response as she is fast asleep. When Ginny goes up, she is surprised to find her aunt's bedroom door wide open and she is fast asleep. At the same time, "she felt something wrong—danger! her body said, jerking her to a halt." (353)

She smelled kerosene and when she is about to enter room:

Suddenly, from nowhere, something heavy and sharp slammed down hard on her head— she felt a flash of unspeakable, splintering pain—and Aunt Sally's eyes popped open. There was a roar like an explosion, a terrible, dark rumbling, the room shone with glittering pinwheels and stars, and she went hurtling, as if at the speed of light, into blackness. (P-353)

Sally ties this applearc strictly under the manipulation of that pulp novel. While taking Ginny to hospital, instantaneously after the accident, Lewis her husband drives the car without a single word. Dickey sees his mother in the back seat with full of blood and he doubts whether she is dead or alive and he thinks that all this has happened because of the book he has dropped in Sally's bedroom. When they are coming down into the valley he looks over at his father and says, "It's because of that book. His father said nothing . . . when they'd driven a little farther, Dickey said, I lost the book the same night Grampa and Aunt Sally had the fight." (P-359-60)

Dickey presumes that "the book" is the cause for all the fight and disturbance in the family.

Ginny's accident and his friend's heart attack (due to his crazy behaviour) begin to affect James Page. A kind of saintly transformation starts in him. Until now he has locked his heart on his own past. He has closed his door of his guilty consciousness. He now realizes that his inability to understand his son's problems has promoted him to commit suicide. He is not even able to remember his wife's face. He is very stubborn so far in his life. There is no place for love in his locked dark heart. James Page's life is filled with spiritual decay and he is nearing death. There is no light to save him from the spiritual death.

Good impact of art:**4.1. Good impact of art on Sally:**

However, it is splendid to find scope for revolution in such stubborn lady like Sally. The ending of *The Smugglers of Lost Soul's Rock* brings change in Sally. In the last chapter of *The Smugglers*, all of them congregate on a volcanic island basin filled with smoke. They indulge in merry-making, love-making and are also busily engaged in knife-fights. Captain, who is an artist, begins a speech, which is quite significant while they are listening, suddenly Santisillia one of the characters shouts and warns them to lie down and then they realize that the Dancer has opened fire with his machine gun. There is severe aggression and even old Alkahest, a cripple, is also not spared. The Mexicans run down the cave, the basin's only exit. Santisillia drags Peter Wagner and Jane toward the cracking outer wall. The cave roof falls and there is a lot of terror and confusion among the Mexicans. At the same time, Peter Wagner, Jane and Santisillia are shocked to find the bombers impending them. Jane weeps at the imminence of death and pleads with Wagner that she is too young to die. To their astonishment there appears a flying-saucer abruptly. God-sent-saviour and they begin to cry loudly that they are innocent and hence should be saved. Jane's care for dear life is an excellent example of the need for living. Jane being in the smuggler's gang spends every minute in danger and yet when the real danger of death approaches, she craves to be spared. Thus life proves to be more important than money, violence and sex.

When the smuggler's gang is attacked by the coast guard, there descends a huge flying-saucer to pick up the "lost souls." Sally puts the novel down and turns to the window staring at her reflection and the darkness beyond. Horace, "she said wearily, that's the kind of thing this world's come to." (P-400)

Morris remarks: "She turns again to a recollection that is cloudy and puzzling a recollection that possesses the key to her total unlocking." (P-161) Sally is very much shocked to find the innocent Pearl Wilkson, a character in the novel, who is wrongly accused of murder. She rejects the world of Pearl which is undoubtedly dangerous because of her innocent involvement with the world of violence and crime. Now Sally realizes the bad influence of the book and is prepared "to leave her book, her friend's in the novel, and her room and to resume her life among ordinary but real people like James. (Morace p-142) She unlocks herself from the world of smugglers with the realization that understanding and negotiation, readiness to surrender and faith in values are indispensable for endurance. This apprehension helps to unlock the door of her locked bedroom as life becomes more interesting.

4.2. Good impact of art on James Page:

Certainly such light comes very progressively in James Page's life. His insight advances with his visit to his friend in the hospital, with a guilty conscience. Ed Thomas shows no hatred for James Page. On the other hand, he talks about his death and what he is going to miss after death. He further talks about the political campaigns and how television plays a significant character in understanding the political campaigns. This also clears James Page's mistaken views on the media. Dean McWilliam observes: "Ed then talks of changing seasons. As they set-talking in October, „locking time“ is already beginning. The ground will freeze, and the days grow shorter. Then after the winter solstice another movement will begin. The sun will gradually reappear and shine more brightly on the snow, heralding the coming of „unlocking time, “ the beginnings of spring.” (80) After this conversation, his transformation continues and he remembers his wife and also realize, "that life had been once . . . good, as poor Ed. Thomas understood now more clearly than ever, now that he was dying." (P-428)

This "unlocking time" also reminds the nearness of the end of his life and his isolation from the society. His wife and son are dead and his only daughter prefers to stay away from him with her family. He lives alone depending upon a small piece of land. He has never uttered a word of love for his wife and has burnt the house after his son's suicidal death. He is locked in his guilt and cannot understand and account for his inability to love anyone. He lives in his limited world on the Prospect Mountain just as George Loomis (Nickel Mountain) lives in his Crow Mountain, Talking about James Page's isolation, Butts comments: "James in his house, sitting alone on Prospect Mountain, is a fitting symbol of his self-imposed isolation." (P-444)

James Page is completely reconciled with his own self when this isolation is traumatized. The unlocking of his armored self and transformation completes, when he accepts the entire responsibility for his younger son's death and elder son's suicide. His stubborn heart melts.

He rubbed away tears with his finger-tips he couldn't tell whether they are tears of fear or sorrow or shame or what may be all of that or may be mere words were too narrow for the feeling charging through him like a fire. It was as if, suddenly, he had fallen back into the world, found the magic door. (427)

James Page is a complex character. Despite his reprehensible qualities, he has self-reliance, which is a very venerable trait. He preaches and also practices, this quality which is one of the essential teachings of the great transcendentalism Emerson. He gives his reason for his hatred of the television thus, "Did God give the world His Holy word in Television Pictures?" (4) When he is drinking in the Hideaway tavern with his old friends, he tries to analyze the whole problem. He thinks: "It isn't altogether Sally's fault that she's poor, and now that she's with me, she mostly does her share. I ought to just try and bend more, could be, Whole thing slotted with that television". (293)

He respects his sister's opinions by saying that "Sally's no tape worm! She does a thing. She's got reasons for it." (216) He feels sorry for the misunderstanding between them. He reflects on the bad literature of the society exerting its deleterious influence on people.

His mind kept drifting to the teacher and the writers, the book he'd fed the pigs, his mule-headed sister up there starving in her room, blaming the whole damn world on him, and his spirits grew still heavier, weighed down with self-pity and pity for them all, the whole country sickening by a foolish accident, some deaf misunderstanding. (P-305)

5. Reconciliation:

Reconciliation between James Page and Sally Abbot comes silently. When Ginny is brought from the hospital, Lewis once again starts painting the walls and asks Sally to open the door to paint it and, at the same time, James Page comes and tells her:

Ed Thomath telleth me TV ith a wonderful invention, around election time. I hadn't thought of that. Heeth not too well, by the way Him thelf, he don't think he will pull through. "What?" she said alarmed, opening the door more and looking at his face. (P-425)

People cannot live in isolation. As human beings choose to be in community, they have to accept certain values like empathy, respect to others, " ideals, communal life, compromise etc. If people are separated from one another for various reasons, later they always realize the need for reintegration of life. People should mould the circumstances to work for a better human life. When a person is in a critical situation, it is the moral duty of any human being to rise to the occasion regardless of the differences. Sally Abbot proves to be a person with empathy, by opening the door, unmindful of their fight when James Page announces that Ed Thomas is in the hospital. "In fact, she hardly noticed the victory when it came." (P-425)

The image of bear is used differently in different situations. It is used as metaphor in describing the Uncultured yet principled attitudes of America's heroes, and the image is also used as the model for past values. When James Page is desperately sorry for the suicide of his son, he was "prowling a lost bear hunting for the door to the underworld" (303). At the end, James Page comes to a complete understanding of his life only after he encounters with a bear. He hears the bear saying "Oh James, James!" like his wife, Ariaiah. He does not find any accusation in these words but only realization of the need for affirmation of life. He remembers his children in their childhood and the day he has proposed to Ariaiah. The confrontation between his ideals and his love comes to an end. Earlier, he has ill-treated his own family members for not respecting his ideals. The confrontation comes to an end with the magical transformation in James Page. At the end, the unlocking of his stubborn self clearly reflects the change in James Page, when he fails to shoot the bear in his confrontation with.

James Page, a hard Vermont farmer, who works his whole life on the rocky Vermont soil and suffers nature's fury sometimes, now reviews the good in nature after his conversation with Ed Thomas. He learns that life is good if only it is understood in its own terms.

Sally too realizes that peace in life and concern for others gives more satisfaction than fights and violence. They achieve reconciliation with the help of the community— family members and friends like Estella, Lane Walker, Ed Thomas, who work, tirelessly for the rediscovery of love and tolerance between the brother and sister.

Conclusion:

The unlocking after a long period of locking, based on realization and compromise, certainly gives a fruitful new life to the central characters. To sum up, in the words of Laurie Prothro, "James is locked into his vision of the past, Sally locks out the world. And naturally at the end, everything begins to unlock." (P-22).

Finally, there is the resolution of the conflict between James and Sally, past and present, America and Britain, through the power of nature as interpreted by art. As it is always the case in Gardner's fiction, isolation within one's self leads to despair; rejoining the larger community brings strength and joy. Thus how art exerts its bad and good influence on lives and society has been explored in John Gardner's novel *The October Light*.

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