

Pam Rosenblatt

Poet Harris Gardner: Questioning the existence of Angels

Angels. Who or what are angels? Do angels really exist or are they simply folklore or figments of your imagination. When thinking about angels, *Peter Pan's* Tinker Bell, the much-loved pixie,¹ or "a kind of nature spirit that, under different names and guises are found in every part of the world" and is also known as "a small humanoid being with wings",² and/or Cupid, who is technically "the Roman god of love",³ may come to mind. Both characters have wings and help out people: Tinker Bell brings Wendy and her brothers, John Napoleon Darling and Michael Nicholas Darling, back home from Neverland; Cupid shoots his love arrow at people to make them fall in love, especially on Valentine's Day.

An infinite number of mythological angels exist. There are Guardian Angels who have been around since people were created.⁴ There are Angels of the Hours, who are each ruled by a planet in our solar system during the daylight hours in astrology.⁵ And there are even Angels of the Seasons, who watch over each season.⁶

Good angels and bad angels exist in the Angelology. The most popular good angels are Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael.⁷ They are archangels in the Hebrew Biblical history. Gabriel and Michael are the two highest ranked archangels in the Judo-Christian and Islamic religious folklore.⁸

On a 2008 Blog, it was suggested by Lynda Miller Baker that the angel Gabriel may have been female or androgynous in a 14th century egg tempera and gold leaf panel of antique wood depicting the Annunciation.⁹ But poet Harris Gardner disagrees. He supports the theory that angels are usually genderless; and that Gabriel is traditionally a male name and Gabrielle is usually a female name further supports Gardner's view. Angels tend to be male or androgynous in art or the movies, he commented.¹⁰

Satan, often represented by the serpent, is known as the symbol of evil and death. He is known to be the sexually oriented transgressing angel and to be interested in practicing witchcraft.¹¹ He has inspired many writers, poets, musicians, and playwrights. For example, in the *Old Testament*, Satan appears humanoid or angelic as when he acts as an adversary or

1 Lewis, James R. and Oliver, Evelyn Dorothy, *Angels A to Z*, Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996, p. 331

2 Ibid, p. 155.

3 Ibid, p. 112.

4 Ibid, pp. 186-188.

5 Ibid, p. 212-213.

6 Ibid, pp.356-357.

7 Ibid, p. 41

8 Ibid, p. 92-93

9 Baker, Lynda Miller, "Representation of a female or androgynous Gabriel, Archangel Gabriel Flying," December 14, 2008, www.lyndamillerbaker.com, angelgabriel.blogspot.com/2005/07/representation-of-female-or.html

10 Gardner, Harris, Wilderness House Literary Review email correspondence, May 2017.

11 Lewis, James R. and Oliver, Evelyn Dorothy, *Angels A to Z*, Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996, p. 356.

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as a divine agent. In *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, Satan is an apocalyptic figure.¹²

Billy Collins, James Joyce, William Blake, Thomas Mann, and John Milton all have written books with angels used technically as metaphors, protagonists, divineness, or simply messengers in their writings: *Questions about Angels* by Billy Collins; *The Tables of the Law* by Thomas Mann; *The Songs and Innocence* by William Blake, and *Paradise Lost* by John Milton.

Gardner, the co-founder of Bagelbards, a poetry group in Somerville, MA, has a sincere interest in angelology and wrote a chapbook called *Among Us* published by Červená Barva Press in 2007. His 45-page poetry collection is filled with insights, questions, and lessons about angels.

Upon reading *Among Us*, the reader sees Gardner's creative imagination soar as he surrounds us with his angels in the 24 poems that he has written. Most of the poems have a religious bent to them, as Gardner writes his poems with references to Genesis, Exodus, Abraham, Jacob, and more.

In "Hold in Trust" (page 11), the opening poem, Gardner creates a conversation with Bat Kol, defined as a heavenly voice/a guardian angel, and the archangel Raphael.

Raphael has been busy protecting in an "unbroken vigil/that spans the two forbidden trees. Their beauty marvels the lesser caretakers". He listens to the Bat Kol who requests that Raphael "Remember your duty, devoted Seraph./Hold the limbs holy, untainted by touch/of the dust who harbors Creation's breath./Their juice shall not stain mortal mouths."

Raphael is not happy with this plan and "He complains, 'what jest is this?/ Why place these branches within their reach?// 'Surely these frail creatures will fail and fall.'" But the Bat Kol does not change his instructions, says "Raphael, pass or falter, it is written./I urge you to guard [the trees' limbs] well./In this you above all have Heaven's trust."

Concerned about the fate of the "mortals", Raphael says, "So, now I am in the mortals' equation./Their survival rests on my triple wings./ Whose victory hides in Divinity's Book,/that tome where even I dare not look?"

Raphael understands that the mortals' fate has already been written in the book of God, a place that is so holy that even this archangel "dare not look". The Bat Kol simply tells Raphael not to worry so much, just carry out God's orders to "Watch well the fruit, protect the trees."

So, what Gardner has done in his chapbook's first poem is to let us know that what follows has been, in a sense, predetermined. Gardner's archangel Raphael is aware that the Heaven may change if the mortals become weak and sample the fruit from "two forbidden trees",

but there is nothing that he may do to stop the future events from happening.

In *Among Us's* second poem "Prequel to Exile: Lessons over Lunch" (pages 12-13), Raphael serves lunch to Adam, instructs him on proper etiquette. But Adam is no longer interested in learning about how to "Set

12 Ibid, p. 354.

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the plant and shrubs in even rows./Sprinkle gently; grind with rocks what remains/from each meal. Cover the base with this blend; then add plenty of fragrant earth./The birds and bees will aid your labor". He has been taught this lesson before and is more curious to find out from Raphael about whether or not "...angels have sex in Heaven?"

Raphael is startled. But, being the consummate teacher that he is, Raphael carefully responds that angels don't have sex the way that Adam and Eve do. He explains that angels do not touch each other but "become/one with The Ancient of Days./Our numbers increase with each hallowed word.//Always we praise the Original Source./Our song begins, Kodosh, Kodosh, Kodosh,/Holy, Holy, Holy." Then Raphael questions to Adam, "Now do you understand?"

Adam gets the concept of what Raphael told him about angels and sex but wants to learn more about the angels' sexual habits. Raphael answers Adam's question up to a point and then says,

*"Even if I could respond, to think such a thing is taboo.
A flood of flame would engulf the peaks;
Heavens would buckle, a third of firmament
would fall. All the waters beyond your sight
would roar and rise as one to cleanse the earth
of all things not born within the sacred design."*

Raphael's predictions frighten Adam who has just realized that God has a "holy plan" and Raphael informs him that "the Divine blueprint/cannot be revealed to Man./More gently, but you are new with shallow roots./Wisdom unfolds with each advancing season."

Adam realizes that he is not that intelligent or, perhaps more appropriately, "not that intelligently coordinated":

*Chastened, Adam grumbles, "but I stumble with each lesson.
It is easy to get lost when left turns right,
And right strangely becomes wrong."*

Here Adams seems to be in the process of transgression. So, Gardner has the archangel Raphael act like a sensitive teacher when he replies:

*... "Your road will be rough under foot.
Though your heart will be blistered and sore,
shed your worry, you will endure.
Learn what I teach; abandon other concerns."*

And Gardner concludes the poem with Adam still curious about things, as he writes:

*Adam's glance devours the dwindling display.
The fruit dances in the sun's allure.
The seraph declines further dessert.
Adam ponders whether it's polite to have more.*

Gardner now not only has Adam wanting more, but the reader most likely wants more also to find out if and when Adam will partake in the forbidden fruit from the forbidden trees. Knowing Judeo-Christian

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history, we probably figure out that Adam and Eve will soon transgress against God's grace.

In Gardner's "First Farewell" (page 15), Gardner does not sway from Biblical history's written path, and soon Adam and Eve's "Two slinking shadows skitter along/thorny surface of furrowed earth." They are no longer free of sin. They have tasted "the fruit [that] dangled too near on a bowing branch."

But the final stanza of "First Farewell" lessens the seriousness of Adam and Eve's transgression. Gardner has written:

*Poor innocence, so casually cast aside.
Fear not, though your wisdom was gained through your wrong,
Turn, obey the word, be strong.
Future learning will restore your sight.*

It is unclear whether the voice in "First Farewell" is that of God or the archangel Raphael. But it is a relief that Adam and Eve may be forgiven for their transgressions if they "Turn, obey the word, be strong."

Throughout *Among Us*, Gardner has set a religious tone, a tone that may lead the reader to understand several things about Gardner's inner belief system: the existence of Adam and Eve, the existence of God, the existence of archangel Raphael, and the existence of angels in general.

Gardner explains how in writings angels may be humanoid or energized spirits. They may take on human forms or not. And if angels possess human forms and energized spirits, if angels do exist - especially in writing, drawing and/or painting, reading - do these messengers have emotions? In literary and poetic situations, angels seem to have emotions in an anthropomorphic sense. "We tend to humanize angels with our emotions." Gardner muses, "Maybe the archangels have superior emotions than regular angels because [the archangels] are more greatly evolved, hypothetically,"

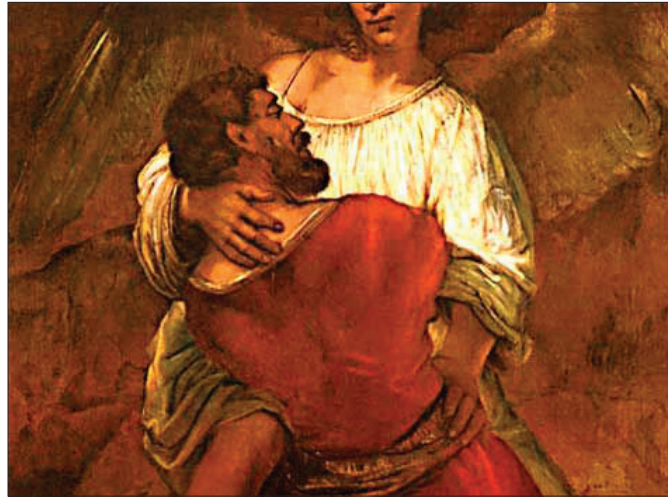
Archangels are "'According to Dionysius, ... messengers that carry Divine Decrees.' They carry God's messages to humans and are ultimately in command of God's armies of angels who constantly battle the Sons of Darkness, with Michael at the helm." And their appearance is much bolder than "regular" angels. The archangels have lots of eyes.¹³

Gardner then questions whether any type of angel actually exists in reality. He ponders, "Angels exist according to one's belief system. The question should be, if you don't believe they exist, do they exist?"

The 21 poems that follow "Hold in Trust", "Prequel to Exile: Lessons over Lunch", and "First Farewell" reveal Gardner's knowledge of angels and the Old Testament.

In "Rematch" (page 20), he writes about Jacob wrestling an angel. A match that ends up in what the angel says, "...a draw".

13 Lewis, James R. and Oliver, Evelyn Dorothy, *Angels A to Z*, Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996, p. 41.



Artist Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669), "Jacob Wrestling With the Angel", Oil on Canvas, 45.67" x 53.94", 1659. Berlin, Germany.¹⁴

And in "Jacob's Dream" (page 21), Gardner paints images of Jacob dreaming in the desert, having a vision of "Winged singers (who) climb and descend, lightly cling.//Their voices, their ethereal songs;/the beauty of their nearly unbearable sound/surpasses mere earth-bound mortality." This scene is truly blessed, mystical, and transcends ordinary thought. "Indeed," writes Gardner. "this must be a sacred place."



Artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985), "Jacob and the Angels", Lithograph, 36.5" x 30", 1980, Long Island City.¹⁵

¹⁴ van Rijn, Rembrandt Harmenszoon, "Jacob Wrestling the Angel", 1659, May 24, 2017, grande.net/Rembrandt/Jacob-wrestling-angel .

¹⁵ Chagall, Marc, "Jacob and the Angels", Lithograph, 1980, https://www.1stdibs.com/art/prints-works-on-paper/figurative-prints-works-on-paper/marc-chagall-jacob-angels/id-a_121298/

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After these poems with religious overtones, Gardner creates poems that have a more personal, self-realizing bent to them, as seen in his "Inquiries for Angels" (page 32). He opens the poem with a very down to earth line "My high school economics teacher wrote in my yearbook:/"To the student who asked twenty-one questions, per class." The teacher is being direct, concrete in his comment. Gardner recalls why he asked so many questions is "More likely, it was because I didn't know the answers." Humor like this is read throughout Gardner's chapbook. Questions abound, too. But aren't questions the path to discovering answers?

Former United States Poet Laureate Billy Collins has many questions about angels, too – their possible existence and their habits – as read in "Questions About Angels", published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 1999. His poem "Questions About Angels" (page 25) deals with almost "all the questions you might want to ask about angels". Collins writes that he has "No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time/besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin/or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth/or guiding a boy or a girl across a rickety wooden bridge", probably because these acts seem ordinary things for angels to do. These angels seem almost human.

But what Collins is really curious about is if angels "fly through God's body and come out singing?/Do they swing like children from the hinges/of the spirit world saying their names backwards and forwards?/Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?"

What Collins is writing seems serious yet playful and imaginative. He is asking questions about an energized spirit that may not exist in reality. And he makes it so convincing that angels probably do exist, at least in his mind. (This idea is very similar to Gardner's philosophy. Gardner even quotes Collins at the beginning of his poem "Inquiries for Angels".)

Collins continues on questioning angels about their personal lifestyles:

*What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,
their diet of unfiltered divine light?
What goes inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall
these tall presences can look over and see hell?*

Collins is behaving, perhaps pretending, like angels do exist. All of his questions seem practical, after all, if angels do exist, shouldn't we know all about "their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,/their diet of unfiltered divine light?" and especially "What goes inside their luminous heads?" And if in reality angels do exist, there must really be a "hell" with "a wall/these tall presences can look over and see...?"

But the reader perusing this poem most likely realizes that angels are part of ancient Biblical times and are part of folklore. The only question that Collins thinks the old theologians discussed is "about/the little dance floor on the head of a pin/where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly."

Collins guesses that the angels on "the little dance floor on the head

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of a pin" are in the "millions,/billions to make us run out of numbers and collapse/into infinity...". This abstract notion is suddenly humanized or personified into "one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,/a small jazz combo working in the background."

Like Gardner, Collins uses his clever imagination to reach his reader. If a reader never thought that much about angels before reading Collins's *Questions About Angels* or Gardner's *Among Us*, he or she will certainly begin to consider the existence of angels in reality as well as in literature and art.

Gardner mentions in the *Wilderness House Literary Review* interview, that *Among Us* was written not to give answers, just to give his opinions. "I give my opinions," he says. "Not universal answers."

Gardner's collection of angel poems reveals a belief system in angels yet offers some skepticism about them. He leaves the choice up to the reader on whether or not to believe in angels. "I've never met an angel before," Gardner smiles. "Or have I?"

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