

## Possessive Love and Psychic Disorders: A Psychological Analysis of Characters in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*

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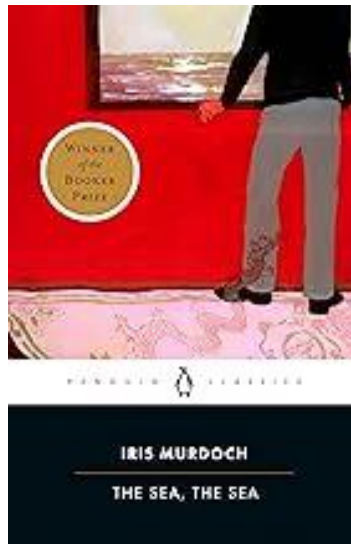
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### Abstract

Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* delves into the complexities of possessive love and its psychological ramifications through the lens of its protagonist, Charles Arrowby. This paper examines how Charles's obsessive fixation on his childhood love, Hartley, reveals deep-seated psychic disorders and emotional immaturity. Despite retiring to a secluded coastal home to reflect on life, Charles becomes consumed by his desire to reclaim Hartley, disregarding her autonomy and marital bond with Ben. His actions, driven by narcissism and inability to relinquish control, expose the destructive nature of possessive love. Hartley, in

contrast, embodies resilience and purity, remaining devoted to Ben despite Charles's manipulative attempts to disrupt their relationship. The novel also explores the themes of trauma, self-centredness, and the dichotomy between appearance and reality, drawing parallels to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Through a psychoanalytic approach, this study highlights how Murdoch critiques the egotism inherent in romantic aspirations and societal neglect of emotional maturity. The characters' inner conflicts and transformations underscore the enduring relevance of Murdoch's work to understanding human relationships.

**Keywords:** *The Sea, The Sea*, Iris Murdoch, Possessive love, psychic disorders, emotional immaturity, narcissism, autonomy, trauma, self-centredness, dichotomy, psychoanalytic approach, Shakespearean echoes.

### **Introduction**

Iris Murdoch, one of the most celebrated authors and philosophers of the 20th century, carved a niche for herself with her intricate psychological novels that seamlessly blend philosophical musings, comedic elements, and profound explorations of human relationships. Her works often delve into the complexities of love, morality, and the human psyche, offering readers a window into the inner lives of their characters. Among her many acclaimed novels, *The Sea, The Sea* stand out as masterpieces that encapsulate her unique narrative style and philosophical depth. Published in 1978, the novel earned Murdoch the prestigious Booker Prize, cementing her status as a literary giant. As Allan Abraham Malayil notes in his scholarly analysis, "Murdoch focuses on one individual, the renowned actor Charles Arrowby, whose interior life is troubled by his numerous relationships" (160). This focus on Charles Arrowby, a retired theatre director who retreats in a coastal mansion named Shruff End, serves as the foundation for an exploration of themes such as possessive love, emotional immaturity, and the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Through Charles's obsessive fixation on his childhood love, Hartley and Murdoch critique the egotism inherent in romantic aspirations and societal neglect of emotional maturity.

At the heart of *The Sea, The Sea* lies the tension between appearance and reality, a theme Murdoch frequently revisits in her works. Charles Arrowby, the protagonist, embodies this tension as he embarks on what he perceives as a journey of self-discovery. Upon retiring from public life, Charles resolves to isolate himself in Shruff End, where he plans to reflect on his life and time. He likens his endeavours to Prospero's relinquishment of magic in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a connection Murdoch deliberately draws to underscore the

novel's exploration of power and transformation. As Charles reflects on his past, he is consumed by the memories of Hartley, his childhood love. Murdoch writes, "Charles considers reminiscence to be the foundation of truth. He conducts an enquiry by examining his past experiences" (*The Sea, The Sea* 94). This introspective process, however, reveals more about Charles's inability to confront reality than about any profound truth. Critics like Peter J. Conradi have noted that Murdoch's characters often engage in such self-deceptive pursuits, stating, "Murdoch's protagonists are frequently trapped in their illusions, unable to see beyond their immediate desires" (233). Charles's obsession with Hartley exemplifies this tendency, as he romanticises their past relationship while disregarding the reality of her present life with Ben Fitch.

The relationship between Charles and Hartley serves as a focal point for Murdoch's critique of possessive love and its psychological ramifications. Despite Hartley being married to Ben, a retired fire extinguisher salesman and former combatant, Charles becomes determined to reclaim her. His actions reveal a disturbing lack of regard for Hartley's autonomy and well-being. As Malayil observes, "Hartley declines Charles's invitation to his home, prompting him to devise a strategy to demand her presence" (161). This strategy culminates in Charles abducting Hartley during her husband's absence and confining her to a room in his residence. Such behaviour underscores the psychic malady afflicting both Charles and Hartley, as Charles's possessiveness spirals into a form of emotional imprisonment. Murdoch's portrayal of this dynamic highlights the destructive nature of possessive love, a theme she explores through psychoanalysis. Bran J. Nicol, in his analysis of the novel, argues that "Murdoch's depiction of Charles's actions reflects a broader commentary on the human tendency to prioritise personal desires over the autonomy of others" (196). This critique is further amplified by Charles's exploration of trauma and emotional immaturity, as Charles's inability to mature emotionally perpetuates his obsession.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* serves as a significant intertextual reference in *The Sea, The Sea*, enriching Murdoch's exploration of themes such as relinquishment and transformation. Charles's decision to retire to Shruff End mirrors Prospero's renunciation of magic, symbolising a desire to abandon worldly ambitions and embrace solitude. However, unlike Prospero, who ultimately achieves redemption through forgiveness and reconciliation, Charles struggles to relinquish his personal "magic"—his theatrical charm and influence. Murdoch writes, "Through his thoughts and actions, Charles argues that it is difficult to

relinquish power or effect significant change" (*The Sea, The Sea* 104). This difficulty is evident in Charles's interactions with Hartley, as he clings to the illusion of their past romance despite the passage of time and the reality of her marriage. Critics have drawn parallels between Charles's predicament and Prospero's journey, noting that "while Prospero transcends his ego through acts of forgiveness, Charles remains trapped in his self-centred worldview" (Conradi 236). This contrast underscores Murdoch's critique of egotism that often accompanies romantic aspirations, as Charles's inability to let go of his desires leads to emotional turmoil for both himself and those around him.

The novel also delves into the dynamics of Hartley's relationship with her husband, Ben, offering a counterpoint to Charles's possessive love. Ben and Hartley's marriage, though fraught with occasional conflicts, is characterised by deep-seated affection and mutual respect. Unlike Charles, who views Hartley as an object of desire, Ben cherishes her as a representation of purity and innocence. As Malayil notes, "Ben's desire for Hartley is not based on physical or mental attachment; rather, he desires her as a symbol of the bygone era of purity and innocence" (161). This perspective highlights the stark contrast between Ben's genuine love and Charles's selfish obsessions. Hartley, for her part, remains devoted to Ben despite Charles's attempts to disrupt their relationship. Her resilience and unwavering commitment to her spouse underscores Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of emotional maturity and mutual respect in relationships. Critics have praised Murdoch's portrayal of Hartley, with Nicol observing that "Hartley's character embodies the virtues of patience, loyalty, and selflessness, serving as a moral anchor in the narrative" (201).

Murdoch's use of psychoanalytic theory further enriches the novel's exploration of the characters' inner lives. Charles's psychological breakdown becomes increasingly apparent as he isolates Hartley in his home, preventing her from interacting with others. His actions revealed a profound psychic disorder rooted in his inability to reconcile his desires with reality. As Malayil explains, "Charles's frustration is directed at Hartley, his childhood sweetheart, for her ignorance" (162). This frustration stems from Charles's failure to recognise Hartley's autonomy and agency, reducing her to a mere projection of his fantasies. Murdoch's depiction of this dynamic aligns with Freudian concepts of id, ego, and superego, as Charles's unchecked desires clash with his moral conscience. Critics have noted that "Murdoch's integration of psychoanalytic theory allows her to delve deeper into the complexities of human behaviour, exposing the underlying motivations that drive her

characters' actions" (Conradi 233). This approach not only enhances the novel's psychological depth but also reinforces its critique of possessive love and emotional immaturity.

Throughout *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch employs a first-person retrospective narrative style, allowing readers to witness Charles's gradual unravelling through his reflections. This narrative choice enables Murdoch to explore the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of the truth. As Charles recounts his past experiences, he often romanticises events, distorting reality to fit Hartley's idealised vision. Nicol observes that "the first-person retrospective narrative in *The Sea, The Sea* highlights the fallibility of memory and the ways in which individuals construct their versions of truth" (196). This distortion is particularly evident in Charles's recollections of his theatrical career and relationships, which he views through a nostalgic lens: Murdoch's use of this narrative technique underscores her broader philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality and illusion, inviting readers to question the reliability of Charles's accounts.

In addition to its psychological and philosophical dimensions, *The Sea, The Sea* offer poignant commentary on contemporary society. Through its portrayal of characters such as Charles, Hartley, and Ben, the novel critiques the egotism and self-centredness that often characterise modern relationships. Murdoch suggested that individuals frequently prioritise their desires over the emotional well-being of others, leading to psychological trauma and interpersonal conflict. As Malayil concludes, "All of these characters exemplify contemporary society, in which people adore one another for the sake of their advancement. They disregard the emotions and psychological traumas of the other individuals in this situation" (161). This critique resonates with Murdoch's broader philosophical concerns, as she advocates a more compassionate and morally grounded approach to human relationships. Critics have praised Murdoch's ability to weave social commentary into her narratives, with Conradi noting that "Murdoch's works serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its flaws while offering a vision of redemption through moral introspection" (236).

*The Sea, The Sea* stands as a testament to Iris Murdoch's literary genius, offering readers a rich tapestry of psychological insight, philosophical enquiry, and social critique through its exploration of themes such as possessive love, emotional immaturity, and the dichotomy between appearance and reality, the novel challenges readers face when confronting the complexities of human relationships. Murdoch's masterful use of

psychoanalytic theory, intertextual references, and narrative techniques enhances the novel's depth, making it a timeless work that continues to resonate with audiences today. As critics have observed, "Murdoch has created a piece of art that merits recognition in the contemporary era" (Malayil 160). By delving into the inner lives of her characters and exposing the motivations that drive their actions, Murdoch invites readers to reflect on their relationships and the societal norms that shape them. In doing so, she reaffirms the enduring relevance of her work in understanding human conditions.

## Discussion

### The Dichotomy of Reality and Illusion in *The Sea, The Sea*

One of the central themes explored in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* is the dichotomy between reality and illusion, a theme that resonates deeply with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Charles Arrowby, the protagonist, embarks on a journey of self-discovery after retiring to Shruff End, a coastal mansion where he plans to reflect on his life. However, his perception of reality becomes increasingly distorted as he is consumed by the memories of Hartley's childhood love. Murdoch writes, "Charles considers reminiscence to be the foundation of truth. He conducts an enquiry by examining his past experiences" (*The Sea, The Sea* 102). This introspective process, however, reveals more about Charles's inability to confront reality than about any profound truth. Critics like Peter J. Conradi have noted that Murdoch's characters often engage in such self-deceptive pursuits, stating, "Murdoch's protagonists are frequently trapped in their illusions, unable to see beyond their immediate desires" (Conradi 233). Charles's obsession with Hartley exemplifies this tendency, as he romanticises their past relationship while disregarding the reality of her present life with Ben.

The novel's exploration of appearance versus reality is further enriched by its intertextual connection with *The Tempest*. Charles likens his retirement to Prospero's relinquishment of magic, symbolising a desire to abandon worldly ambitions and embrace solitude. However, unlike Prospero, who achieves redemption through forgiveness and reconciliation, Charles struggles to relinquish his personal "magic"—his theatrical charm and influence. As Bran J. Nicol observes, "While Prospero transcends his ego through acts of forgiveness, Charles remains trapped in his self-centred worldview" (Nicol 196). This contrast underscores Murdoch's critique of egotism inherent in romantic aspirations, as Charles's inability to let go of his desires leads to emotional turmoil for both himself and those around him.

## **Possessive Love and Its Psychological Ramifications**

At the heart of *The Sea*, *The Sea* lies the destructive nature of possessive love, a theme Murdoch explores through Charles's obsessive fixation on Hartley. Despite Hartley being married to Ben, a retired fire extinguisher salesman and former combatant, Charles becomes determined to reclaim her. His actions reveal a disturbing lack of regard for Hartley's autonomy and well-being. As Allan Abraham Malayil notes, "Hartley declines Charles's invitation to his home, prompting him to devise a strategy to demand her presence" (160). This strategy culminates in Charles abducting Hartley during her husband's absence and confining her to a room in his residence. Such behaviour underscores the psychic malady afflicting both Charles and Hartley, as Charles's possessiveness spirals into a form of emotional imprisonment.

Murdoch's portrayal of this dynamic highlights the psychological ramifications of possessive love, a theme she explores through psychoanalysis. Bran J. Nicol argues that "Murdoch's depiction of Charles's actions reflects a broader commentary on the human tendency to prioritise personal desires over the autonomy of others" (196). This critique is further amplified by Charles's exploration of trauma and emotional immaturity, as Charles's inability to mature emotionally perpetuates his obsession. Hartley, for her part, remains devoted to Ben despite Charles's manipulative attempts to disrupt their relationship. Her resilience and unwavering commitment to her spouse underscores Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of emotional maturity and mutual respect in relationships.

## **The Dynamics of Hartley and Ben's Relationship**

In contrast to Charles's possessive love, the relationship between Hartley and Ben serves as a counterpoint that highlights the virtues of genuine affection and mutual respect. Ben and Hartley's marriage, though fraught with occasional conflicts, is characterised by deep-seated affection and mutual respect. Unlike Charles, who views Hartley as an object of desire, Ben cherishes her as a representation of purity and innocence. As Malayil observes, "Ben's desire for Hartley is not based on physical or mental attachment; rather, he desires her as a symbol of the bygone era of purity and innocence" (161). This perspective highlights the stark contrast between Ben's genuine love and Charles's selfish obsessions.

Hartley, for her part, remains devoted to Ben despite Charles's attempts to disrupt their relationship. Her resilience and unwavering commitment to her spouse underscores

Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of emotional maturity and mutual respect in relationships. Critics have praised Murdoch's portrayal of Hartley, with Nicol observing that "Hartley's character embodies the virtues of patience, loyalty, and selflessness, serving as a moral anchor in the narrative" (201). This portrayal reinforces Murdoch's critique of possessive love, as Hartley's steadfastness contrasts sharply with Charles's emotional instability.

### **Intertextuality: The Influence of *The Tempest***

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* serves as a significant intertextual reference in *The Sea, The Sea*, enriching Murdoch's exploration of themes such as relinquishment and transformation. Charles's decision to retire to Shruff End mirrors Prospero's renunciation of magic, symbolising a desire to abandon worldly ambitions and embrace solitude. However, unlike Prospero, who ultimately achieves redemption through forgiveness and reconciliation, Charles struggles to relinquish his personal "magic"—his theatrical charm and influence. Murdoch writes, "Through his thoughts and actions, Charles argues that it is difficult to relinquish power or effect significant change" (*The Sea, The Sea* 202). This difficulty is evident in Charles's interactions with Hartley, as he clings to the illusion of their past romance despite the passage of time and the reality of her marriage.

Critics have drawn parallels between Charles's predicament and Prospero's journey, noting that "while Prospero transcends his ego through acts of forgiveness, Charles remains trapped in his self-centred worldview" (Conradi 236). This contrast underscores Murdoch's critique of egotism that often accompanies romantic aspirations, as Charles's inability to let go of his desires leads to emotional turmoil for both himself and those around him. The intertextual connection to *The Tempest* thus enhances the novel's exploration of themes, such as power, transformation, and the relinquishment of personal desires.

### **Psychoanalytic Insights into Character Motivations**

Murdoch's use of psychoanalytic theory further enriches the novel's exploration of the characters' inner lives. Charles's psychological breakdown becomes increasingly apparent as he isolates Hartley in his home, preventing her from interacting with others. His actions revealed a profound psychic disorder rooted in his inability to reconcile his desires with reality. As Malayil explains, "Charles's frustration is directed at Hartley, his childhood sweetheart, for her ignorance" (178). This frustration stems from Charles's failure to recognise Hartley's autonomy and agency, reducing her to a mere projection of his fantasies.



Murdoch's depiction of this dynamic aligns with Freudian concepts of id, ego, and superego, as Charles's unchecked desires clash with his moral conscience.

Critics have noted that "Murdoch's integration of psychoanalytic theory allows her to delve deeper into the complexities of human behaviour, exposing the underlying motivations that drive her characters' actions" (Conradi 233). This approach not only enhances the novel's psychological depth but also reinforces its critique of possessive love and emotional immaturity. By exploring the inner conflicts of characters like Charles and Hartley, Murdoch offers readers a nuanced understanding of the human psyche and societal norms that shape it.

### **Narrative Style and the Subjectivity of Truth**

Throughout *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch employs a first-person retrospective narrative style, allowing readers to witness Charles's gradual unravelling through his reflections. This narrative choice enables Murdoch to explore the unreliability of memory and the subjective nature of the truth. As Charles recounts his past experiences, he often romanticises events, distorting reality to fit Hartley's idealised vision. Nicol observes that "the first-person retrospective narrative in *The Sea, The Sea* highlights the fallibility of memory and the ways in which individuals construct their versions of truth" (196). This distortion is particularly evident in Charles's recollections of his theatrical career and relationships, which he views through a nostalgic lens.

Murdoch's use of this narrative technique underscores her broader philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality and illusion, inviting readers to question the reliability of Charles's accounts. As Malayil notes, "Charles habitually compares his thoughts to a cave, reaffirming that the memory of Hartley illuminates them: '...the great light in which I have been wandering my way half-consciously'" (180). This metaphor highlights the subjective nature of Charles's perceptions, as his memories of Hartley serve as a guiding light shaping his understanding of reality. By delving into the inner workings of Charles's mind, Murdoch challenges readers to confront the complexities of human relationships and societal norms that shape them.

### **Social Critique and Contemporary Relevance**

In addition to its psychological and philosophical dimensions, *The Sea, The Sea* offer poignant commentary on contemporary society. Through its portrayal of characters such as Charles, Hartley, and Ben, the novel critiques the egotism and self-centredness that often characterise modern relationships. Murdoch suggested that individuals frequently prioritise

their desires over the emotional well-being of others, leading to psychological trauma and interpersonal conflict. As Malayil concludes, "All of these characters exemplify contemporary society, in which people adore one another for the sake of their advancement. They disregard the emotions and psychological traumas of the other individuals in this situation" (181).

This critique resonates with Murdoch's broader philosophical concerns, as she advocates a more compassionate and morally grounded approach to human relationships. Critics have praised Murdoch's ability to weave social commentary into her narratives, with Conradi noting that "Murdoch's works serve as a mirror to society, reflecting its flaws while offering a vision of redemption through moral introspection" (236). By delving into the inner lives of her characters and exposing the motivations that drive their actions, Murdoch invites readers to reflect on their relationships and the societal norms that shape them. In doing so, she reaffirms the enduring relevance of her work in understanding human conditions.

### **Language and style of Iris Murdoch**

Iris Murdoch's language artistry is defined by a captivating combination of philosophical insight, psychological depth, and vividly woven prose. Her narrative often mirrors her philosophical roots, particularly her fascination with existentialism and moral philosophy, which she weaves effortlessly into the tapestry of her storytelling. The outcome is a collection of works that are not only intellectually invigorating but also deeply emotional.

Murdoch's characters are commonly depicted as richly imperfect yet profoundly relatable, wrestling with dilemmas of ethics, affection, and autonomy. They navigate elaborate social landscapes where connections are intricate and charged with tension. Her dialogue brilliantly encapsulates the subtleties of human exchange—awkwardness, deflection, fervor, and fragility—often revealing more about her characters than their introspective thoughts. This dance between spoken words and the silence in between infuses her novels with an essence of realism and psychological depth.

In terms of style, Murdoch favors lengthy, flowing sentences brimming with meticulous observations, crafting an immersive experience within her characters' emotional realms. She possesses a painterly sensibility for detail, portraying settings and appearances with striking vividness and care, almost as if curating a visual masterpiece. Yet this descriptive opulence never feels excessive; it acts to illuminate themes or reflect emotional landscapes.

A distinctive hallmark of Murdoch's style is her deft use of irony and ambiguity. While her tone can exude compassion, it often harbors a subtle thread of detachment, as if she beckons readers to scrutinize her characters from a thoughtful distance. This duality empowers her to delve into universal truths while preserving an air of enigma and unpredictability. Ultimately, Murdoch's linguistic prowess and character portrayals provoke contemplation on the human experience, blending intellectual depth with profound compassion.

### **Conclusion: A Masterpiece of Psychological Depth**

In conclusion, *The Sea, The Sea* is a testament to Iris Murdoch's literary genius, offering readers a rich tapestry of psychological insight, philosophical enquiry, and social critique through its exploration of themes such as possessive love, emotional immaturity, and the dichotomy between appearance and reality, the novel challenges readers face when confronting the complexities of human relationships. Murdoch's masterful use of psychoanalytic theory, intertextual references, and narrative techniques enhances the novel's depth, making it a timeless work that continues to resonate with audiences today. As critics have observed, "Murdoch has created a piece of art that merits recognition in the contemporary era" (Malayil 170). By delving into the inner lives of her characters and exposing the motivations that drive their actions, Murdoch invites readers to reflect on their relationships and the societal norms that shape them. In doing so, she reaffirms the enduring relevance of her work in understanding human conditions.

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