The first step to understand reality is to know what reality is and what it is not. Our constant engagement with the ‘master’ and the ‘devil’ leads us to the realisation of what is not reality. Within the purview of these two extremes lies the crown of life, the awareness of what ‘is’. How then do we live life? How do we journey to reach that truth?

Life draws us out to fight in the inevitable pursuit of reality. In retaliation, we often get disenchanted with the ways in which it works its charms, not realising that it leads us precisely where we ought to be, often by hit and miss, onto the middle path. Our ability to nurture the clarity we gain when dealing with the opposites is a prerequisite to accomplish this feat of walking the razor’s edge, not swaying under the influence of knowledge gained but recovering just enough balance to find our centre in the middle ground. The middle course will then, by its design, lead us to where we are destined to go.

Life begins with ignorance with incomplete perspectives which disallow us to view it in its entirety. In order to arm us with awareness, it presents us with the problem of choice, the problem of choosing from opposites. This is the first stage in
the fight for truth. Therefore, to understand life in its complete form, it is necessary to battle these opposites.

This chapter makes an effort to discuss the different dimensions of the eternal battle between opposites, using *The Sandcastle* and *The Bell* as launch pads. These two novels have been chosen since they vividly portray and celebrate the existence of extremes and suggest the ways in which some of the characters are, at times, thrust towards the point of equilibrium. This chapter attempts to employ narratology by identifying certain ‘actants’ and ‘functions’ (in the novels) which define the narrative system. There are recurrent motifs in the novels that reflect a battle between opposites. Therefore, the chapter considers ‘battling’ and ‘opposites’ as the two Actants. Some of the ‘functions’ that support these ‘actants’ are: Dialogues (Noel tells Dora, “You must either knuckle under completely or else fight him.”); Narration (“it was hard to see how he [Nick] could escape boredom on a scene in which he chose to participate so little.”); Images and symbols (Imber and London; Male and female; Old bell and new bell; Catherine and Nick; Art and nature; ‘swimming’, ‘bell’, ‘bird-trap’); Archetypes (‘light’ and ‘dark’). The chapter, in the course of discussion, elaborates on these varied motifs and their contribution in comprehending the theme.

Our worldview will always lack in substance when it does not integrate all the aspects of life defined by the existence of opposites. When James judges Nick harshly, Michael thinks,

. . . James was certainly no connoisseur in evil; a result perhaps of a considerable pureness of heart. Could one recognize refinements of good if one did not recognize refinements of evil, Michael asked himself. He concluded provisionally that what was required of one was to be good, a task which usually presented a singularly simple though steep face, and not to recognize its refinements. (Murdoch, *The Bell* 117-18)
It is true that goodness is better comprehended in the awareness of evil. But, since we attach the condition of ‘desirability’ to goodness, we are driven to affix to it some sort of refinement. As Michael thinks, it is, perhaps, only in our understanding of good and evil in their entirety, devoid of any perception of their refinements, that they can be used interchangeably. This idea is reiterated in the symbolic cycling scene in *The Sandcastle*:

He [Mor] slipped through at last and began to pedal up the hill towards the railway bridge. It was a stiff climb. As usual he forced himself at it with the intention of getting to the top without dismounting. He gave up the attempt at the usual place. He reached the summit of the bridge and began to freewheel down the other side. (Murdoch, *Sandcastle* 23)

Mor’s efforts to get to the top without dismounting are futile. This suggests how one has to necessarily swing between good and evil in order to attain a complete understanding of life where extremes cease to exist. But, until such knowledge is attained, life presents the case of opposites within the paradigm of desirability where the opposite is taken to be a representation of all that is undesirable. This is true in the case of the ‘master’ and ‘devil’ when they are taken to be symbols of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Drawing a parallel between the mechanism of the bell (outlined in *The Bell*) and the mechanism of human psyche, a critic remarks,

The old bell emerges like a Freudian reminder—murky, primitive, atavistically physical – from within the weave of the story. Even the emotions of the characters are described in ways that evoke a sense of the momentum of a mighty metal bell. With the human actions in the novel there is a faint trace of agency, the first gentle push or omission; quickly, the characters find their psyches swinging violently and uncontrollably. The movement is like the swinging of the bell, experienced as something mechanical and deterministic, but also as layered in organic and earthy matter. (Insole 121)

In such a swing, the opposites become even more defined. But, this distinction is a necessity for the untrained mind which rigidly perceives the extremes as the
complete composition of life. Initially, this prevents the mind from canvassing for any variation in between, preventing it from finding a middle ground. As one becomes accustomed to this fight to prove the relevance of one’s actions, one realises that all that lies within the confines of the opposites are just aberrations of those extremes. Hence, the importance to identify the midpoint becomes an even greater challenge as well as, simultaneously, an easier prospect. The challenge lies in our ability to single out the point of equilibrium. This is ultimately achieved using the method of ‘trial and error’. As the frequency of the oscillation between the extremes increases, it becomes easier to accustom our sight to where the centre might lie.

In Mor’s case, the presence of an extreme freedom as opposed to his perception of bondage to his wife and family is necessary for broadening his understanding of issues:

. . . Miss Carter who had been responsible for his ability to decide, having given him, by her mere existence, a fresh sense of power and possibility. Mor mused for a while upon this mystery. Eccentric people, he concluded, were good for conventional people, simply because they made them able to conceive of everything being quite different. This gave them a sense of freedom. Nothing is more educational, in the end, than the mode of being of other people. (67)

Deliverance from a certain rigid perspective is necessary to swing to the other extreme, thereby revealing the complete spectrum of life. This shift of perspective helps one to appreciate the necessity of direction. A directional shift is an agent of movement towards the understanding of the middle path or the correct road to be taken: In the thoughts of Rain Carter, Mor “. . . Once more . . . felt a sense of purpose and direction, a sense of the future” (64).

The fact that Mor is drawn to Carter might seem undesirable but, in retrospect, it is part of the inevitable process of gaining knowledge of the other side. This knowledge might come mostly at the expense of taking a seemingly wrong turn
because, sometimes, only that will arm one with the experience to know the right way. In a way, Mor’s struggle between Carter and Nan is representative of the struggle between ‘id’ (Carter) and ‘super ego’ (Nan) of the psyche. It is inevitable, therefore, for Mor to be swayed between both these extremes before he gains any balance.

Swinging from one extreme to the other, however, turns man’s gaze inwards, even if momentarily, and helps him to perceive himself differently, bringing greater awareness of his being:

. . . . Now when they began to talk he was surprised to find himself able quietly to unravel so many deep and obscure thoughts about himself and about his marriage, things which he had in the past but half understood, but which as he drew them out at last in Rain’s presence emerged clear and intelligible and no longer terrifying. He talked and talked, and as he did so his heart was lightened as never before. He was able, a little, to explain how in the long years Nan had frustrated him, breaking within him piece by piece the structure of his own desires. He was able to explain how and why it was that he no longer loved his wife. (204)

Mor’s engagement with one extreme (Carter) clarifies the perception of his situation at the other extreme (Nan). In Carter’s company, he discerns the reason for his frustration with Nan. He clearly sees this because the component absent in Nan (which disturbed him) was present in Carter. Viewed metaphorically, Mor’s situation suggests that one’s engagement with one extreme assists in making the other extreme clear.

However, the danger of engaging excessively with an extreme is real and prominent. A man (like Mor) is likely to forget the purpose of the extreme and may lend more importance to it than to its function: “. . . . The vision of beauty and happiness and fulfilment with which he had been blessed, so briefly, in Rain’s presence, had come again and with unfaded power. What he rather feared was that the shock which had so much confounded him would have destroyed her ” (203). Mor is
thrilled at the prospect of a life with Carter. He does not realise the futility of such an outlook. Carter is only meant to bring in his life an awareness of the other side. He is attached to her instead of to the knowledge she brings. Ironically, this gives rise to fear of losing what cannot be achieved.

Nevertheless, though apparently harmful, this intense engagement is necessary because it gives scope to witness and understand the truth. In fact, it forces one back to the other extreme, placing one back on oscillation. In the process, even a glimpse of the truth at midpoint condenses the pleasure derived from the extremes which are but the illusory reflections of the truth. When Dora feels excited upon hearing an instrument that sounds like a cuckoo, she cries,

   It’s as good as the real thing!
   ‘Nothing’s as good as the real thing,’ said Peter. ‘It’s odd that even a perfect imitation, as soon as you know it’s an imitation, gives much less pleasure. I remember Kant says how disappointed your guests are when they discover that the after-dinner nightingale is a small boy posted in the grove.’
   ‘A case of the natural attractiveness of truth,’ said Michael. (Murdoch, B 129)

   It is natural to be attached more to the imitations of truth than truth itself. However, Peter and Michael reiterate the fact that once we know the truth we lose the pleasure we derive in its imitation.

   The momentary clarity, gained by the oscillation between extremes, gives us the ability to view the middle path: “In Murdoch’s own mediation between moral extremes hers might be said to be, like Buddhism, a dynamic and cheerful philosophy of the Middle Way” (Conradi 85-86).

   In a very unassuming description of Michael’s habitual walk, the narrator suggests: “As he reflected he had been walking slowly on, and looking ahead now he realized that he had reached his destination. He saw at once with interest that what he had taken to be a gravelly beach was in fact a wide stone ramp which led gently down
into the water” (Murdoch, B 145). Michael’s destination was the ramp which is like a bridge between the shore and the sea. But, unaware of this, Michael allowed himself to be led to the other side.

This phase of constant engagement does bring a moment of clarity where the focus shifts inwards, the only place where truth exists. Then, the external and the false image of the internal cease to exist. Mor’s unvarying engagement with the extremes of his life – his wife and mistress, forces the focus back to himself:

He wondered for the hundredth time what it was that he wanted from her. It was not just to be the owner of that small and exotic being. He wanted to be the new person that she made of him, the free and creative and joyful and loving person that she had conjured up, striking this miraculous thing out of his dullness. He recalled Bledyard’s words: you think of nothing else but your own satisfaction. All right, if two people can satisfy each other, and make each other new, why not? After all, he thought, I can be guided by this. Let me only make clear what I gain, and what I destroy. With relief he felt his mood shifting. The cloud of nightmare which had hung over his head while he was waiting at Waterloo was lifted. In a world without a redeemer only clarity was the answer to guilt. He would make it all clear to himself, shirking nothing, and then he would decide. (Murdoch, S 237)

Life, like that of Mor’s, pushes us to the extremes, and coerces us to detach from the same. In the process, the focus shifts to oneself, away from the opposites. This inevitable process brings a moment of clarity which is the starting point of awareness. This is precisely what happens in the engagement with the idea of the master and the devil. Beyond a point, the focus shifts from the master and the devil to oneself. This realisation makes one a little more aware. Dora in The Bell is one of the characters who constantly shuffles between extremes (life with and without Paul; London and Imber Court). However, her intense loyalty and attachment to the either of the opposites helps her survive the calamities that befall on Imber. Michael recalls her situation and realises that “She had fed like a glutton upon the catastrophes at Imber and they had increased her substance. Because of all the dreadful things that
had passed there was more of her. Michael looked with a slightly contemptuous envy upon this simple and robust nature. . . ” (Murdoch, B 317).

In one sense, Dora’s shred of awareness, though momentary, comes from her excess attachment to the extreme. Surprisingly, the novel subtly portrays the lives of the characters that restrict themselves to pseudo-religious ways, unwilling to let life flow. They let themselves go to the other extreme and are, in the end, ruined. The innocent Dora who is unable to distinguish between right and wrong is the only one who endures the catastrophe.

But, sometimes, even this momentary lucidity acts as a trigger, and sends one swinging back to the other extreme, magnifying one’s discomfort in the perfect presence of clarity. The discomfort arises from various sources such as disbelief in oneself/ in the truth, curiosity to know the other extreme caused by a feeling of emptiness, etc. All these perceptions of discomfort arise from our ignorance and lack of awareness of what lies within. After Dora spends a few days at Imber, the narrator remarks, “Dora felt restless and dejected. In spite of certain moments of satisfaction, when the warmth of the weather and the beauty of the scene lifted her above her anxieties, she had not been able to settle down at Imber. She still felt nervous and shy and as if she were acting a part” (135). This reflects the discomfort with the moments of satisfaction and clarity. Unwilling to stay static or prolong the moments of equilibrium, we plunge into the journey of oscillation between opposites.

The shift from one opposite to the other is also a result of a fatal curiosity. When Peter was photographing the trapped birds, he has a conversation with Dora,

‘Why ever do they go in?’ Dora wondered.
‘For food,’ said Peter. ‘I lay down a little bread and nuts as bait. Then they try to get out by flying what seems the easier way into the second compartment, and then its still harder for them to escape. Some birds will even enter an unbaited trap out of sheer curiosity.’
‘Again, like human beings,’ said Michael. (128)

Curiosity often arises from a feeling of emptiness. We are curious to know where happiness/ truth lies because we feel it is not within us. Like the birds, when we go for the nourishment of the soul (food) to a place where the food is, which is but bait (illusion), we travel even farther away from the reality. The novel explores this idea of curiosity in greater detail in Toby’s adventurous escape into the Abbey gates:

It was harder than it looked. The soft stone crumbled at the edges and with grazed wrists Toby fell back to the ground. He was now frantic. The desire to see inside the enclosure had taken violent hold upon him. He had once more, and to an unprecedented degree, the disturbing sense of being about to pass through the looking-glass. The wall presented just the right degree of difficulty. It was an obstacle but not an insuperable one. Toby tried again. (180)

Man is often driven by the desire to see the ‘other side’. He makes innumerable efforts to reach there. But, are his efforts in vain? No, because these repeated efforts enhance his ability to detach and attach. He develops the facility to detach because, once he views the other side clearly, he realises that it is not different from the point where he is. This is precisely what Toby learns when he actually reaches the interiors of the Abbey. Toby finds the ‘. . . alley of conifers continued on the other side’, and feels immediate disappointment because, “After all, it looked pretty much the same inside as outside” (181). Fiddling with the extremes, one gains, in a moment of clarity, the awareness that the extremes are only ‘seemingly’ different. In reality, they are one and the same. Ironically, this realisation causes disappointment because man insists on seeing them as different. It is this desire in him that is the cause for the creation of duality.

But, this is not a failure to understand the truth. It is just a part of the inevitable pattern that one is destined to follow in the search for truth. The Abbess tells Michael,
. . . Have faith in God and remember that He will in His own way and in His own time complete what we so poorly attempt. Often we do not achieve for others the good that we intend; but we achieve something, something that goes on from our effort. Good is an overflow. Where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves – and because it is mysterious we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us draw back. God can always show us, if we will, a higher and a better way; and we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back. (242-43)

Sometimes, the engagement with an idea may appear very futile, but it may prove to be a rewarding experience in the long run. That is what happens in the case of Dora. The narrator says that she is saved after her own fashion which she is supposed to have repented after. Jennifer R. Rapp, in Forgetting and the Art of Seeing, says,

. . . To echo Murdoch: we begin again not through the force of will or demonstration of virtue (although these may accompany the process), but rather because we are drawn forward, beyond ourselves, by the plenitude of a reality not ourselves, the character of which befits oblivion. This perspective seems to offer its own distinctive view of fragility. It does not regard us as fully self-sufficient creatures and allows us to hold the place of forgetting in a life because, once drawn back into engagement, we are able to behold the place from which we have been returned. . . . My suggestion is that it would behoove us to leave to some extent the differences across these vantage points unresolved. In letting them stand alongside each other, we gain a fuller view of who we are and how to reckon with this view. (Rapp 704-05)

Though one cannot see it, there is always some good that comes out of every effort that one makes. But, the unseen rewards should not push one backward in the journey of life. They should not stop one from ‘engaging’ in activity. After all, all failures are, in fact, failures in understanding the love which is one’s true nature. Understanding this, one has to move forward, ignoring the temptation to resist life’s concerns.
But, this needs certain degree of clarity which colours and impacts the entire being. The problem then lies in our inability to prolong and retain the precious moments of clarity, which seem impossible to gather hold of. The failure to reconcile with the moment of lucidity also adds to the momentum of letting go entirely towards the other opposite. The title, *The Sandcastle*, which is highly symbolic of life, reiterates this: Talking about her childhood experience in the hot and dry South of France, Miss Carter recalls an experience with sea:

‘Yes, but a melancholy sea as I remember it. A tideless sea. I can recall, as a child, seeing pictures in English children’s books of boys and girls playing on the sand and making sandcastles – and I tried to play on my sand. But Mediterranean beach is not a place for playing on. It is dirty and very dry. The tides never wash the sand or make it firm. When I tried to make a sandcastle, the sand would just run away between my fingers. It was too dry to hold together. And even if I poured sea water over it, the sun would dry it up at once.’ (Murdoch, *S* 72)

Man is unable to retain the sense of clarity because he is not grounded in himself. He remains in a volatile position. And, this is inevitable because he cannot rush such wisdom. He cannot make the sand stand firm. In the novel, Mor tries hard to be with Carter (prolong the sense of extreme), but he is unsuccessful because life with an extreme is momentary. Unmindful of this, we try to hold on to the extreme which is a mere imitation of truth. Towards the end, Carter boldly affirms the truth – “‘You would be happy with me for a short while, but then what would happen? It’s all dry sand running through the fingers. . .’” (300).

After a few days at Imber, Dora is “. . . driven by this fit of solipsistic melancholy one degree more desperate, she felt the need of an act: and it seemed that there was only one act which she could perform, to take the train to London” (188). Unable to retain the point of clarity which she experiences momentarily, Dora again retreats to London. Her shuffling between Imber and London only makes evident her
desire to flee from from the present, from reality. The narrator remarks, “Incapable of consistency or calculation she moved frankly and apologetically from one policy to another and back again” (Murdoch, B 6). In prospect, this fluctuation never ends well, because, “. . . Violence is born of the desire to escape oneself” (180). Truly, when one is unable to take the objective position, one is engaged in a more fierce battle with the extremes.

These actions (of shifting between the extremes) ensnare man in a vicious circle where he keeps engaging with one extreme or the other, and doesn’t let go. Too much attachment causes fear in him – what would happen if that idea is taken away from me? Fear is born of the need for duality. Duality disappears when one knows oneself truly. With the dawning of knowledge about the self, fear disappears without a trace. Indeed, when the dependency on the ideas that man creates grows, man finds it difficult to detach himself adequately, forbidding him to harness the power of the clarity that is bestowed upon him for an extremely short duration of time. Consequentially, he begins to lose faith in his inner power: “Michael took the reading to himself, reflecting that his innumerable hesitations, his inability to act simply and naturally, were marks of lack of faith” (170). When man loses faith in his own capability, he forgets that he has power over the idea. He also ignores the fact that the perception by which the idea survives is entirely his doing. After Carter finishes her painting, Demoyte says, “‘I begin to feel that I am the shadow and this the substance. . . .’” (Murdoch, S 169). Similar is the case with Dora. It does not occur to her that she has power over the idea called Paul. At one extreme is her life with Paul and at the other extreme is her life without him. She is unwilling to change or dissociate herself from the perception of these illusory extremes which give rise to fear:
Dora closed her eyes and remembered her fear. She was returning, and deliberately, into the power of someone whose conception of her life excluded or condemned her deepest urges and who now had good reason to judge her wicked... That she had any power over Paul never occurred to her. (Murdoch, B 12)

When man forgets that ideas are, most often, his creation, he starts taking them very seriously. Mor is introduced as a man who takes seriously “the obligations imposed by matrimony. At least he supposed he did. He had never really had occasion to reflect on the matter. He had always been scrupulously responsible and serious in everything that related to his wife and children” (Murdoch, S 160).

Since memory seems very real and concrete, he fears that he shall be disowned. The fear of isolation haunts him. He does not wish to be lonely, forgetting that he has, in his ignorance, created an illusory companion. Discerning this, Carter later tells Mor,

‘It’s useless, Mor. What am I doing in your life? I’ve often wondered this, you know, only I never told my doubts. You are a growing tree. I am only a bird. You cannot break your roots and fly away with me. Where could we go where you wouldn’t always be wanting the deep things that belong to you, your children, and this work which you know is your work?...’ (300)

Carter’s words highlight how it is not only inevitable to move towards extremes, but how it is inevitable that one would move towards the midpoint or root, so to say.

But this realisation is difficult to achieve. Therefore, man connects to the extreme. He is either in love with it or tries to avoid it. Both these acts are inescapable. He craves for the approval and acceptance of such acts. His doubts and insecurities find a voice again, further concretising the idea that reality lies without. Michael, in The Bell, attaches himself to the spiritual idea of Imber and ignores the worldly demands of Nick. After Nick’s death, he regrets, “the occasions on which Nick had appealed to him since he came to Imber, and how on every occasion Michael had denied him...” (Murdoch, B 319).
The truth is that neither the denial of the opposite nor the involvement with it is the solution: “Dora, who had so lately discovered in herself a talent for happiness, was the more dismayed to find that she could be happy neither with her husband nor without him” (1). It is revelatory that truth/happiness does not lie in either extreme. But, when caught up in conflict, one fails to devise a way out of this circle and viciously swings from one extreme to the other. More questions, “‘Look here Bledyward, even if it were the case that I could set aside all consideration of my own happiness and my own satisfaction I should still not know what to do’” (Murdoch, S 213). Perhaps, the tendency to cling to something is compulsive. It rests on the fact that one, most often, does not know ‘what to cling to’ or ‘what else to cling to’. When Dora first escapes from Paul, she feels intense relief. But she soon realises that “...she had no other life to escape into” (Murdoch, B 7).

Nevertheless, this continuous engagement/escape eventually pushes man into the awareness that something isn’t right. He then has to fight with the idea that he created in order to secure his freedom from its clutches. Can he do this? Noel tells about Dora,

‘You’re a dreadful girl. You placate Paul until you can’t stand it any longer and then you run away and then you get frightened and then you start placating him again. You must either knuckle under completely or else fight him. Quite apart from anything else, your present policy isn’t fair to Paul. You won’t really know whether you want to stay with him until you’ve fought him openly on equal terms, and not just by running away. And my guess is that once you start to fight you’ll know you can’t stay with Paul. . . .’ (251-52)

Noel tells Dora to fight with the idea of the undesirable (Paul) to help her disengage herself from it. She runs away, she is attached, she fears – this is the sequence she is going to be swung into till she extricates herself from the stifling perception of Paul. She has to visit and revisit this extreme (Paul) till she fully understands the futility of either engaging with or disengaging from it. Till she reaches that point of
understanding, she has to fight the fierce battle of the opposites. She cannot, and life will not allow Dora to escape the battle. It will drive her back to face it. The novel brilliantly introduces the unique fact that one must learn to deal with the opposite instead of running away from it: “Dora Greenfield left her husband because she was afraid of him. She decided six months later to return to him for the same reason. . . . She decided at last that the persecution of his presence was to be preferred to the persecution of his absence” (1).

In an idealistic situation, as aforesaid, this battle may be seen as unending till man realises the futility of either attaching or detaching from the extremes. When Paul writes to Dora asking her to return to him, the narrator describes Dora’s predicament as follows:

. . . . The trouble was that the return to London would be so far from gay…. She saw the flat in Knightsbridge, meticulous, exquisite, glowing with stripy wallpaper and toile de Jouy and old mahogany and objects d’art, utterly alien and utterly dreary. She could not see herself in it. It was not that she intended anything at all. She simply did not believe in that future. (136)

Dora’s perception that a life with Paul, despite its attractions and luxuries, would be alien and dreary, finally, convinces her of the pointlessness of engaging with the extreme. It is to be noted here that the issue is not about staying with Paul or running away from him. The major concern that this relationship portrays is the pointlessness of the obsession with the idea of nearness to or distance from Paul. Such futility is felt only in the absence of obsession, a product of the imagination. Appealing to Mor to detach from Carter (the symbol of desirability), Bledyard says,

‘You lie. You do not know even remotely what it would be like to set aside all consideration of your own satisfaction. You think of nothing else. You live in a world of imagined things. But if you were to concern yourself truly with others and lay yourself open to any hurt that might come to you, you would be enriched in a way of which you cannot now even conceive. The gifts of the spirit, do not appeal to the imagination.’ (Murdoch, S 213)
Bledyrd’s words highlight the process of detaching oneself from the opposite. When one extricates oneself from one’s perceptions and becomes open to what life has to offer, the imagination becomes numb. One, then, gets enriched in a way by which one automatically detaches. When man embraces the reality of what ‘is’, he doesn’t need to escape. What this highlights is the impact of living in the present, devoid of motives and imagination. Since the imagination thrives on the perception of duality, Bledyrd says that clarity (that cannot see duality), which is the gift of the spirit, does not appeal to the imagination. Once man overcomes the temptations of the imagination, he gets to see clearly the bare reality. This makes him understand the futility of disengaging or engaging with extremes.

After realising that this engagement is futile, man takes the decision to come out of the vicious circle fired by his latent will and strength. When Mor is ensnared in the conflict between his love for family and for Carter, he realises, in an epiphanic moment, that the struggle is not because of fate. It is the result of his own will, “. . . And with this came a great sense of vigour and power” (176). Thus, latent will brings with it the sense that one is more powerful than the extreme one attaches value to. This is quite similar to what Mor feels in the initial plot when he finally decides to detach from the idea of Nan:

When Mor awoke next morning he found, with his first consciousness, that he felt extremely light-hearted. . . . Then it came back to him that of course he had now at last decided. In the light of the actual decision the steps necessary to carry it out seemed very much easier. What was necessary was possible. (67)

So, participation in the battle is not only necessary, but also mandatory. However, the question is – What is the reward of the battle? The result may be adverse or good. The battle between extremes may not end well but it needs to be fought. It may not end well because, as a response to a backlash, one might take
refuge in the seemingly positive nature of the other end, thereby completely missing the middle (path). When Noel asks Nick for the motive behind telling him all the truth, Nick says, “‘There are moments when one wants to tell the truth, when one wants to shout it around, however much damage it does. One of these moments is upon me’” (Murdoch, B 273). The need of the hour is being truthful. When one gets connected to the truth inside, one severs the ties with the outside. Though it might seem damaging, it is only then that one realises that detachment is not only a necessity but an inevitability. When Demoyte calls him a fool for leaving Rain alone, Mor says dully, “‘It was inevitable’” (Murdoch, S 307). While standing behind the darkness of the rescued bell, Dora also suddenly feels the need to align to the truth and truth-telling: “. . . Vaguely there came back to her a memory of something that had been said: the truth-telling voice that must not be silenced. If it was necessary to accuse herself, the means were certainly at hand. But her need was deeper than this. She reached her hand out again towards the bell” (Murdoch, B 277). One realises the importance of clarity, no matter how short-lived it may be, and one will also realise the pivotal role of truth-telling in attaining that clarity.

Thinking of Dora’s future with Paul, Michael wonders, “. . . Running away was worthless unless she could find herself a way of life which had dignity and independence, and in which she could win the strength needed to make her able to treat with Paul equally and stop being afraid of him” (314). What Dora needs to focus on is not her dealings with Paul, but the lesson of learning to find the balance between ‘leaving’ him and ‘living’ with him. The dignity which Michael hopes for her can be found even with Paul, only Dora has to learn to balance her perception of him. This can happen only when she feels complete in herself. And, in that moment of
realisation, she will learn to let go and just be. One day at Imber, while crossing the room where Paul is studying, Dora suddenly feels proud of him. The narrator remarks,

Dora’s capacity to forget and to live in the moment, while it more frequently landed her in grave trouble, made her also responsive without calculation to the returning glow of kindness. That she had no memory made her generous. She was unrevengeful and did not brood; and in the instant as she crossed the room it was as if there had never been any trouble between them. (64)

This kind of clarity and sense of detachment comes only when one lives in the present. This is the midpoint where one is generous without any conditions – one just ‘is’. When this rare moment of clarity dawns on Dora, “. . . she no longer had the feverish urge to escape into his [Noel’s] world” (324). Indeed, in the moment of clarity – however short-lived it may be – the need to involve or escape vanishes. This is suggested by two images that occur towards the end of the novel. The first one is Dora destroying both the letters of Paul. It is symbolic of her getting rid of the fear of Paul – a fear that arose out of her oscillating perceptions of Paul. This incident suggests that she finally surrenders her fear. Another exquisite image is that of Dora rowing the boat which highlights the priceless moment of clarity, of just ‘being’:

. . . . The mist was becoming golden. Now it began to clear away, and she saw the Court and the high walls of the Abbey toward which she was drifting. Behind the Court the clouds were in perpetual motion, but the sky was clear at the zenith and the sunshine began to warm her. She kicked off her sandals and trailed one foot in the water over the edge of the boat. The depths below affrighted her no longer.

. . . . Soon all this [Imber] would be inside the enclosure and no one would see it any more. These green reeds, this glassy water, these quiet reflections of pillar and dome would be gone forever. It was indeed as if, and there was comfort in the thought, when she herself left it Imber would cease to be. But in this moment, and it was its last moment, it belonged to her. She had survived. (328)
Once the mist of her doubts, confusions and insecurities is cleared and she feels complete in herself, Dora is no longer afraid. When she detaches herself from the extreme, the extreme (Imber) ceases to be. Indeed, her creation of the extreme would cease to be. Thus, the readers find that once Dora learns to cling to the inner world, the images or imitations disappear. In that moment of catastrophe, Dora survives. Conradi says that for Murdoch, the ability to swim is (almost) moral competence. This is because both, act of swimming and moral competence, depend on ‘one’s willingness to surrender a rigid nervous attachment to the upright position.’ Echoing the same, at the end of *Under the Net*, Jake says, ‘like a fish which swims calmly in deep water . . . the secure supporting pressure of my own life’ (qtd. in Conradi 138).

Tranquillity is a midpoint stage which man has to reach in order to experience peace. Then, the external aberrations cease to disturb him, especially the one who feels complete in himself and finds it pointless to judge the external. Referring to Dora’s life with Paul, the narrator remarks, “Yet withal she (Dora) did not judge him. A certain incapacity for ‘placing’ others stood her here in the lieu of virtue. She learned to coax him or to withstand him mutely, cherishing herself. . . .” (Murdoch, *B* 4). Though Dora experiences this only for a short while, this is the midpoint or the point of equilibrium where one may cherish one’s own inner being irrespective of the happenings of the outside world.

No matter how limited this knowledge may be, it gives one the strength to carry on with the journey which an ignorant man tries to resist. After the adventure with the old bell, while Dora is waiting for Toby to come near the bell, the narrator says, “The moon was obscured and the path was full of obstacles, but Dora knew her way pretty well by now and was indifferent to the briars and brambles which dragged
at her legs” (271). It is important to note here that it is those obstacles that she had been dealing with ‘apparently’ unsuccessfully that actually brought Dora the wisdom of the ‘right way’. Dora unconsciously learns from her many oscillations and falls. That is why, when Michael watches Dora, he feels that she is “turning towards life and happiness like a strong plant towards the sun, assimilating all that lay in her way” (321). From this, we understand that the wise man is not he who commits no flaws, but he who assimilates all the experiences, good and bad, to catch a glimpse of the truth/clarity.

In return for all our efforts to find clarity, one shall be granted the gift of a glimpse into the middle path (which is the truth). Evvy echoes this truth when he says, ‘And so we see that God is to be thought of as a distant point of unification: that point where all conflicts are reconciled and all that is partial and, to our finite eyes, contradictory, is integrated and bound up. . . . If we will truly gear our lives on to God, and keep moving always towards that distant point, we shall be able, when the scene otherwise would seem dark indeed, to perceive clearly what is that one good thing that is to be done. And indifferent as we shall at such moments be to all worldly vanities and satisfactions we shall know the priceless joy of duty faithfully performed – for “not as the world giveth give I unto you.” Often throughout our lives will the darkness fall – but if we are ready, through prayer and through the ever fresh renewal of our efforts, to “help ourselves”, the grace of God will not be found wanting. . . .’ (Murdoch, S 206)

Truly, the middle path is ‘action’ for the sake of ‘action’. It is a state in which one does not attach any significance to one’s actions. This is, precisely, what Lord Krishna, in the Gita, refers to as Niskama Karma. As James says, the world might wrongly perceive this as indifference. But it is not. It is just a state where one has understood the opposites and assimilated them both. It is that point of unification where all the conflicts are reconciled and integrated. But, that state of unification may not stay long. The darkness may recur. Hence, as James rightly puts, one has to
continuously renew one’s efforts to move to the midpoint or the point of equilibrium (God) where extremes are unified.

However, this awareness comes with experience, when one is forced to conform to life’s designs and bend to its rules. This invaluable awareness is out of reach of the inexperienced and the immature. Troubled by the thoughts of youth, and the task of retaining innocence and goodness, Toby wonders, “. . . The trouble with so many young people nowadays was that they were not aware. They seemed to go through their youth in a daze, in a dream. Toby was certain of being awake. . . . When one was so favoured it was not difficult to be good” (Murdoch, B 145). This makes it clear that till time doesn’t pull one into the battle, life looks easy. But, it is when the ignorance which colours youth is severed that one wakes up to experience that which plunges one into many unprepared battles. This stage is extremely trying. Looking enviously at the vibrant youth in Toby, Dora thinks,

. . . There is a yet more difficult age which comes later, when one has less to hope for and less ability to change, when one has cast the die and has to settle into a chosen life without the consolations of habit or the wisdom of maturity, when, as in her own case, one ceases to be une jeune fille un peu folle, and becomes merely a woman, worst of all, a wife. The very young have their troubles, but they have at least a part to play, the part of being very young. (13-14).

Unlike youth, the toughest stage is when one has to continue to live devoid of significance, where living is forced into a ‘being’ deprived of drama, that is, with ‘no part to play’. This is an inevitable phase because life’s design forces us forward, despite the resistance. Knowledge reveals itself bit by bit as one is dragged into action and oscillation by life:

As Dora slipped into her clothes she heard the steady expectant beat of a drum. Then into the deep rhythmic sound were woven the unpremeditated and protesting cries of a clarinet and a trumpet. The beat, more insistent that ever,
was hidden in the increasingly complex golden nostalgic din. The music flowered, rampantous, irresistible. (192)

This image subtly portrays life’s clarion call to participate. As Dora slips into her life, she hears the steady drum beats of life’s pattern. She feels the need to follow. And, in her endeavour to follow the rhythm of this beat, she is lead to hear the ‘unpremeditated and protesting cries’ of the extremes (clarinet and trumpet) which hide the rhythm of the pattern (drum beat). The irresistible music finally pulls Dora towards itself. Indeed, life calls one, rather draws one out to participate. Inaction is fatal. It is a death blow to life. In The Bell, the elders at Imber are shown to be helpless in rescuing Nick because, “. . . Nick was neither inspired nor dangerous but simply bored; and it was hard to see how he could escape boredom on a scene in which he chose to participate so little” (118-19). It is, therefore, important to participate in life in order to get away from boredom, and to the truth or purpose. In fact, “Those who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed” (84). In the nature of things, it is impossible to avoid experiencing frailties. Hence, those who choose to avoid them end up getting frustrated. Indeed, life presents a no-exit situation. After Nan learns about Mor’s dishonesty, she is forced to go back home. She thinks, “. . . The real pain after all was not that the world had fallen into little pieces. That was a relief from pain. It was rather that the world remained, whole, ordinary, and relentlessly to be lived in” (Murdoch, S 191). No matter how much one resists, life remains to be lived.

The essential question that arises is: How do we transform the knowledge gained into action? How do we assimilate the glimpse of truth into finding balance and walking the middle path? In a sermon, James says,
‘. . . We have been told to be, not only as harmless as doves, but also as wise as serpents. To live in innocence, or having fallen to return to the way, we need all the strength that we can muster – and to use our strength we must know where it lies. We must not, for instance, perform an act because abstractly it seems to be a good act if in fact it is so contrary to our instinctive apprehensions of spiritual reality that we cannot carry it through, that is, cannot really perform it. Each one of us apprehends a certain kind and degree of reality and from this springs our power to live as spiritual beings: and by using and enjoying what we already know we can hope to know more. Self-knowledge will lead us to avoid occasions of temptation rather than to rely on naked strength to overcome them. We must not arrogate to ourselves actions which belong to those whose spiritual vision is higher or other than ours. From this attempt, only disaster will come, and we shall find that the action which we have performed is after all not the high action which we intended, but something else.’ (Murdoch, B 210)

James’s sermon brings out the practical solution of how to retain the moment of equilibrium. James warns the readers against any act, even a good act that is done with motives and expectations. He also puts forth the difficulty of acting or doing for the sake of doing and even abstaining from doing an act. He suggests the dangers of over doing when he says that we should not aspire to imitate the condition of those higher than us in a spiritual state. In a sermon, Michael echoes the same saying, “One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles” (207). One has to be truthful to one’s own nature and perform the deeds that one’s own nature and ability allows. All in all, his sermon advises us to be wise like the serpent, exercising the wisdom of letting life flow, in being lead, instead of foolishly trying to get ahead of it. Self-knowledge takes one farther from extremes. With self-awareness, one has less chance of falling into the temptation of the extremes. One has to become aware that the answer lies away from the two extremes, and somewhere in the middle. Bledyard warns Mor:

‘There is such a thing as respect for reality. You are living on dreams now, dreams of happiness, dreams of freedom. But in all this you consider only
yourself. You do not truly apprehend the distinct being of either your wife or Miss Carter.’

‘... You imagine that to live in a state of extremity is necessarily to discover the truth about yourself. What you discover then is violence and emptiness. And of this you make a virtue. But look rather upon the others – and make yourself nothing in your awareness of them.’ (Murdoch, S 213)

These words of Bledyard give an insight into the actual nature of the self. As pointed out earlier in this chapter, to engage with extremes is, in retrospect, helpful because, in the process of such an oscillation, the focus gradually shifts to one’s own self. It becomes evident that, as Bledyard puts it, it is important to look at oneself as nothing in order to rightly perceive the world. James’s words also reiterate this when he says, “‘The chief requirement of the good life is to live without any image of oneself. . .’ ” (Murdoch, B 133). Focus on oneself is necessary but one need not always attach a major share of significance – “don’t make it a virtue” – to that. The result of such misconception of significance can be dangerous: James says,

‘The study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is, as I see it, dangerous to goodness. We were told at school, at least I was told at school, to have ideals. This, it seems to me, is rot. Ideals are dreams. They come between us and reality – when what we need most is just precisely to see reality. And that is something outside us. Where perfection is, reality is. And where do we look for perfection? Not in some imaginary concoction out of our idea of our own character – but in something so external and so remote that we can get only now and then a distant hint of it. . . .’ (133)

Indeed, perfection or reality is not in the perception of ourselves. It is attained only at a point distant from ourselves. One reaches the state of perfection only when one becomes nothing (which is one’s true state of being). One should not read too much significance either in oneself or in the process of life (oscillation). When one’s awareness of both extremes becomes nothing, the extremes cease to exist.
What are the pre-requisites of achieving this position while undertaking the journey of life? We have to be as gentle and harmless as doves, and as wise as serpents to be able to detach without attachment and to attach with detachment. We have to learn to strike a balance between the opposites – worldly and spiritual, master and devil, good and evil, life and living. To arrive at the centre of balance is the ultimate test of life. It is achieved by the constant practice of understanding the sanctity of experience. This comprehension can dawn only on those who learn to bear witness to the experience which is also referred to as innocence in The Bell: James says, “‘And what are the marks of innocence? Candour – a beautiful word – truthfulness, simplicity, a quite involuntary bearing of witness’” (138).

The serpent’s argument for attaching with detachment is also voiced in The Sandcastle when Bledydar warns Mor, “‘Sometimes, it is unavoidably our duty to attempt to attempt some sort of judgement – and then the suspension of judgement is not charity but the fear of being judged in return’” (Murdoch, S 211-12). Here, Bledydar points to us the wrong intentions behind the apparently right acts by referring to how we cannot suspend the act of judgement for the fear of being judged. One has to attach oneself to an action (even inaction) with true detachment. Perhaps, then, life will hold us in spite of ourselves. Instead, if we involve ourselves in inaction and break the bonds of necessary action, we “‘. . . destroy a part of the world’” (212).

In an attempt to escape from his familial bonds, Mor pleads with Carter to accept him back, but she refuses, “‘. . . I saw it all so simply, with nothing to it but you leaving your wife whom you didn’t love and who didn’t love you. But a life has so much more in it than that. I had not seen that I would break so many many things’” (301). Rightly, as Carter puts it, one cannot attach oneself to the illusion of
happiness that the extremes display. One has to go back to the bonds and roots of one’s own self through the painful disengagement from illusion, and the equally painful engagement with reality. Towards the end, when Carter leaves Mor for good, he says, “‘I suppose I ought to go back. Nan will be wondering where I am. . . . I shall go ahead. I shall go ahead now’” (309). ‘Going back’ is sometimes symbolic of going ahead in life. It is a testimony of progression. Progression happens only when one is willing to turn away from extremes into the reality of one’s own self, however bare and blank it may seem. At the fag end of the novel, Mor ‘turns away’ from taking away his sketch that Carter once made. This symbolically suggests the final detachment from the image/sketch of himself which the extremes create, and which drives him back home to his real self.

If one is open to life, one understands that the power to journey through it lies inside. The image of the bell stands for this wisdom that life silently imparts to us. James says,

‘. . . . The bell is subject to the force of gravity. The swing that takes it down must also take it up. So we too must learn to understand the mechanism of our spiritual energy, and find out where, for us, are the hiding places of our strength. This is what I meant by saying that it is the positive thing that saves. We must work, form inside outwards, through our strength, and by understanding and using exactly that energy which we have, acquire more. This is the wisdom of the serpent. This is the struggle, pleasing surely in the sight of God, to become more fully and deeply the person that we are; and by exploring and hallowing every corner of our being, to bring into existence that one and perfect individual which God in creating us entrusted to our care.’ (Murdoch, B 211)

Indeed, it is in this state of equilibrium – which is our true self – that we fulfil the ultimate duty of a perfect human being. Undoubtedly, there are various difficulties to be overcome before we can attain this stage. After leaving Demoyte’s house –

Mor went out of the front door and found his bicycle. The sun was shining now, pale yellow, through a white haze. A steady stream of traffic was passing
both ways along the main road. Mor decided to return home by the road and not by the fields. He got on to his machine and began to pedal slowly towards the hill. He felt extreme weariness. . . . The wind was against him. (Murdoch, S 310)

While trying to balance life peddling the extremes it presents, one certainly feels the power of the strong winds blowing against oneself, making the ride to the hill (the point of summit) a tedious one. But, to avoid the wind and go ahead, one has to continue to pedal, else one will lose balance and fall. A look behind at the distance covered or a look ahead at the distance left to be covered might discourage us. Therefore, one needs to focus one’s strength on every single step to the summit, on the precious moment of the present. We learn to overcome the winds by living in the moment with a sufficient sense of attachment and detachment, and attempting to achieve the middle ground:

During those days Mor learnt what it was to have a mind diseased. There was no longer any point at which his thoughts could find rest. They fled tortured from place to place. Only by absorbing himself in the routine duties of the school was he able to find, not peace, but the means simply of continuing to exist. (230)

All of us, on a daily basis, struggle to find the centre. In her explanation about the intermediary form of life, the Abbess tells Michael about the purpose of Imber. She says that it is fundamentally for those “. . . whose desire for God makes them unsatisfactory citizens of an ordinary life, but whose strength or temperament fails them to surrender the world completely” (Murdoch, B 80-81). What is needed is balance. We practically make our world like what the Abbey says – we are finally doing a bit of that and a bit of this – an intermediary form of life. The middle path which life forces us into is nothing but a movement away from the extremes of our creation. When such a move takes place, we move into the reality of our true being. We, then, learn to outgrow ourselves in order to know ourselves. The need to outgrow
and the way to do it is beautifully summed up in *The Sandcastle* in a conversation between Bledyard, Mor and Rain:

‘As you know,’ said Bledyard, ‘we find it natural to make the distinction. Only we do not make it absolutely absolutely enough. When confronted with an object which is not human being we must of course treat it reverently. We must if we paint it, attempt to show what it is like in itself, and not treat it as a symbol of our own moods and wishes. The great painter the great painter is he who is humble enough in the presence of the object to attempt *merely* to show what the object is like. But this *merely*, in painting, is everything.’ (Murdoch, S 76)

Bledyard’s words affirm the importance of the state of ‘being’ which is devoid of motives and conditions. When one does not attach conditions to an act, it leads one to the reality which just ‘is’. But it is difficult to detach our perception from the action. That is why, Bledyard says, ‘ ‘If it were possible, ah, if it were possible to treat a head as if it were a spherical material object! But who is great enough to do this?’ ” (77).

At this juncture, Mor asks a very practical question:

‘I don’t see why one should attempt to treat a head as a spherical material object. . . . We know what a head is, and we know what it is to understand another person by looking into his eyes. I don’t see why the painter should be obliged to forget all this.’ (77)

His question echoes the most singular doubt: Why should we not attach significance? To this, Bledyard replies, ‘ ‘Who is worthy to understand another person? . . . . Upon an ordinary material thing we can look with reverence, wondering simply at its being. But when we look upon a human face, we interpret it by what we are ourselves. And what are we?’ ” Bledyard’s profound wisdom warns us against attaching significance because that is again clouded by our perception of significance. Besides, the other dimension of the insight is that perceptions are futile because they are illusory – they are illusory because they are created by the ‘illusory us’. Carter says, ‘ ‘Our paintings are a judgement upon ourselves. I know in what way, and how deplorably, my own paintings show what I am’ ” (77).
Rain’s opinion reiterates how what we perceive is basically our judgement of ourselves. To this, Bledyward replies:

‘It is a fact, that we cannot really observe our betters. Vices and peculiarities are easy to portray. But who can look reverently upon another human face? The true portrait painter should be a saint – and saints have other things to do than paint portraits. . . .’ (77-78)

Indeed, it is easy to look at a dark place instead of a bright one. A saint alone, who plays the role of an objective witness, can, perhaps, paint the brighter side very reverentially – though, ironically, the saint may not even portray it since he represents the wisdom that goes beyond the need to portray. Rain replies, “‘I don’t know whether it shows a limitation, if we want to see ourselves in the world about us. Perhaps it is rather that we feel our own face, as a three-dimensional mass, from within – and when we try in a painting to realize what another person’s face is, we come back to the experience of our own’ ” (107).

In a way, the deconstruction reading of the text focuses on the relationship between common binary oppositions in the novel like Dora and Paul; old bell and new bell; the twins; Imber and London, and so on. All these opposites represent the idea of desirability and undesirability or light and dark (the symbolic archetypes enlisted by Jung). Jung says that the key to success is the ability to understand that the opposites are the two necessary sides of a coin and thus one should endure the tension of the opposites without abandoning the process. The process and participation alone, according to Jung, allows one to grow and to transform. On the other hand, the denial of either of the two opposites leads to what Freud calls ‘projection’, a defense mechanism that keeps the conflict buried in the unconscious by driving the individual to see in the outside what is actually within him.
The novels reflect how when the characters look at one extreme as more ‘privileged’ and thus ‘marginalise’ the other, their psyche is set to a greater momentum of oscillation. Therefore, Jung suggests that the individual should make efforts to move towards what he terms as ‘Union of Opposites’ which confers psychological wholeness. The novels endorse the same and, therefore, suggest that swinging to an extreme (of painting the other) is a limitation, since that extreme is a reflection of oneself. Only, when one understands that it is reflection, it will bring one back to one’s own self. In short, one needs illusion to get to reality. Beyond the curtain lies the reality or the truth. The journey of life, of moving outward, of swinging between opposites will finally lead us in.