Ivy Compton-Burnett as a novelist remained in the field of fiction for more than half a century. She is the author of twenty-five novels. She was born on fifth June 1884 at Pinner, Middlesex. She had her early education at home with her two brothers. She attended Royal Halloway College of London University and she took her degree in Classics. Compton-Burnett spent her childhood and youth in an upper-middle class family with nurses, governesses, servants etc. This family background is projected in most of her novels.

Compton-Burnett developed a close friendship with Margaret Jourdain and they lived together in a London flat for thirty-two years. The death of her friend in 1951 was a hard blow for Dame Ivy. The London life provided her with ample material and time for writing her novels.

Her works fascinated at first a small group of admirers but later on this circle slowly started widening. Her first novel Dolores is entirely different from the works produced later on. The next novel appeared after fourteen years; the sufferings and experiences she might
have undergone form the raw material of the other novels, which are entirely different. She had a thorough knowledge of the contemporary world as she had lived through the two world wars. In her novels she chooses the period before 1910. The late Victorian time with the intricacies of the middle class living is her favourite subject in most of her novels.

The honour, Commander of the Order of the British Empire was conferred on her in 1951 in recognition of her work. In 1955, James Jait Black memorial book prize was awarded to her novel Mother and Son. In 1960 Leeds University honoured her with an honorary Doctor of Letters. She passed away in 1969.

From her novels we get an idea of her own childhood and youth. Moreover they throw light on the individual, family and social life during the Victorian Age.

The modern society is entirely different from the earlier societies in that the various moral and psychological problems, which we have to face are graver than those problems people faced in the earlier days. Life has become complicated, resulting in a lot of stress and tension on the physical, mental and psychological levels of each and every person. Living as he does in a complex and tension-ridden world, man has become a complex
creature prone to pulls, which his ancestors were blissfully ignorant about. This is because the personality of a human being is shaped by the psychological perspectives, the influence of the environment, the frustrations faced by him from the early childhood and such other factors. All these factors and the resultant impressions formed on the mind, shape the character and the concepts of an individual. So the writers of the modern age have also automatically changed their attitudes and ideas about their creative works. The didactic effect and moral judgement have given way to an understanding and sympathetic nature. The religion and the concepts of morality, sin etc. have given way to an understanding of human nature and a consequent sympathetic attitude. Hence for the modern writer the traditionally followed religions are insignificant and unacceptable. Their religion is one of humanitarianism and tolerance without retribution, penance and the other connected aspects.

Another feature of the modern writers is their affinity for realism. The writers who are discussed in this dissertation, especially Compton-Burnett whose concept of sin is studied in this chapter, illustrate this. The peculiarities of the society and the individual at the lifetime of the authors are unconsciously or
consciously reflected in their works. This is true in the case of Compton-Burnett in a special way. She has always been conscious of the human foibles and faults. At the same time she holds the view that all individuals are combinations of good and evil. This idea is consistently brought out and established in all her works, which are selected for study in this chapter.

The works of Compton-Burnett usually have simple and violent plots dealing with thefts, forgeries, betrays and murders but covered with layers of her wit. Her outstanding contribution to the art of character drawing is her analysis of types. Since she has narrated the novels in an unchanging background without any difference in the climate or atmosphere, she could create only a handful of individuals or characters who would remain in our memory. Though she had sent out sound waves of her witty, glittering and interminable conversations, she was unable to create enduring and strong characters as has been pointed out by Pamela Hansford Johnson.\(^1\) Consistently in all her works she is concerned with the manner in which people react to situations. She seems to be preoccupied with the temptations that overcome human beings. "People have a way of not coming out well in a temptation. They generally behave quite as ill as they can, don’t they?" Dame Ivy remarked in an interview with
Miss Kay Dick. Her concern is with people, how they react to other people and to the outside forces, which confront them.

She has her own steadfast viewpoints regarding temptations, the yielding to the forces and the resulting punishments. In her interview with Michael-Millgate she says: "I think, as I have said many times, that a good many of us, if subjected to a strong and sudden temptation, without any risk of being found out, would yield to it. That is my opinion."

Her earliest work *Dolores* was written in a crude, bare and rather alarming style. *Dolores* and her later works have in common the concern with man's built-in weakness, his foibles and inadequacies. She was hailed as an original writer by the literary world after the publication of *Pastors and Masters* in 1925. Even in this work, in her characteristic manner the sins and evils are approached and exposed for the readers but not reproached. Similarly no verdict is passed and no punishment is given. In her works *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), *Men and Wives* (1937) etc. incestuous associations are hinted at.

Compton-Burnett does not use a descriptive narrative method for describing the sins commonly found in the 'decent' families. She uses her own method of insinuations
and witty remarks put forth by the characters themselves to depict the voluptuous, evil and unpleasant nature of the characters concerned. The words of Agatha Catkin in *Men and Wives* suggest the incestuous relationship between Gregory Godfrey and his mother Harriet. The hypocrisy and the inconsistency in married life are other aspects deplored by Compton-Burnett. She has sheer disgust for people who have superficial family ties but pretend ideal bondage outwardly. The truth is that inwardly the ties are feeble or practically severed. Though Dame Ivy uses only her indirect and objective mode of narration, beneath the outward, placid approach we can discern a contemptuous indictment for such insincere bogus relations. Hypocrisy is constantly visible in the conversations of many of the characters. The readers are reminded of the remarks made by Christ and can draw a parallel for the same with the witty comments made by Compton-Burnett's characters. Though she doesn't pass any verdict, her disapproval is evident.

Compton-Burnett's novel *More Women than Men* (1933) deal with illicit relations, hypocrisy, pretence, insincerity in marital life etc. and above all the plotting and carrying out of a murder. There is a suggestion of homosexuality also in the relation between Felix and Gabriel.
The isolation of her characters, their lack of interest in social conditions outside the family or in economic problems apart from those of the family fortunes, is made more credible by isolating them in time as well as in place situating them in a period when the impact of public events on private individuals was less immediate and crushing than at present. Therefore she has chosen the end of Queen Victoria's reign.¹

Josephine Napier, in More Women than Men is a subtle type of tyrant who is able to lead as well as drive her family and colleagues into obedience. She is a fascinating, extremely dangerous tyrant and the only character combining her role with murder. Josephine is morally, though not legally, guilty of her nephew's wife's death as suggested by Robert Liddel in his The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett. In this context, certain arguments put forth in the second chapter can be adopted to substantiate this statement. The philosophers like Plato and Socrates are of the view that crime proceed from social conditions, from inherited predispositions and from discoverable and often curable mental illness. Hence they are of the view that deliberate wrong does not exist. Josephine Napier can be considered mentally unfit to
compromise the attachment of her adopted son Gabriel for his wife Ruth. She cannot relieve her mind from the set orbit of maternal affection for her cherished son. A morbid touch can also be discerned in the relation between this mother and son. Similarly the term 'morally guilty' becomes relevant only in relation to God and religious belief systems. The Christian moral laws have undergone modification in the secular adaptation in different ages and by different authors according to the particular social conditions. In the above-mentioned incident, the moral standard of Josephine Napier and her society has reached such a level that even morally her act of being a medium for the death of an innocent girl, doesn't cause any feeling of guilt. The ideal society, which conformed to pre-established principles has become practically non-existent. Hence the term 'morally' itself is undergoing evolution on the secular level with the passing of time. But on the Christian level a model society would be possible only if all the people have the moralistic approach. The better a man gets, the more clearly he understands the evil that is still left in him. So when the act of Josephine Napier (exposing the sick girl to draught) is considered on the secular level it need not amount to a sin. But when considered in the light of the Christian principle it is a grave sin,
committed by a cold prig. In other words, the spiritual ignorance has led to her sinful state. According to John Keke's definition of the evil action we can decide that Josephine Napier's evil deed comes under the category of evil actions purposefully done by people with genuine intention to harm others and they are called gratuitously evil actions.6

The works of Compton-Burnett—*A House and Its Head* (1935), *Daughters and Sons* (1937) etc.—which follow *More Women Than Men* are also replete with the evils like tyranny, treachery, jealousy etc. Relentless pursuit of money, inheritance and power is visible simultaneously with deliberate attempt at murder and such other inhuman deeds committed in cold blood.

*A Family and A Fortune* (1939) is a story of two inseparable brothers, Edgar and Dudley. Here also, along with the narration of the story, there is the undercurrent of incestuous relationship, hypocrisy and insincerity in family life. The lack of resemblance between the father Edgar and the daughter Justine is mentioned by Aunt Matty. To this statement the daughter Justine herself replies that if she had been a copy of her father he would not feel the attraction of opposites. These two statements point to the infidelity of the husband Edgar and the wife
Blanche in their marital life and also to the incestuous relationship between the father and the daughter, Justine. There is a suggestion of the sinful associations between Dudley, the brother of Edgar and his wife Blanche also. The corruption caused by the power of money is also well portrayed in the novel. Dudley himself mentions that money is the cause of all evil. His godfather had speculated, which was a wrong deed, and he had left the fruits of his sin to Dudley. It was similar to the state of affairs 'when the sins of the father are visited upon the children.' Frivolity of the family relation, the extremity of selfishness etc. are also pictured and the novel presents a vivid functioning of these evils in the family.

To counterbalance the bad characters Compton-Burnett has portrayed many good characters also. Some of the good characters are particularly brave and most of them are irreligious. But they are serious, honest and sensitive, their human values are always right and they are ready to defend them. The bad characters may talk good of everyone but the good characters deem it their duty to abuse tyrants or to allow the victims to retaliate against the tyrants. And even the bad characters are sometimes inspired by certain heroic virtues.
The innocence of the children in the works of Compton-Burnett remains untarnished in spite of all the vices and evils practised. This situation is highlighted in *Parents and Children* (1972). The parents, the grandparents and other elders are all exposed towards the end of the story but the children with their freshness and innocence are glorified. The grandson Graham makes certain scathing remarks about his grandfather: "Oh, I will keep Grandpa's guilty secrets, and in future I will commit errors base enough to be hushed up." The children themselves are not satisfied with the retribution meted out to their grandfather Sir Jesse for his prolonged deceit and insincerity to the family. Graham feels that his grandpa had sinned for years and suffered only for a moment. At the secular level, as has already been mentioned in this chapter, the so-called sins can be approached in a lenient manner as the concept itself has undergone drastic changes. But the Christian idea remains constant and the children and the grown-ups who get such an insight essentially achieve this viewpoint owing to their religious background and outlook.

The characters of Compton-Burnett can be divided into three groups. The first group consists of the protagonist, the 'tyrants' exercising power in the house and the other related main characters. The second group
includes friends, other well-wishers, relations etc. The third group includes the servants, the group of children etc. Children remain untouched by the sins and crimes committed by the elders in all the instances. Compton-Burnett accepts the tragedies resulting from sins. She is especially vulnerable to the calamities brought about by the corruptive nature of money and power. A suitable example is Dudley in *A Family and A Fortune*. Even towards the grave sins Dame Ivy has a very tolerant and understanding approach. Hence the style which is simple and feeble doesn’t emphasise the seriousness of the actions. She has a soft spot even for the intellectual but ineffectual homosexual like Sir Felix Bacon in *More Women than Men*. But the terms ‘Lesbian’, ‘homosexual’ etc. are alien to the vocabulary of Dame Ivy. Her favourites are middle-aged intelligent women who are sensible. She is especially repulsive towards hypocritical, pretentious characters. She did not care for the ‘virtuous’ as she considered that altruism too often served a person’s self-interest and self-esteem. Jesus Christ has repeatedly condemned this group which believes in external appearances and impressions.

The works of Compton-Burnett have been branded ‘amoral’ as there is no punishment for the guilty. But Dame Ivy is of the firm opinion that in real life the
guilty people never get punishment. She feels it to be only a literary convention. She considers herself a moralist. She can't brand her characters either good or bad by clearly bifurcating them. She finds some good inherent in the bad and vice versa. She thinks that many people don't get the opportunity to do good and she feels that even the people who do it, like the missionaries and the people who do charity work are not so very good themselves. They may be virtuous, but not good. Whether Compton-Burnett is a moralist, is the question here. If she is a moralist, what type of morality does she preach? In this context again there arises the significance of the religious morality and secular morality.

Kai Nielson has explained: "Goodness or badness, the moral appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain acts, cannot be constituted by their being commanded or ordained by God." Certain moral realities would remain just as intact in a Godless world as in a world with God. If certain deeds remain bad even in a Godless world, we have no reason to believe that, in any important sense, morality is dependent on religion. Hence morality can be believed to exist on commitment and so there is certain arbitrariness in morality and in the living of our lives. If such a remark about the nature of morality is correct, it is unavoidable for the religious moralist as well as
for the secular moralist. But in addition, we should also recall, the secular moralist need not attach to his conception of morality and the moral life, a cosmology of dubious coherence and he need not crucify his intellect with an obscurantist mythology. Anyway the experience and reflection show us the pernicious effects of general or even extensive non-conformity. A recognition of the pernicious effects of such non-conformity will check in rational people their inclination to non-conformity to the requirements of justice. So each person, as far as the individual conduct is concerned, has reasons for the neglecting of or sticking to what is morally required of him. Morality is compatible with reason even though it is not required by it. The old system of morality, which was wedded with religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam is on the decline in almost all sectors of society. A secular morality cannot be expected to ground itself in the imitation of old religious moralities. Hence the pattern of behaviour of the characters of Compton-Burnett can be ascertained as pertaining to her principles of secular morality justifying and nullifying many of the deeds which may be branded sins when related to a strict religious morality. Though they appear unprincipled, these characters are not irrational according to the above
argument. Since they are moralistic, they are rational in their outlook, or rather in the outlook of the author.

The exercise of power, tyranny and the other evil forces are enforced by characters of different age groups in the different works. This mode of presentation enables the readers to understand the different ways in which these forces are exerted and the multifarious reflections on the concerned people, which happen in relation. In *Elders and Betters* (1944) Anna Dorne is the family tyrant, who exploits her pitiable plight, being the only daughter in the motherless family. In a comment on the novel, *Elders and Betters* of 1977 edition, Storm Jameson has mentioned that Compton-Burnett’s works are the repetition of one and the same human situation, an acting-out of powerful impulses that run counter to an accepted social morality and impulses, including the impulse to subdue weaker and younger members.

Though Compton-Burnett does not consider her characters sinners, there is a method used by the characters themselves to justify their weaknesses and errors. The character Terence, in *Elders and Betters* remarks about his own selfishness: “I have a sort of innocent selfishness; at least I hope it is regarded as innocent; of course I know its real nature myself.”

Similarly the lenient, tolerant attitude of the author is expressed through the words of Jessica about the burning of the will of Aunt Sukey. She comments that it might have been done in delusion or error or in some weakness. Smaller children in the same novel who are always the symbols of innocence can also be seen trying to justify the insincerity of their father in his family life. They pray to God to pardon him and not to visit His wrath on their weak, sinful father who lacks the wisdom of childhood. The author has permitted the children to adhere to the Christian sense of saintliness and sin, whereas most of the elders who ought to be 'the betters' in their moral life can be seen wandering away from the aforesaid principles and hence they are justified by the secular concept which can deviate from the path of Christian principles of morality and sin.

*Man Servant and Maid Servant* (1947) which deals with the two worlds consisting of the masters and the servants had been the favourite novel of the author herself. Horace Lamb is the family tyrant who leads his own wife to illicit and incestuous relationship with his own brother Mortimer. Similarly the children had grown up in suffocation under the strict inhuman eye of the father and they silently permit the sin of their father. The servants are also treated ruthlessly and subsequently,
they also behave in an insincere manner at the most crucial occasion. George, removes for example, the danger signal to mislead Horace into danger and death. The characteristic witty and humorous remarks are adopted by Dame Ivy to camouflage the real intention of the characters, which serve to highlight the effect of their unscrupulous and sinful methods. Frequently evil thoughts are passing through the minds of the characters, though they never bear fruits. Gideon, a character, can be heard talking in the face of Horace that he hopes the latter's children wouldn't follow his example. He finds it impossible to teach the smitty people anything. Bullivant compels George to conform fully and freely regarding his plot to kill the master Horace. It would be the best way for the expurgation of his sin. Horace gets aggrieved at the manipulation of his own children towards him. Still he would not visit their sin upon them. He would rather take it on himself. This novel is one of the fine novels of Dame Ivy presenting, to a certain extent, the cunning and the wickedness of children. In all other works the children are depicted as innocent and though they may discuss the vices of the elders, they can never make any evil plots.

Two Worlds and Their Ways (1949) depicts the deceitful ways of the children and the elders. The
sinful, immoral lives and the underhand methods of the people which lead to the final exposure of their own misshaped individuality in front of their own children are brought out clearly in the next novel Darkness and Day (1951). Edmund comments on his illicit relation and justifies his actions: "A glimpse of me before I was ennobled. Well an ordinary, faulty, human being is known to be more loveable. . . ."12 Usually the characters of Compton-Burnett who are indulging in many of the grave sins, can be noticed to comment that the deeds were done in innocence. Hence the author must be particularly creating the impression that they were either in a state of innocence or ignorance or in a mental make up congenial to the secular concept of sin when they committed these evil and sinful actions. Her view is further clarified when Mrs. Spruce in Darkness and Day states that hardness and harshness are more detrimental to them than the sins to which the flesh is heir. Hence she would be inclined to condemn the first and condone the second.13

David Daiches has commented on Compton-Burnett as follows:

She deals in closed societies, families whose mutual tormentings are covered by the most
polite and conventional outward behaviour. Yet the something that covers the evil also reveals it, and it is the contrast between the tone of the conversation and what is actually said or indicated that gives the novels their power. Another aspect is that the Victorian parents mostly identified themselves with God, and modelled their behaviour towards their children upon that of Jehovah towards the children of Israel at their most recalcitrant. They claimed divine authority for their worst excesses. Hence novels of the period are full of lawful autocracy, approved by the Victorian authors.¹⁴

In the earlier part of this chapter it has been argued that the author upholds the secular concept of morality and sin and that she denies the branding as an 'amoralist'. The misuse of the power and authority by the elders can be considered a technique used by Dame Ivy to emphasise the extent to which the religious sense of morality, saintliness etc. can digress from the proper path when it becomes corrupted by the material and worldly influences. The conversations made by the characters in all her works, even in the most sinful context abound in Biblical quotations and verses. Thus the readers become more aware of the extent to which evolution has taken place in the
original idea of sin and morality when it becomes secularised and adapted by the different societies.

A novelist like Dame Ivy who is not reduced by the clamour of contemporary fashion and who is honest in her study of human nature will inevitably be a social critic and a philosopher of history. The violence described in the works of Dame Ivy is entirely credible. Even crime or adultery in her works is less shocking than the daily cruelty at the breakfast table. Her bad characters see virtues in the tyrants which have no objective existence; they do not dare to believe in the evil that is there, because they are too morally cowardly to take sides against it. Her good characters are serious, honest and sensitive; their human values are always right and they will, if necessary, defend them. Their virtues are rare and unconventional. However, the author herself has pointed out that she has not attempted a bifurcation of characters into good and bad, as such an unpolluted condition of saintliness or sin can never be found in any person. Through her works she has proved that even the so-called bad characters are capable of acts of almost heroic virtues. Even Josephine Napier, one of the most notorious of the characters of Compton-Burnett, has proved herself to be capable of noble qualities like sympathy, understanding etc. The truism that a good heart may often
guide a poor head or vice versa is firmly supported by the author. Robert Liddell states that the creator of these characters, namely Dame Ivy, reminds us that wisdom is, after all, an intellectual virtue, and that the children of this world can be wiser than the children of light. This view of Liddell is congenial to the argument brought forward in this chapter. Adjustment to a practical way of life is essential in a materialistic world. Hence the strict adherence to the religious concept of morality becomes impossible. So the wise individuals will adapt themselves to their society and this wisdom will be found more in the children of the world than in the children of light. The children of light can be considered the blind followers on the pre-conceived Christian path of morality or sin.

It is the anxious attention of Compton-Burnett to truth which, more than anything else, gives to her books their quality of timeless relevance. Edward Sackville-West has pointed out that

though her world is apparently so confined, the moral implications of her art reach into every corner, not only of her own world, but of those worlds the existence of which she only implies
and that is the advantage of the high degree of 'abstraction' involved by her method.\textsuperscript{16}

She talks a good deal about subjects like murder, incest, suicide, theft, immolation, relentless mental cruelty, self-martyrdom, forgery etc. Thus the universal theme of the novels of Compton-Burnett is the real hell that rages behind the respectable masks of many a bourgeois house of the late Victorian period. The presence of the sinister current in the works of Dame Ivy has made the critics compare her works with the Greek tragedies, which are full of these evils. There were fearful scourges in the self-satisfied Victorian society, as probably in every society, but there they were rendered more sinister by the patina of respectability which had to be safeguarded no matter what the cost.\textsuperscript{17} The sexual passion, which was repressed was a recurring theme. But the dominant theme was the lust for power. The critics were against the approach of Compton-Burnett as she left the evil doers unpunished. Here the novelist is soon openly objecting. There is no probability of being punished as sinners (according to the religious sense) usually go scot-free. She has succeeded in exploring the darknesses of the Victorian families and the minds of the individuals frequenting the society during that period to the maximum
extent and with the most wonderful effect. Thus even the minor characters have become memorable.

The dexterity with which the author brings out the darkest and the most rotten recesses of the human mind is well expressed in her work *Mother and Son*, published in 1955. Many philosophers have rejected finality as a necessary condition of morality. This is especially relevant in the case of secular concepts of morality. But there is the view that in any definition of morality the maximization of self-interest cannot be justified and hence the pursuit of self-interest with blind disregard for the fellow beings will amount to 'sin'.

When regarded in such a light the characters of Compton-Burnett have to be branded as 'sinners'. But their deeds, which are evil and sinful can be regarded as performed not with the intention of maximizing their self-interest. Their disposition and pattern of behaviour have the basis in the inherited pre-dispositions, the contemporary social conditions and discoverable or indistinguishable mental illness. This will relieve the characters of the burden of sin.

Kurt Baier has said that morality consists of giving men reasons, reasons for putting something ahead of their self-interest, reasons which show that their doing is
someone else's business. In the debate regarding morality many historians and philosophers believe that the metaphysics of Christianity has performed a special function, by conditioning man (however irrationally) to accept equalitarian ideals and they debate about whether humanism is strong enough to stand on its own feet. For the elitists racism is the effective school which concerns morality. The philosophers advocating morality and delineating the realm of the moral have enlisted the qualities essential in a person to remain moralistic.

Such a person should give priority to the ideals over his whims and desires. He should be able to empathize with other men and be able to give reasons for his moral assessments. Egoism and sadism should be subdued and he should have a concern for the welfare of the society and not himself. He should possess some criterion of justice as fairness at least and should use his ideals to pass judgement on his own way of life. Happiness is an important motive for such a person but he doesn't have the responsibility to endorse the happiness of the whole world. Emphasis has been given to the point that a moralist should give precedence to his ideals over his desires.
This point itself can ground the view that the characters of Compton-Burnett are not amoralistic. They are acting according to their own ideals which have been firmly established in their minds due to their circumstances, the age in which they were living, their mental conditions and such other factors. Dame Ivy has brought out the individual concept of sin and morality based on the Victorian social life. The society of that age also had such a basis and hence the social concept is akin to the individual concept on the secular level. But the Christian concept based on The Holy Bible is hard and fast and entirely different from the former. In the New Testament Jesus Christ emphasises the necessity of repentance for the redemption of the sinners. This kind of realisation and repentance are incompatible with the portrayal of Compton-Burnett’s characters. Hence the Christian concept of sin on the individual and social level is not congenial to the concept found in the works of the author which can be justified on the secular level.

In the later works of Compton-Burnett like A Father and His Fate (1957), A Heritage and Its History (1959), The Mighty and Their Fall (1961), A God and His Gifts (1963) and The Last and The First (1971) we see the same themes recurring. The incestuous relations, insincerity in marital life, hypocrisy and all the other evils already
mentioned occur frequently in these stories also. In *A Father and His Fate*, a character, Audrey, herself makes an ironical comment about the appalling callousness and hypocrisy of all around her including her father. "How I should like to meet someone who was bad at heart. It would be such a pleasant person." All these pretentious characters emphasise the importance of truth but their deeds are far away from truth. The important character, Miles, who is in the role of the father, is seen to be the one individual with the maximum number of frailties. Finding the departure of his wife to be very convenient he utilizes the opportunity by fixing another marriage with a young girl. When exposed, he tries to justify all his deeds, even the main act of providing financial help to his genuine wife without supplying the information regarding his evil projects. He emphasises that all his deeds were done with the best intention for the future of all around him. Here there is implicit a comparison to Scobie, protagonist of Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie underwent a lot of mental torture and was submitted to physical strain through satisfying the desires of all around him finally to his own mental anguish. But the mental anguish and the mental disposition which prompted his deeds are as genuine and unselfish as those delineated by Greene when compared to the character
of Miles, who is not portrayed as the possessor of any subtle, noble human qualities by Compton-Burnett. In an introduction to *A Father and His Fate*, Penelope Lively comments that her works are detached from public events and recognizable landscapes and that they concentrate on a Sartrean world—the enclosed torments of family life. The philosophers who were the apostles of militant secularism considered evil to be 'the past', man's superstitious heritage. So we must turn our back upon it. Sartre, who has himself no liking for the past, is a thinker morbidly aware of evil, even though he may not conceive it in conventional terms. Even in his repudiation of values, the existentialist philosopher lives at the level at which the sense of values has become acute. To be 'beyond good and evil' is to live in a moral void and to live in such a void was to suffer a particular sort of agony, that of having 'neither God nor friend'. The more negative the philosophy, the more positive becomes its indirect message. This negative philosophy is adopted by Murdoch and Compton-Burnett alike whose works do illustrate this. So the world they exhibit is visibly distorted but is at the same time a disconcertingly apt reflection of the real one. Angus Wilson has suggested in *The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett* that some critics are of the view that her world is a dead unit on the social
and the spiritual vision. They suggest that she has not been touched by the fresh vision of original sin that has come to humanity in the last forty years. It is this modernity of vision which has rendered her works unique. She presents the readers with a whole view of life and conveys that whole view in a subtle and convincing way, but she doesn’t tell us more about it and projects it from another side to the readers. The melodrama in her works is an integral element in the whole ambiguity which is at the centre of her view of human values. The character Rhoda in A Heritage and its History states a universal truth by denying that to know all is to forgive all. She feels that to forgive it is at best to know as little as possible. In The Mighty and Their Fall (1961) the author presents the mighty people who would stoop to any level to conquer their own selfish ends.

The mode and extent of corruption made possible by wealth and power are portrayed very clearly in Dame Ivy’s work named A God and His Gifts published in 1963. It reveals the hero Hereward’s voluptuousness which is loathsome and horrible enough to arouse the shock and repulsion of the members of his family. But it is ironical to note that they all accept him and his evil deeds unquestioningly regarding him as a God with supreme rights and powers. Even in so acute a case Compton-
Burnett doesn’t pass any verdict or deviate from her path of impersonal and indifferent narration. Hereward himself considers his faults and weaknesses the manifestation of his strength.

Her final work The Last and the First (published in 1971) serves in grounding the views she has presented in her earlier works. But in her final work two opposing feminine characters are presented. One is Eliza, an elderly woman, who is corrupted by power and the other is Hermia, a young lady who is ennobled by power. Thus in this work Compton-Burnett has attempted to give a new dimension to her consistently repeated theme. In other words a moral realism has replaced a moral idealism.23 She has allowed poetic injustice to replace poetic injustice where sudden cruelty abounds and is unpunished. Most of the critics have tried to brand the characters of Compton-Burnett as amoral but she herself denies this charge. Critics find a sort of irreligiousness in her books which sets her works so squarely in the Edwardian period. Though the characters have names and ways of talking as found in the sculpture, usually the intended sense is different. A character Selena in The Mighty and Their Fall saves herself from the temptation of a last-minute access of faith. About her Maker she feels she has no fear, on the contrary he might be feeling a
sort of fear about her. This irreligiosity or an agnosticism is found in her works. Without a religious sense, she strove to set up a moral standard which was essential for a civilized life. Hence her characters while preserving their individual identities are sharing the same scepticism and the other necessary qualities in search for a moral standard that rational beings can live by. As she sought for a moral standard which was liberated from the conventional religious morality, her characters possess the sort of secular individualistic morality as already mentioned in this chapter. The society in which these characters are presented also reflects the same secular morality. Hence her expectation regarding her people and the society in which they were moving was set at a very low level. The narrowly circumscribed society with which she concerns herself becomes, for Compton-Burnett, a stage on which a concentrated examination of moral relationships is carried out. She has sacrificed the sort of variety one expects in an author's novels in order to keep our attention on her central purposes. Though the critics have tried to draw a comparison between the Greek tragedies and the works of Compton-Burnett, there is never a suggestion of moral-retribution for the crimes and guilt that are revealed. Moreover, she has never attempted to make any
analysis of individual personality in depth. So she has not created any enduring human being. Some critics are of the opinion that Dame Ivy is not much interested in the aspect of sin connected with the deeds of each character. She has portrayed all the characters especially the hypocrites with a charming transparency. Even the characters having a criminal tendency like the servant George in *Man Servant and Maid Servant* are presented as if they are in a struggle for existence and the result is the survival of the fittest. Similarly many a time an accusing finger is pointed by the author at the society or some of the members of the society for being responsible for a particular behaviour from an individual or a particular situation. What is flashing out of her work is a spirited, unpardoning sense of injustice which becomes sharper in her later books. The fact that retribution does not fall upon the unjust has caused Compton-Burnett to be considered an amoral writer. But in the article "The Moral Comedy of Miss Compton-Burnett," Mary M. Curtis argues that this point of view actually misses the moral concern of the author.  

Through her works we are close to a deterministic view of morality in which impulses are followed blindly and inevitably. We get an idea about the moral principles of Dame Ivy which often run counter to the Christian ideal.
The words of the characters reveal the attitude of the author towards these Christian ideals, and often her disapproval of them. For example, most of these characters seek their own good and the Christian idea of putting the needs of others before their own is repulsive for them. The language of real love and selflessness is unfamiliar to the people of her books. For them 'love' means to have or possess whatever they wish, power, money or a relationship. Falsity and egotism are not defeated but accepted with infinite tolerance. Evil is not minimised or explained away, but it is recognized that the conventional moral code, spoken of in terms of good and evil, conscience, guilt, sacrifice and temptation--that is, in the terminology of religion as well as ethics--simply cannot be kept. But this does not make her immoral. Curtis points out that the deliberate refusal to take a high moral tone is itself a significant part of her vision. This vision may be negative in that it refuses to adopt attitudes of disgust or indignation, but it is positive in its acceptance of the whole of life, however nasty. She accepts the evils present in the day-to-day life without making any comment about them.

The above viewpoint is very much congenial to the argument put forth in this chapter about Compton-Burnett's concept of morality and sin. That she presents the sins
and weaknesses of the people around her without commenting on them is no reason to brand her as 'amoral'. She doesn't adhere to the conventional code of religious morality. But she has her own characteristic view of morality based on the social life and the individualistic life prevailing at that time. She herself had rejected the Church of England because she felt that it would foster guilt in people. She has the firm conviction that all individuals are potential sinners when considered on the religious basis and that a character does not improve or undergo changes but only that it gets exposed under certain suitable or unfavourable circumstances.

Louis Potter comments that being true to one's real self is the worst possible basis for morality. To play a part before a hypothetical audience is the only solution to a world where there is no ideal objective observer of the heart—that is, no God. Only in terms of the ideal observer has the concept of the 'real' self any meaning. The works of Dame Ivy have mostly an agnostic atmosphere and the major characters do not believe in God. The Biblical quotations which are twisted in her works for the benefit of her characters remind us that 'good' exists only in this world. Since the atmosphere is agnostic, there is no need to base the actions on a religious morality and any way such a type of morality would demand
the revelation of the 'real' self. The society in which the characters are essential parts is a pseudo-society and hence they project a pseudo-individuality which results ultimately in her own concept of morality and sin which is ultimately the evolved form of social and individual concept. So according to her concept the material aspects are elevated above the spiritual aspects. Thus the hidden, recess of the human mind is unimportant and the self which is exposed for others to see is more important.

This exposed self itself is the centre of selfishness and the author had the feeling that life provides many opportunities for people to achieve selfish ends. The people are ready to sacrifice the interests of the other people for getting their own selfish aims fulfilled. Compton-Burnett was fully convinced that such ill-doing and selfishness never met with retribution in this world. So people would be tempted to yield to these base feelings.

In spite of being considered 'amoral' she is convinced that she has a moralistic outlook. The morality she preaches is suitable for the age in which she is writing. The twentieth century has seen a compassionate and objective understanding of the human personality and
many guilt-alleging theories have been propounded by the modern philosophers and psychologists. This attitude is the result of the evolution that has taken place in the adherence to strict principles and dogmas that was the characteristic of religious morality. This moralistic evolution subsequently is the result of the changes that have occurred and are continuing in the life of the individual in relation to a particular society. Bertrand Russel has suggested in his essay "Philosophy for Laymen" that a conception of a good way of life has to be a social rather than an individual conception in the modern age. An individual can make positive changes in his personal life only with the political or the financial support of the society. In the opposite situation the individual will have to adjust or reform himself in a suitable way to lead a life in harmony with the society. This is the situation of the characters delineated in the works of Compton-Burnett. The characters become identical with the prevalent peculiarities and idiosyncrasies common in the society of the particular age. Pamela Hansford Johnson states that the author discovers the depths of human goodness and corruption not in observing others. He can do that only through the remorseless study of his own mind and motive. Compton-Burnett's characters are delineated in a manner which provides them with the
ample opportunity to analyse and assess their own "self." Each and every character gets the chance to probe into the recesses of his own mind and understand his own maxims and motivating principles more clearly than anybody else, except the writer. It seems that the author has left the responsibility of detecting the moral virtues and vices of each character to himself or herself or the reader. And the writer has tried constantly to assert the right of the personality to exist without primary duty to anything save itself. The former idea expressed in Dolores, the first novel, asserts that sacrificing oneself and one's own interests for others is noble. The idea expressed in all the other novels which come afterwards establishes that sacrificing oneself is beneficial for others whereas it is horrible and detestable for oneself. She observes that if virtue based on the original concept mattered in the primitive society, in the modern society it is power that matters and hence it is the resultant virtue. This exercise of power never leads to any kind of punishment or retribution, as is clearly proved by the events happening around us. The characters give primary importance to the superficial social performances and appearances without being bothered about their deviation from the established religious norms and dicta. But a careful reading
would reveal to the readers the moral insight of Compton-Burnett. Mere statement of facts without any mention of the consequences or the expected punishments is the characteristic feature of her moral outlook. The established religious concept of sin is alien to the modern society. The author portrays the life of the individuals in the Victorian society which is far from the accepted Christian principles. The modern view of morality is influenced by many factors which include the progress of science, the psychological studies etc. As a result the modern writers like Compton-Burnett have a liberalized benevolent view. But her style of expressing this sort of understanding, justifying attitude is different from the mode of narration adopted by her own contemporaries who have a different moral outlook and a different awareness of sin and saintliness. Her firm belief in the unexposed recess of the human mind also finds expression through her works. She is of the opinion that a person can know only very little about any individual. Moreover, she is convinced that wickedness and such other so-called vices meet with little retribution. If it is likely to be punished, people would avoid these vices but in normal life this phenomenon of punishment or actual justice doesn’t occur and so people are more and more likely to yield to this sort of
ill-doing and temptations. Besides she finds no character absolutely good or bad. They are influenced by economic, psychological and hereditary factors. So she has adopted the modern benevolent attitude towards her characters, one which is suitable for all individuals in the society. The character of each individual is a reflection of the idiosyncrasies found in the society. For the author's purpose, the society becomes a more or less insignificant factor. So, we find that in the works of Compton-Burnett also, the society exists as a mere silent witness or participant of the events. The primitive force existing in each individual is polished and maintained by an external social mask which is removed now and then to reveal the inner true self. Thus she has sustained a neutral approach in her analysis of the individual character based on the contemporary society.

Based on the analysis of the characters and the approach of Compton-Burnett, it can be asserted that she has an individual-oriented approach towards morality and sin. She enunciates the theory of self-justification so that her characters are their own judges. Hence every act of her characters whether sinful or virtuous, bad or good, is self-justifiable and cannot be condemned. So her characters are not disturbed by the prick of conscience and the feeling of guilt. The
framework of religious (Christian) morality is ousted and the structure of the secular concept based on 'self' is highlighted. For her, selfishness, hypocrisy, incestuous relations, inconsistency in marital relations etc. if justifiable by circumstances, or the conscience of wrong doer, are not against morality. This theory of convenient opportunism is adopted to enable the individual to escape the clutches of the established religious concept. Her moral rationalism is based on the obvious aim to project her characters and their deeds as the normal result of the inherent weakness of man. Her moral vision is limited to the material and it doesn't extend to the spiritual world. Hence the spiritual concept is giving way to the secular concept and pragmatism is the foundation of her moral outlook.

Her works are essentially the reflections of the materialistic life of a secular society which ignores the virtues and values preached by the religious concept of morality and sin. The reforming effect expected from the literary works for the amelioration of morality and ethics in the society is dwindling into insignificance, and this leads to the emergence of a new moral code as demanded by her contemporary society.
Notes


7 Ivy Compton-Burnett, A Family and a Fortune (London: Victor Gollancz, 1979) 98.


9 Millgate, The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett 44.


13 Compton-Burnett 250.


15 Liddell, The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett 94.

16 Edward Sackville-West, “Ladies whose Bright Pens...,” The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett 122.

17 Mario Praz, “The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett,” The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett 125.


19 Flynn 284.

20 Compton-Burnett, A Father and His Fate (London: Victor Gollancz, 1984) 46.


22 Angus Wilson, “The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett,” The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett 132.


25 Curtis 219.