CHAPTER IV
Dr. Iris Murdoch has in her fiction, tried to grapple with the situation of man in the modern world, through a study of human characters and relations. She attempts to comprehend the real human being and his life beset with all the problems created by himself and others.

Iris Murdoch's perception of life includes the existence of mystery, myth, fantasy in everyday life and her concept of character takes full note of unpredictability and incomprehensibility of human beings. She believes, "the human mind is an ambiguous thing." ¹

She finds that in life, in real human beings, "the fantastic and ordinary, the plain and symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together." ²

She examines in her novels man's relations with others and his own self. She finds the incomprehensibility of life and human character a challenge that can be taken up in a spirit of humility and love. In an interview with Ronald Bryden, she admits, "I think myself that pattern in a novel is very important. ... I care very much for pattern and I want to have a


beautiful shape, an apprehensible shape ... this usually comes from the fundamental pattern of the Psychological dilemma of three of four characters."³

An important feature of modern fiction is the image of man in these novels as stripped, solitary and without any moral reference.

Iris Murdoch has tried to revive the nineteenth century mode of novels in its emphasis on independent character, related to their social background and involved with other human beings.

G.S. Fraser says, "The primary goal of the novelist is a purposeful explanation of life, a quest for a certain kind of moral centre based on a just and varied sapling of typical human experience."⁴

We find that in most of Iris Murdoch's novels, which she moulds into "a beautiful shape," there are characters which seem solitary, and somehow out of this world. These independent characters are not the major ones, the hero as such. Sometimes, as in The Sea, The Sea, they come into the novel much later, as Charles Arrowby's cousin James, does. They are at first just

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³ Ronald Bryden, "Talking to Iris Murdoch", The Listener (4 April 1968) 433-34.

referred to by the major character, just someone of whom we
gather some amount of knowledge. Gradually we find that these
characters are good and sage-like. They are good beyond our
conception, but they cannot attain to sainthood, because saints
really do not inhabit our real world. There may be saints, but
they are invisible. Murdoch on occasion has been able to project
a character of the good of the highest order.⁵—"One whose mind
is not disjunct from or selfishly unconscious of his milieu,
whose knowledge and humility lead him into areas of human
development rare in our civilization. The high moral constitu-
tion of these moral characters makes them, generally, fairly
union rather than obviously and gloriously heroic."⁶

We are told by Murdoch repeatedly that the highest
human state—our notion of a saint—is not really attainable
because such a person would be invisible, "utterly neutralized by
the perfection of his undestructive selflessness."⁷

In all her novels, only one person is clearly identi-
fied as a saint by a genuinely trustworthy person... the priest,
Brendan Craddock, in Henry and Cato, calls his mother one, but
she is not a character who lives and speaks in the book,—she

⁵·WS. 14.
⁶·WS. 14.
⁷·WS. 15.
is, to the reader and Cato, truly invisible, mythic, "an object of hearsay like God himself". 8

Just beneath this absolute level of sainthood for which many of Murdoch's characters yearn, in horror and despair, is the maximum human achievement - a good person whose self-discipline pushes him towards the possibility of "acting for nothing" 9, who is least bothered about reward of any kind or ego-satisfaction, who perceives what reality is, as well as mankind can. Elizabeth Dipple thinks that only three characters in all her first nineteen novels, come near this sainthood. ... Bledyard in The Sandcastle, Tallis Browne in A Fairly Honourable Defeat and Brendan Craddock in Henry and Cato, the twentieth novel Nuns and Soldiers presents a peculiar case, she thinks.

Bledyard in The Sandcastle appears to be a comic, stammering, humble man. He is against the romantic notions of love and open freedom. "He lacks charisma and the stylish authority of a lecturer. The reader is convinced of Bledyard's inaptness for the world." 10 Without any regard for his own position in Mor's eyes, he criticises Mor for the destructive pattern of the Rain-Mor affair.

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8, WS. 15.
9, WS. 15.
10, WS. 16.
Real freedom is a total absence of concern about yourself." ...\(^{11}\)

"Bledyard's impertinence was almost beyond belief. Yet it was not as impertinence that Mor felt these words."\(^{12}\)

"Although he rarely reflected upon it, he valued Bledyard's good opinion."\(^{13}\) Such was Mor's respect for Bledyard. Bledyard once said to Rain, "Vices and peculiarities are easy to portray. But who can look reverently enough upon another human face? The true portrait painter should be a saint and saints have other things to do than paint portraits."\(^{14}\)

"Mor envied Bledyard's total disregard of convention."\(^{15}\)

Again, Bledyard said honestly and seriously to Mor, "I think you are acting wrongly."\(^{16}\) and next, "You are deeply bound to your wife and to your children, and deeply rooted in your own life. Perhaps that life will hold you in spite of yourself. But if you break these bonds, you destroy a part of the world."\(^{17}\)
This utterance is surely by a close-to-saint like human being whereas a normal human being like Demoyte said, "Oh, you fool, you fool, you fool."\(^{18}\) ... to Mor, because he had not been capable of keeping Rain to himself. She had gone from their lives. ... Mor: 'When did she go?' Demoyte: 'About two hours ago.' He turned suddenly on Mor, and his anger shook him so that he had to hold on to the table. 'Why did you leave her? Why did you leave her for a single moment?, you must have willed to lose her!'.\(^{19}\)

But even the most careless reader is aware of Bledyard's surprising authority. He is admired by his colleagues as a man. He is a gentleman with grace — as Mor remarked on his case in wearing evening dress and socializing with the rich and influential at his final dinner.

In The Sandcastle, the reader gets the impression of a totally good character who is sane, but keeps to the background, except now and then.

Mor listened to Bledyard's sermonizing. "'But I'm insane enough at the moment to be willing to hear what you have to tell me.' Something in the seriousness of Bledyard's manner, combined with the extremity in which he now continuously felt

\(^{18}\) SC. 307.  
\(^{19}\) SC. 307.
himself to be, made him engage in the discussion on Bledyad's own terms.20

Such characters, as we find in Murdoch's novels, are not exciting or interesting. They are real, because they are not heroes. The heroic ones are depicted by Murdoch to be Satan-like figures. In her world, "whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" holds crucial place.21 "She has also urged that art is the pursuit of the good, which is of itself a form of attention to the particular."22

We see that in A Fairly Honourable Defeat, Tallis Browne plays a larger role than Bledyad does. Yet like Bledyad, he appears minor and powerless, in fact irritating Tallis has been represented as a good character, but in Work For The Spirit, Elizabeth Dipple thinks that, "...nowhere in Murdoch's work is the problem of presenting a good character more interesting and puzzling than in the case of Tallis."23

"In interviews, Murdoch has pointed to a fairly obvious allegory of Christ, Satan and human soul in which Tallis plays

20 SC. 212.
21 SBR. 257-271.
22 RT. 24.
23 WS. 18.
Christ to Julius King's powerful Satan, and Morgan's horrible human soul."24

Morgan talking to her sister Hilda about her marriage to Tallis says - "He's perfectly sane, but his sanity is depressing, it lowers one's vitality."25...

We see in this novel that Julius, a powerful, charming image of Satan is exciting and full of charisma. Murdoch's realism embodies the small but very real opposing power of good - an honest depiction of what the good man devoid of myth, might look like in and to, the world.

Hugo Bellfounder in Under the Net (1954) is the first good character in the very first of her novels. In Under the Net, Murdoch has emphasized "the contrast between the man who's silent and the man who speaks; the man who's unconsciously good and the man who's consciously aesthetically, creating his life ... a kind of struggle between an angel and a mortal."26...

Anne Peronett in An Unofficial Rose (1962) is another good character; sage-like. These two, and Tallis are undynamic and of a touching simplicity.

24 WS. 18.
25 FH. 48.
26 RT. 29.
"They are simply admirable and that they exist is a relief in the darkness of much of Murdoch's world."\textsuperscript{27}

The Unicorn and The Time of the Angels contain a fine expression of a completely loveless, morally bleak world. This world shows the absolute nature of evil and points out that absolute good is required to redeem it. But there is no such redeemer since all human beings are prone to evil, in some or other manner.

Thus Iris Murdoch creates characters like James in The Sea, The Sea, Honor Klein in The Seved Head.

Both as a philosopher and as an artist, Iris Murdoch is concerned with the problem man is facing today. The major problem modern man is facing, as shown in Murdoch's works, is the loss of moral values resulting in the disintegration of human relationships and human personality. Man is no longer seen against a background of values which transcend him. The general consciousness today is ridden either by conventions or neurosis both of which are the enemies of love. Murdoch sees a way out of this. It can only be achieved by transforamtion in both men and concepts brought about by freedom and love. Freedom says Murdoch is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other

\textsuperscript{27} WS. 19.
than ourselves. Love is a function of freedom. Once one is free to know, understand and respect things other than oneself, one can love that otherness.

Iris Murdoch considers in her famous essay, "Against Dryness" that the novel must create essential images of humanity and must therefore be 'a fit house for free characters to live in.'

In *The Sea, The Sea*, a streak of jealousy is noticeable in Charles' attitude to James. "My own feeling that I have won the game comes partly from a sense that he has been disappointed by life, whereas I have not." 29

We find we like the sane James, who turned into a Buddhist Monk, lived in a strict monastery of Tibetan Buddhist monks, gained magical powers which he only twice or thrice had to exercise, and though nearly a saint-like being, committed one or two errors like any human being does. But we take a dislike to Charles Arrowby, arrogant, self-centred, jealous, a breaker of women's hearts, in fact a heartless actor who has gone into voluntary retirement.

Although he is not a Satan-like depiction, like Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, he is the evil power and

28 AD. 29.

29 SS. 66.
opposed to this powerful major character, is his cousin James, a
Buddhist monk, who imparts sound advice to Charles and tries to
help the others.

Charles, in *The Sea, The Sea*, says of Hartley's husband, "'He warned me off.'...

James replied, 'well, my advice is, stay warned' — (a
sane advice which was rejected by Charles.)

Charles thinks, 'I had noticed in the past that my
cousin did not like any discussion of marriage. The subject
embarrassed him.'

James, 'I feel it could all end in tears. Better to
cool down.'

In *Work For The Spirit*, Elizabeth Dipple says, "In the
interim scenes, James is always a source of intelligence, acute
analysis and sensible action, he lives naturally and completely
in a world he knows very well. All Charles' friends like James
instantly and the reader, maddened by Charles, understands
quickly that James is the central character of impressive morals
and personal characteristics. The intelligence of James'
remarks, their enormous cultural evocations, which Charles just
does not catch, and his impassioned sense of truth of situations
are all geared to draw the experienced Murdoch reader's sympathy and attention. In the midst of Charles' sustained madness, James shines very brightly.  

"In many ways close to being a character of the good, James cannot for a long time be suspected of the magical demonism, which so sorrrily ends the tale proper."  

Unafflicted by narrow self-interest, or vanity, James is seen living in his Pimlico Flat in London amid an enormous, untidy mass of Tibetan materials. We recognise gradually that this wise man has the spiritual discipline of the adept.

Charles's cousin, James Arrowby, is a student of the dangerous road and unlike the naive and largely unconscious Charles, he is acutely aware of its nature and dangers as well as of its task in seeking goodness and evoking the whole of the spiritual life. James is one of Murdoch's most subtly developed characters and his spiritual discipline and practice of Tibetan Buddhist rigours, slowly emerge through Charles' narration.

Charles not only hates James with jealous intensity, but is also ignorant of his cousin's enormous store of Buddhist lore, and is determined to perceive him through his own spite.

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31. WS. 292.
32. WS. 292.
Violently competitive, Charles was cheered up by Wilfred Dunning's statement that James seemed to be a disappointed man, and gradually Charles' own success has made James' areas of shining expertise, less threatening. Nevertheless, this prejudiced and self-centred Charles, the narrator, persists in negative judgements of James, and in spite of Charles' belief in his now customary power, James spontaneously and invariably comes out on top, in terms of both intelligence and sensible action, whenever he and Charles share a scene or conversation.

James, who lived in his Pimlico flat amid an untidy mass of Tibetan materials, Chinese and Buddhist objects of the greatest value—solid gold Buddhas, jade and porcelain items muddled with bits of stone, mud, feathers. The almost peculiar, animistic, and fetishistic, indeed almost premival nature of Tibetan Buddhism is behind this, and we gradually recognize in this wise man, the spiritual discipline of the adept.

James, kept in the wings from page four of the novel, served in the Green Jackets during the war, and through the army went to India and then to Tibet. After the war, instead of returning to England and the successful life he was obviously built for, he developed a career as a professional soldier, a far cry from what such a talented man could have achieved. Charles was delighted.

The surface of this response reads simply as another statement of Charles' jealous triumph. But there are other ideas
lurking which will become clearer as the novel's subliminal aspects slowly develop. Charles is slowly establishing himself as a stage magician. But James too is secretly establishing himself - we find through reports of James' having become a Buddhist as well as the reference to poetry-writing, that his life has taken a turning quite unusual for a soldier.

We meet James, well into the book, the diary, under odd circumstances, in a place which becomes symbolic. ...

"After a drunken evening with Peregrine, in London, Charles treats his hangover by going to the Wallace Collection where he perceives the paintings as reflecting his own life. The sense of doom, the hammering of the workers, increase Charles' heartbeats. Amidst this, the dramatic entrance of James combines to take this scene into a psychic area where one questions external reality. The novel is of course about doom and suspense. The most important activity and conversations in it occur when Charles and James meet and are characterized by James' extraordinary knowledge, his moral and spiritual development and his almost palpable connection with some other realm. When we learn of his rescue of Charles and set it against Titus' death, he takes on a new dimension and we are forced to realize that this spiritually highly developed man has indeed taken a

33 WS. 290.
wrong turning, as Charles had so long intuited. ... "In the rescue of Charles, as earlier in the death of the Sherpa-boy, he succumbs to the power of his brand of potent magic: the dangerous road to goodness for a man like James who takes a spiritual route, is more subtly tempting and finally more devastating than the egotistical path Charles has so blindly followed." 34

James takes the dizzy and hungover Charles to his flat in Pimlico, another place whose symbolism is intense. There, their first conversation of the novel occurs, a conversation during which James absorbs the diverse data of Charles' life and begins to talk intelligently and abstractly about it.

The two most important scenes between Charles and James are this first one and the last one which occurs at Shruflf's End during an evening visit, before James' journey which is a willed death. James, in the interim scenes, is always a source of intelligence, acute analysis and sensible action. He lives naturally and completely in a world he knows very well, naming flora and fauna, admiring the stones and rescuing flies and moths. Finally, he is instrumental in rescuing Hartley, from her imprisonment.

James' failure on the dangerous road to good is one of

34 'WS. 290.
the hardest, saddest examples in all Murdoch's works. In his final conversation with Charles, again a masterpiece of wisdom, James talks of the tricks of the adept—the Indian rope trick, raising bodily warmth, walking indefinitely without stopping for food or drink. James says, "Goodness is giving up power and acting upon the world negatively. The good are unimaginable." 35

The annals of Buddhism are full of men of James' type—highly developed adepts who go off the rails—who are, as Murdoch describes James, genuinely spiritual beings but who finally do not quite make it.

The sane James says, "We never give up a pleasure completely and absolutely, we only barter it for another." 36 "The reader's sorrow on recognizing James' failures is overwhelming." 37

Though Iris Murdoch has no religious feeling, nor does she believe in God, she has deep faith in a sense of goodness.

A Severed Head depicts a culture where good manners have assumed the air of a major virtue. Individuals are encouraged to be civilized and rational, and are praised for behaving well. Richard Todd in Iris Murdoch says, "The two power

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35 SS. 445.
36 SS. 444-445.
37 WS. 246.
figures here are, the anthropologist Honor Klein and the psychoanalyst Palmer Anderson who in their very incestuous relationship, become 'gods'. 38 - But are they sages? At one stage, the narrator of the story in A Severed Head, Martin Lynch-Gibbon says, 'It was like an arrival at the shrine of some remote and self-absorbed deity.' 39

Again, 'I had dreamed of her as free, as alone, as waiting in her still slumbering consciousness for me, reserved, separated, sacred... 40

Then also, in Martin Lynch-Gibbon's letter to Honor Klein, "... You are, I add, for all my resentment I can see this clearly, a person worthy of my respect and one who pre-eminently deserves the truth." 41

Even such a revered person, so highly intelligent, an anthropologist always among "one of her savage tribes", 42 a scholar of Cambridge, her German Jew father being Emmanuel Klein, a classical scholar, could have such an incestuous relationship with her half-brother, Palmer Anderson, a psycho-analyst. She is a sane character, but down-to-earth and one of whom people had

38: RT. 48.
39: SH. 93.
40: SH. 138.
41: SH. 116.
42: SH. 7.
varied opinions. Georgie says of her, "She could inspire awe ... There's something primitive about her. Perhaps it's all those tribes". 43

Martin, when he reached Honor's home from the station said, in fact thought to himself, "She stood there in the doorway, her gaze fixed upon the golden pair by the fire, her head thrown back, her face exceedingly pale; and she appeared to me for a second like some insolent and powerful captain, returning booted and spurred from a field of triumph, the dust of battle yet upon him, confronting the sovereign powers whom he was now ready if need be to bend to his will..." 44

So we find that Murdoch has created characters like James in The Sea, The Sea, Theo in The Nice and The Good, who do not quite make it, who in spite of being genuinely good, have made mistakes in their lives. They talk intelligently and become Buddhists, but both leave the monastery.

Murdoch's production of a good character — a person who goes as far as possible towards an unseeable goal — is not an easy job.

Murdoch admires Lord Buddha, who is a symbol of love. G. Galloway says, ... "Buddha's own gospel of deliverence from

43. SH. 7.
44. SH. 58.
the illusions and snares of sense, through the enlightenment of
which, he was the prophet ... Gautam Buddha taught that the
secret of Man's sorrow and suffering, and of his redemption
likewise, lay within himself. 45

Reading Murdoch, teaches her serious audience to
discriminate in reaching towards the good and through most of The
Sea, The Sea, we regard James with pleasure as an arch-discriminator, as pointedly observant of the human scene as Brendan
Craddock in Henry and Cato and often close to the nameless good
which Murdoch advocates. He seems a character for the highest
honours bestowable.

"The spiritually much more advanced Brendan Craddock,
one of Murdoch's characters of the good, differs radically from
Cato's limited perception of the Christian problem." 46

Brendan will finally leave everything in his English
life and intellectual order to go to India alone, without
theology or traditional images, "in order to follow the furthest
reaches of the religious life and to enter an area of obedience
where even speculation is disallowed." 47

46·WS. 252.
47·WS. 253.
Murdoch has written two essays named, "The Sublime and The Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Re-visited" which show her concern for the good.

There are other characters of the good, Hartley, Charles Arrowby's childhood love in The Sea, The Sea; The Count and Anne, Guy Openshaw and Gertrude in Nuns and Soldiers.

The fictive world of Iris Murdoch is thus filled with characters who carry conviction. They are real human beings, grooping their way out of a chaotic, morally dark world, for a vision of the morally good, inter-personal relations. Some are sage-like, quite near to our concept of a saint, and some are just sane characters - mixtures of goodness and weakness in some spheres of life, but certainly respected and often looked upon with awe by most others in the novels.