
Literary Conflicts in Iris Murdoch's 'The Green Knight'

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Abstract:

Murdoch's 'The Green Knight' is beautifully skilled fiction and its plot is filled with suspense, humor, symbolism and mysticism. It replays biblical and medieval themes in contemporary London. Like her previous novels, Murdoch uses various types of narrative conflicts to point her concern towards the coherent issues related to an individual and society. Her major intention is to discreet realism from idealism and to prepare her readers for the acceptance of truth and reality of modern world and then to teach them to follow the path of optimism, morality, justice and redemption by their choices not by chances. This research paper divulges that the plot is conferred foru types of narrative conflicts by digging moral underpinning of human behavior.

Key words: Conflict, Realism, Idealism, Humanism, Optimism

Introduction

Murdoch's one of the twenty fifth novels, The Green Knight (1993) is full of suspense, mystery, thriller, humor, realism, idealism and symbolism. This brilliant and magical novel replays Biblical and medieval themes in contemporary London. Murdoch's theme is filled with morality and it explores duties of

relationships, human values and the concept of being true to self. Readers will get the impression to recall similar conflicts which takes place on the Cain and Abel story, the medieval romance in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and the death and resurrection of Jesus. Deborah Johnson comments,"A big fat entertaining novel, as rich and full and strange as one of Shakespeare's late comedies. Like these it explores darkness as well as light, the route from sadness through self-knowledge into joy, and how loss and emptiness, it truthfully traversed, can be transformed into fullness and fertility... A romance in the fullest and positive sense. ¹

Summary

Like Murdoch's earlier novels, *The Green Knight* is also the disclosure of the same edges. Social structure is surrounded by London based upper-middle class intellectuals. In the story, Lucas Graffe, a coldly cerebral academic comes up with a conspiracy to kill his dilettante brother, Clemet because his mother's bend affection towards Clement more than himself. But a mysterious savior, Peter Mir intrudes. Lucas thinks that he ends up killing Peter Mir. After several months Lucas's Life seems to be normal. Lucas has been acquitted of Peter's murder after pleading self-defense. The Craven, helpless Clement has forgiven Lucas for trying to murder him and Lucas has promised never to plot it again. Both brothers determine not to disclose this to their friends like Bellamy James, a former social worker who is in search for God, Joan Blacket, a flirtatious middle-aged widow who is living with her teen-age son, Harvey, Louise Anderson, another widow, who was married to the Graffe brother's best friend, Edward and she accompanies with her three teen-age daughters, the beauty Alpeh, the brain Sefton and the mystic Moy.

After the return of Peter Mir, the mundane lives of the Lucas's circle are suddenly thrown into confusion. Peter initially in the favour of taking revenge from Lucas for his evil

deeds in search of justice. He later tries to establish peace after leaving behind his Old Testament demands for eye for an-eye justice. In spite of vengeance, he favors resolution, at the time of meeting Lucas's family and friends; he tells the truth to all but none believes him. Bellamy repeats that night incident once again to treat Peter. Peter's memory is regained by the repetition of the whole accident. Meanwhile the party, Peter's doctor Dr. Edward Fossett brings him back to the hospital for the treatment. Aleph goes missing. Their plan to help Peter Mir remains useless after knowing the news of Peter Mir's sudden death. They come to know from Aleph's letter that she is going to marry Lucas. Louise feels relaxed. Clement proposes Louise for marriage, and Joen's son Harvey marries with Sefton. Peter Mir proves like a Christ figure for them all.

Plot Conflicts

Every fiction of literature is based on the various types of conflicts, whether it is a story or a biography, short story, play or fiction. In Murdoch's fiction, no story can exist without conflict. Murdoch's novels have many literary plot conflicts which include internal conflict and external conflict which incorporates man versus man, man versus self, man versus nature, man versus society and man versus fate. The way writer uses conflict and how the conflicts are resolved are all determined by the type of story being told. Linda Simon comments, "Readers acquainted with Ms. Murdoch's previous fictional worlds will discover familiar territory here: bewildered characters, artists and scholars among them, search for a spiritual center and energizing force in their lives. Into their midst comes a mystical figure who serves as a catalyst for their changing consciousness. At last, in scenes recalling "A Midsummer Night's Dream," they suddenly lose their social inhibitions and sally forth to mate. Their experiences afford them a new sense of optimism. She further adds, "As in her earlier works of fiction, Ms. Murdoch interweaves allusions to a

rich mine of sources: Freud, Sartre, Simone Weil and Shakespeare. In this new novel, she also evokes the story of Cain and Abel, as well as the medieval romance "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in which a magical intruder tests the integrity of the gallant Sir Gawain. All these familiar motivations and strategies will be either good news or bad for readers whose response to Ms. Murdoch's work is unlikely to be altered by any single novel." ²

Once again her characters are going through various conflicts such as external which take place between the character and outside forces and internal conflicts which take place within the character to experience their external and internal liberty. Murdoch's novels deal with individualism and realism. Like many of Murdochian fiction, 'The Green Knight' is also built around conflicts between good and evil, right and wrong, realism and idealism, love and power, freedom and oppression, optimism and pessimism and last but not the least society and individual. It has analyzed by MICHIKO KAKUTANI in New York Times that "There are other similarities between "The Green Knight" and Ms. Murdoch's earlier novels as well. Once again readers are immersed in an incestuous world of upper-middle-class English intellectuals. Once again readers are invited to watch the dances of love between members of this hermetic world as they choose and change partners for life. As in so many of Ms. Murdoch's novels, the Platonic quest for the Good and the spiritual search for the True push the narrative of "The Green Knight" forward. As in "Message to the Planet" and "The Book and the Brotherhood," accidents and chance occurrences crucially shape the direction of the characters' lives. And as in "Nuns and Soldiers" and "The Philosopher's Pupil," a charming dog (God spelled backward, remember) plays both a symbolic and practical role in the plot."³

Character versus Character

Man versus man is the most fundamental type of external conflict shown in the fiction of Murdoch in which a good character struggles against the evil deeds of imprudent character. These struggles may be born from moral, religious, sexual or social differences and turn out to be very emotional, spoken or substantial conflicts. Man versus man is almost always the conflict present when a protagonist fights an antagonist.

Lucas, an isolated academician also is running away from his crime to attempt to kill his own sensual and charismatic mother's favorite half-brother Clement due to childhood jealousy of his mother preferred loved Clement more than himself that he committed the sin knowingly. He remembers that night: It is past midnight on a summer evening; Lucas gets Clement completely drunk before taking him in the car to a remote place amongst trees and construction rubble with the pretense of showing him something but with the intention of striking him on the head with a baseball bat and killing him. As the murder weapon begins to descend Clement senses it and tries to spring away, observing as he does so "the figure beside Lucas to another man."⁴ The theatrically of the scene is only equaled by its religious implications: the mysterious third figure manifests himself at the crucial moment and saves Clement's life at the apparent expense of his own; when Lucas returns from his self-imposed exile to Clement: he explains, "one man can die for another' and Clement asks, "so he died for me"?(p.91); a little later, as they continue to talk, Lucas comments "An angel might have stayed my hand."(p.92)

Through their conversation, we are introduced to the figure of Peter Mir, "an angel", Peter explains to Bellamy, "is a messenger of the divine, a messenger is an instrument, sometimes an unconscious one' (p.299); though he was at the time applying the wards to Lucas, we are able to conceive of

Peter himself as some sort of mystic messenger, an instrument of justice. It is Alpen who first suggests that he is the Green Knight. Peter explains to Bellamy after his recovery, 'is a messenger of the divine, a messenger is an instrument, sometimes an unconscious one'.(p.299); through he was at the time applying the words to Lucas, we are able to conceive of Peter himself as some sort of mystic messenger, an instrument of justice.

Like Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who was responsible for Rupert Foster's death but without having any feel of guilt and remorse for his misdeeds; before the return of Peter Mir it looks as though this will be exactly the stance of Lucas Graffe; he has invented a story to tell to the world, he has involved Clement in his machinations and he appears to feel no remorse, "You know perfectly well why. Why did Cain kill Abel? Why did Romulus kill Remus? I have always wanted to kill you, ever since the moment when I learnt of your existence. Do not let us waste time on that."(p.88) When Peter reappears and he demands for justice thought it is soon apparent that it is not legal but moral justice that he is seeking. He demands for justice:" You indulged just now in a somewhat pedantic analysis of the concept of punishment when you reached the third term, retribution, you quickly translated this grim idea in to that of reparation. In fact the idea of retribution as everywhere fundamental to justice, where it has mitigated punishment just as often as it has amplified it. Recall that men were once hanged for stealing sheep. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth serves as an image for both restitution and revenge. The punishment must fit the crime, being neither more severe, nor less. In some countries, you know, some crimes, stealing for instance, are punished by the severance of a hand. So in this case, you just punishment would seem to be the reception of a blow upon the head delivered with equal force." (p.126)

In society, justice should be done with every individual but not in that way Peter demands, "I desire to ruin your life as

you have ruined mine" (p.127), in other words The Old Testament justice of "an eye for an eye", more germane to Peter's sense of justice, however, is his desire that Lucas should acknowledge his sin and confess the truth to his friends, the implication behind this demand being that truth is greater than mere justice. Lucas's sin is not only against Peter but also against Clement; furthermore, he has trapped Clement into compounding the sin, for Clement, who is normally decent and truthful, essentially good, has become embroiled in his brother's evil. In the resolution of the plot it seems that Peter, resurrected a second time, recognizes that his feelings of hatred and vengeance are more harmful to himself than to Lucas, metes out symbolic justice and make peace; "I want you to introduce me to them, I want to get to know you all, I want to become part of your family."(p.130) Peter chooses the perfect revenge for Lucas, in place of hatred and jealousy he prefers love and reconciliation. Peter discloses the truth about Lucas to his family and friends but no one believe him because Clement don't confess. Peter wants real justice with goodness and truth. He fails because of Clement's coward ness. He argues with Clement: 'Enough has been said: that is your solution, is it, that solves everything? What I desire and what I deserve is justices, and in I shall have it. You admitted to me that you knew' when did I admit anything?' 'When you thanked me for saving your life' 'I was simply recognizing you! Can't you take in that it is not possible to prove that Lucas intended to kill me? He sent me away simply to protect me- I swear that he did not' 'Now you have changed your tone, and what you say betrays you. You shall be exposed as a liar. Justice and truth will destroy you both'. (p.220) Lucas against Clement and Peter against Lucas are the clear indication of character verses character conflict in which antagonist tries to kill protagonist whereas protagonist ultimate revenge is to forgive and to be the part of antagonist's life. With the help of this type of conflict Murdoch explains that the kind of revenge one will take is depend on his morals, ideals and beliefs. Peter and Clement are

taking better reprisal for their offender because of their goodness in them.

Character versus Society

In 'The Black Prince' Murdoch uses Man versus Society conflict in order to explore the role of power within the society. Peter Mir, tells the truth to all family members but no one believe him. In place of Peter, Lucas is loved by all. As Murdoch defines, "the evil can attract and inspire love."⁵ As Lucas is loved by a number of the characters in the novel. On the other hand Bellomy, who accepts Peter as his Christ figure, convinces Lucas and Clement to the repetition of the incident of that night once again for the sake of revival Peter's memory. Fortunately, Peter regains his memory. In happiness, he enlightens the lives of other characters; he cures Harvey's ankle; he discovers Anax for Moy; He reunites with Lucas and Clement and finally he appoints Bellamy as his secretary. This is the very position that Bellamy adopts after Father Damien tells him, 'do not seek God outside your own soul.'(p.266) Bellamy returns to this concept later in his conversation, about religion with Peter Mir and it is one that is discussed minutely again and again in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*; "it is able to fit in with the modern rejection of God but at the same time to retain a faith in a "Good based" morality".⁶ Though Bellamy has lost his vision of a personal God he has not lost his desire to have an 'avatar' or a 'mediator' whom he can venerate'; he is a man for whom religion is a necessity and he believes that he has received a sign; Peter is to be his path to goodness, yet, when in the party, Peter is taken away by Dr. Edward Fonsett, Peter's doctor to his clinic for treatment: Bellamy tells to the doctor, "he's a spiritual person, like a holy man. He doesn't need doctors! It's you who need him, not him who needs you!"(p.356) Now Bellamy has found his purpose in life, "I've got so much to do, I'll find that job spoke of, and yes he was right about happiness, don't be miserable thinking you can't be

perfect.”(p.471) After Peter's departure, the fall occurs in the family. Aleph has gone missed. There was no news of Aleph. They plan to take help to Peter. Now it is proved that Peter has been “a Christ figure” for all other characters. But they all shock by the news of sudden death of Peter Mir. As a representative of Christ, Peter has died after taking his “Last supper” of bible the party at his house, first to save Clement and secondly “to break all spell and set everyone free”. (p.448) Peter Mir identifies a wrong, become a victim of it and wishes to change how society works in the end and reader will find out that this change is very difficult and the character struggles a lot to uncover truth and accomplishes it at his/her own personal loss.

Character versus Self

Their friend Bellamy James, Lucas secretary rids himself of all ties and possessions, even giving away his beloved dog Anax to Moy. The gay Bellemy who wants to become a priest has a long correspondence with Father Domain, who we come to know only by letter.

Bellamy is the main seeker after God, his whole life ‘a religious quest’(p.23), which his conversation to Roman Catholicism has not resolved. He considers entering the priesthood but does not do so; rather, like Catherine Fawley in *The Bell* he decides to give up the world and enter a monastery in an enclosed order, to cut himself off from social life and dedicate himself to truth. Much of the serious religious discussion in the novel it to be found in the exchange of letters between Bellamy and his mentor, Father Damien, whose philosophy seems in many ways to accord with that of Murdoch herself:

“We fear plurality, diffusion, senseless accident, chaos; we want to transform what we cannot dominate or understand in to something reassuring and familiar, into ordinary being, into history, art, religion, science.”⁷

Even Bellamy has romanticized the religious life; that the monastery is to be for him an escape from reality and that, moreover, he is playing a Christian role to disguise from himself the very fact that he has not convinced himself of Christ's 'existence, first in the flesh and then in the spirit: "if we have a mystical Christ can that be the real Christ? Is a mystical Christ "good enough"? Could there be Christ if that man never existed at all?"(p.41) Here he is rehearsing one of Murdoch's own worries.

Perhaps Christianity can continue without a personal God or a risen Christ, without beliefs in supernatural places and happenings, such as heaven and life after death, but retaining the mystical figure of Christ occupying a place analogous to that of Buddha: "a Christ who can console and save, but who is to be found as a living force with in each human soul and not in some supernatural elsewhere."⁸

Bellamy is struggling within himself because he is proved unsuccessful in searching true and moral aim of his existence or life; that's why he remains indifferent from his responsibilities towards his society. He is waiting for a "Christ Figure" for enlightenment, liberty and rebirth.

Character versus Nature Conflict

The novel begins in Kensington Gardens on a chilly, wet October day, when two middle-aged women Joan and Louise, old friends since their school day, are walking, exercising Bellamy's dog, Anax. Both the widow ladies are living with almost grown up children. Joan has an eighteen years old son, Harvey Balcket, who loves Aleph and nearly wrenches his ankle in an accident. Louise, facing a catastrophe of sudden death of her husband, Edward Anderson had three teen age daughters, the beautiful Aleph, the studious Sefton and the mystical Moy. Through their conversation Murdoch highlights the fatal effect of AIDS on individuals' and society specially the young-generation. According to Joan, "AIDS frightens the

young off sex these days, off all sex, such a pity, they don't have fun like I had at their age, they daren't try themselves out, they daren't experiment. We'll have a generation of monastics....I think Harvey's still a virgin, I don't think he's had any sex life at all."(p.5)

Discussing these growing problems affect the lives of innocent young people who are afraid of having sexual relations and trying to escape from marriages, love and sex. Murdoch discloses her concern towards this type conflict between character verses nature. Moy makes up her mind against marriage. Sefton thinks that human beings are himself responsible for these damages happen in the society: " Being human, we are already sinners, we are already sinners, we are not innocent, on one is because of the fall, because of original sin".(p.18) Death and diseases are those aspects of nature man can never control and these characters are victims in which nature is an inevitable and invincible winner.

Conclusion

The Green Knight is all about struggling with the problems of morality of Good and Evil in a contemporary world and also is the prime cause of the conflicts among characters in the novel . And Peter is a true representative of "a Christ figure", the good and Lucas is "a satan figure", the evil. Society has both aspects of life "the good" or "the bad" and it is up to an individual to choose. But it is decided that the good will win at the end. The Green Knight enters in to the philosophic discussion about the conflict between good and evil; between the existence or non – existence of God; between morality and immorality; between idealism and realism and between humanism and bigotry. Most people shifts their religious and political perspectives as they grow older, responding to their own explorations and investigations. Murdoch is no exception and her theme is nothing short of morality, humanism, idealism and happiness

in an arbitrary world. In the end, in spite of various literary conflicts the book ends with a glow of hope and optimism.

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