

A Path to Self-Realisation: Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight* as a Novel of Transformational Journey

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Abstract

The Green Knight, the penultimate novel written by Iris Murdoch (a modern British novelist and a philosopher) is intense and complex in its matter, meaning and form. Using a psychological approach, the paper analyses the novel's characters' troubles, actions and decisions in an attempt to study how they cope with the flaws and imbalances of their personalities. The characters, Lucas, Clement, Peter and Bellamy, are entangled in strange circumstances and undergo the ritual test of truth and goodness in a journey of transformation. Using Freud's concepts of 'The Id, Ego and Super-Ego' and 'Defense Mechanisms', the novel's characters are studied and their motives, troubles, coping mechanisms and decisions are understood. The process of transformation is varied and realized differently by each character. Interestingly, the paper also tries to explore the connection between the psychoanalytic concept of 'making the Unconscious, Conscious' as a means of self-realization, to the Buddhist concept of 'Bodhi' or 'Satori'- a state of complete awareness. Though the characters do not achieve enlightenment, they do find their 'Middle Paths' as espoused by Buddhist theology in their journeys toward psychological healing.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; Buddhism; Iris Murdoch; transformation; middle paths; Defense mechanisms; enlightenment; psychology

INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch's penultimate novel, *The Green Knight*, revolves around two brothers, Lucas and Clement Graffe. Their lives are transformed when a third person gets accidentally involved while Lucas tries to kill Clement. The titular character, The Green knight in itself, is an allusion to the antagonist of the 14th-century poem 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. The novel mirrors the medieval romance poem in its themes of justice and mercy but cannot

be strictly allegory. The novel contains many layers, rich characterisation, an extensive plotline and various philosophical and literary allusions.

A multitude of characters populates the novel, and each has their character arc that Murdoch has complexly woven into the plotline. The novel's main characters are Clement and Lucas, the brothers, Bellamy, their friend and Peter Mir, the third person who changes their lives entirely. A psychological approach to the characters can help discern the causes of their troubles, actions and decisions. The researcher acknowledges that the author is an 'anti-Freud' and that she has admitted so in her interviews. Yet, there seem to be hidden traces and the enormous scope for a psychological approach to her novels, especially *The Green Knight*.

UNDERSTANDING THE THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

A short preface to the field of Psychoanalysis will help gain a better understanding of the upcoming analysis. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, acknowledged to be the father of modern psychology and psychiatry, is the founder of Psychoanalysis. It is the clinical method of treating psychopathological conditions through dialogue between the patient and the therapist. The concept of the Conscious and the Unconscious mind are a genius of Freud, wherein the former is the state of mind in which a person is aware of his thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires at a given moment, and the latter is a warehouse of unknown feelings, sexual urges and desires, unhealthy thoughts, irrational fears and unwanted memories. He proposed that humans' psyche comprises three components; Id, Ego and Super-Ego. Firstly, the Ego is the rational peace-making element of one's mind, balancing the Id and the Super-Ego. Freud, in his *The Ego and The Id*, defines Ego as

[that which] controls the approaches to motility-that is, to the discharge of excitations into the external world; it is the mental agency which supervises all its own constituent processes, and which goes to sleep at night, though even then it exercises the censorship on dreams (8).

According to Freud, the Id is the primitive part of the mind that predominantly functions during infancy. It only seeks to be instantly gratified and is driven by pleasure. It is noted that Id is "unknown and unconscious, upon whose surface rests the ego...The ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it." (Freud 17). It can be understood that Id functions in a domain that is connected to Ego yet substitutes the reality principle to that of the pleasure principle. The third component, Super-Ego, has to do with the social standards and accepted norms upon which one's morale and ethics are built. It is also called the Morality principle. Freud comments on the nature of Super-Ego, also known as the Ego ideal, as

[Which] answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man. As a substitute for a longing for the father, it contains the germ from which all religions have evolved...the role of father is carried on by teachers and others in authority; their injunctions and prohibitions remain powerful in the ego ideal and continue, in

the form of conscience, to exercise the moral censorship...Social feelings rest on identifications with other people, on the basis of having the same ego ideal (Freud 33).

When one of these aspects of an individual's psyche is not under control and disturbs the equilibrium that is essential for routine, normal functioning, the repercussions manifest in different forms. Dreams and Art were two mediums, identified by Freud, through which the imbalance breaks out, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously.

To maintain the balance and allow the Ego to be stable, the Mind employs specific mechanisms to safeguard itself from the consequences. The Defense mechanism, first put forth by Freud, was further developed by his daughter, Anna Freud. The definition of Defense Mechanisms, according to Phebe Crammer, is:

[A]ny cognitive operation that functions so as to protect the individual from the disruptive effects of excessive anxiety. In this sense, defenses are adaptive. They allow the individual to continue to function in anxiety-arousing situations. When used excessively, defences may distort reality (598).

Some of the Defense mechanisms enumerated by Freud and Anna Freud were:

- Denial is employed when one cannot accept the truth and is in denial of reality.
- Repression is the psychological process of pushing unhappy thoughts, bad memories and immoral urges into the Unconscious of their mind.
- Displacement is the redirection of irrational emotions towards someone else other than the actual recipient.
- Sublimation is the diversion of the negative emotion towards a constructive or socially acceptable activity.
- Regression is moving back in psychological time during excessive stress.
- Rationalization is excuse formation to rationalise one's actions
- Intellectualization is the use of reason and logic to counter the emotion attached to the situation.

These concepts would be the basis of the analysis of the characters mentioned above.

PSYCHOANALYTICAL VIEW

Firstly, Lucas is the elder step-brother and an adopted child who can be seen as an anti-hero. He is a secluded, mysterious, brooding figure and can be looked at as a Byronic hero. He is almost always seen in gloomy areas, alone and detached from people and society. He is described as an 'a quiet reclusive academic, a much-respected historian', 'eccentric...sits in his dark little house writing learned books...goes out and kills someone',

‘not very sociable’, and ‘lonely’. Lucas’s failed attempt at killing his step-brother stems from a long history of hatred, jealousy and greed. Lucas was first adopted by his parents, who were childless for a long. When Clement was born naturally later, Lucas saw him as a usurper of the love, care and position he held with his guardians. Prone to human errors, the parents favoured their biological son over Lucas, the adopted. The feeling of being abandoned and othered was instilled in him since childhood. Lucas’s Id, in such an environment, had accumulated emotions and feelings that moulded him into the person that the readers see.

The game of ‘Dogs’, which is termed to be a ‘ferocious game’, can be seen as a manifestation of the built-up negative emotions that reigned in Lucas’ psyche. An Id fueled by such cynical fodder and a Super-Ego that controls his actions and necessitates his role as an elder brother, Lucas suffers from an unstable Ego. His plot to lead Clement into his trap and attempt to murder him is the ultimate solution to establish stability to a torn Ego. The tug of war between Id and Super-Ego has pulled him through all these years, yet it is still unclear as to why he decides to act and execute his plot. In Lucas, the desire for killing Clement is the manifestation of sibling rivalry. Alfred Adler’s theory of Individual Psychology helps understand Lucas’ intentions and actions better. In the work titled ‘Theoretical Perspectives on Sibling Relationship’, states that

[The] role of the family system, including sibling influences, as central in personality. A key construct in Adler’s theory was the inferiority complex...parents’ differential treatment of siblings is consistent with Adler’s theory in documenting that parental favoritism of one sibling over the other is linked to poorer sibling relationships. (Whiteman et al. 127-8)

His forgiving of Clement at the end of the novel is the representation of the restoration of balance in his psyche and the elimination of sibling rivalry between them. This is also seen as a result of Lucas trying to ‘de-identify’ himself as Clement’s step-brother. The strained relationship between the two brothers is yet another Biblical allusion. Peter Mathews in his work ‘The Scrambled Script: Contingency and Necessity in Iris Murdoch's *The Green Knight*’ notes that the initial act wherein Lucas tries to kill Clement in itself is a repetition, “a psychological replay of the sibling rivalry simmering between Lucas and Clement. This connection is enhanced by Lucas's employment of the same bat the boys once used in their sadistic childhood game of 'Dogs'” (2).

Lucas is a character who can be seen employing multiple defense mechanisms. He represses his anger, hatred and jealousy, for which he holds his parents and Clement responsible. The game of Dogs is a physical, conscious manifestation of his repressed emotions. He acknowledges his endeavour to kill the source of his negative emotions, i.e. Clement, as ‘a burden long carried’ and ‘a duty’. Most of his repressed feelings were redirected into studies. It was sublimated into a positive channel, which helped him create a social image of respect, dignity and power, which he lacked to receive from his parents. Lucas’s reaction to Peter’s appearance after he was declared dead reflects his psyche intellectualising the issue at hand. Removing all emotions attached with the matter, Lucas,

true to his nature of being stoic, offered various alternatives such as money, a physical duel and also tries to confuse Peter by stating that due to his head injury, he might have forgotten things and is perhaps rambling on about abstract ideas of revenge, retribution and justice. The readers will also find a similar approach when Lucas' gives Sefton a farewell speech/advice. One can see how Lucas draws out emotions from inherently emotional concepts such as love, marriage and altruism. Ironically, he says, 'do not indulge jealous feeling, when another is preferred' after his long battle with the emotion. Lucas runs off with Aleph, the eldest of the Anderson girls, to America. This act is a metaphorical escape from the binding reality he faced in his social circle.

Clement, the younger brother, is a theatre artist and is the connecting thread between the novel's various characters. He is called the 'bonding agent' and is described as someone who 'by temperament and in appearance, [is] exotic', 'the most delightful of uncles' for the kids in the novel, and is secretly in love with Louise Anderson. Clement undergoes a moral conflict before the re-enactment episode. His mind and his psyche have been troubled since the day Lucas tried to kill him. Understanding the truth of the situation, Clement's Id and Ego are at war. His psyche struggles to find a middle ground, whether to side with his brother or with his saviour. He viewed the re-enactment as a 'mystery play' and himself as the director. He tries to confront his conflicting feelings in the lines:

Why am I so docile, why am I taking part in this charade, acting as his second, defending his indefensible position, and opposing the righteous stance of a wronged man who has saved my life? Is it because I feel guilt for what Lucas called my cruelty to him when we were children? Perhaps I was cruel. Or is it really because I admired him and revered him when I was a child, I looked up to him, I thought him remarkable and amazing, he is remarkable and amazing. I think I loved him, I think I still love him. And now I am leading him into a trap where he will let anything happen, he will let Peter kill him, he doesn't care, he does not value his life at anything. Or perhaps I shall be the victim; after all, as Lucas said, it was all my fault (Murdoch 279).

From the above lines, it can be understood that Clement feels a sense of guilt for being his parents' biological son and tries to rationalise Lucas's actions. He self blames and takes upon himself the burden whose rightful owner is Lucas. Also, Clement tries to concoct the similarity that the story has with the medieval romance poem. This shows that he tries to rationalise the novel's events by connecting them to a didactic poem of medieval times. There seems to be a subtle parallel between Clement's character and that of Sir Gawain. In the epic poem, "Gawain as representative of the court is found to be humanly but bravely imperfect"⁶. Similarly, Clement has his own inner demons tormenting him, yet faces the situations with courage. Clement overcomes his fear for his brother and gathers up the courage to confess his love for Louise. His happy ending with Louise is the middle path that he chooses.

The third character, Bellamy, is one of Murdoch's staple characters, similar to Michael from *The Bell*. Bellamy was a social worker, who somewhere before the beginning of the novel, decided to give up everything in life and take up monastic order. In his pursuit to search for truth and goodness in him, Bellamy sold his house, gave up his job, and even gave away his dearest dog, Anax, to the Anderson girls. Bellamy is seen to be in correspondence with Father Damien in the novel, who very well understands that what Bellamy is in search of is not the pathway for realisation but a means of escape from reality. The readers get to know of Bellamy's past relationship with a student at college named Magnus. His homosexuality is the reality that Bellamy is trying to cover up through asceticism. His denial of his sexual orientation can be seen as the workings of an overpowering Super-Ego. Homosexuality is viewed as a deviation from the standard norms and rules of society. Therefore, many homosexual individuals tend to repress their sexual feelings and channelise them into other fields. This can have both positive and negative effects on the individual's psyche. In this case, "Murdoch shows how Bellamy's dream of a moral life causes him to shun sexual activity and to adopt a self-imposed vow of chastity in order to purify and transfigure his sexual impulses" (Grimshaw 176).

Lastly, Peter Mir is a very mysterious character and is the third person who accidentally gets involved in Lucas' murder plot to kill Clement. The way Murdoch has characterised Peter enables the reader to connect him to the character of Bertilak from 'Sir Gawain and The Green Knight'. Peter Mir, whose name means 'world' and 'peace' in Russian, is almost always seen wearing suits in shades of green, carrying a giant green umbrella, and wears a green cravat at the party. Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe, in their work *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life*, compare his mysterious appearance to that of Bertilak and comment thus: "Like Bertilak, he [Peter] is an ambiguous figure, large, sinister and benign. When the Green Knight appears in Arthur's hall, elegant and gigantic, he seems to represent both civilisation and savagery and to invade the court from the wild green world of nature." (Martin and Rowe 154). Peter's character acts as a catalyst and helps progress the plot. When Peter meets Lucas and Clement, the readers find that he is hungry for revenge. He even says to Lucas that he intends to exact revenge in a manner as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Murdoch 131). In the episodes such as Moy's birthday party and him violently threatening Clement, it can be gauged that he is temperamental and is throttled by anger and a crude perspective of justice. This attitude and behaviour of Peter can be attributed to an excess of Id functioning in his psyche. Controlled by his overbearing Id, Peter acts intimidatingly and uses techniques such as blackmailing, verbal and physical threatening to gratify his need for revenge.

The second act is the turning point in Peter's character arc, which leads to a transformation in him. When the four characters gather again to re-enact the tragedy, Bellamy imagines that a lightning ball from the sky hit Peter and knocked him out. Later, Clement wonders whether he missed witnessing Lucas hitting Peter with the bat again. Though the cause of Peter collapsing is unclear, the effect it brought is that he remembers a part of his life missing in his memory since the hit on his head. He recalled that he had taken to Buddhism, which helped him calm his former self that was ruled by primordial emotions of

anger and jealousy. This regains of knowledge, and the ceremonial punishment is the two means through which Peter's Id is consoled and brought back to equilibrium.

TYING TOGETHER PSYCHOANALYSIS AND BUDDHIST IDEOLOGY

Murdoch was much influenced by Buddhist ideology and called herself a 'Buddhist Christian', very similar to Peter's religious orientation of being a 'Jewish Buddhist' in the novel. *The Green Knight*, as Tammy Grimshaw notes, is "one of her [Murdoch's] most transparent and extended narrative engagements with Buddhist teachings" (171). Psychoanalysis and Buddhism are two broad areas concerned with the betterment of human life and the ultimate goal of transformation. Though both the institutions operate in opposing fields wherein one is a scientific approach, and a clinical method to counter mental illness and the other is a spiritual and a religious framework that helps a follower move towards enlightenment, there seems to be a connection in their visions. In a letter from Father Damien to Bellamy, he mentions Eckhart's statement, 'Seek God only in your own soul'. This statement reveals the innermost objective of both fields in consideration.

The 19th century, ravaged by World Wars, saw the loss of belief systems and man becoming materialistic and rational in his ways. The man was facing chronic boredom, mechanisation of life and fractured social and spiritual life. Religion took a backseat as Nietzsche famously declared 'God is dead'. In such an age of tumult was born the concept of psychoanalysis. Fromm notes that Freud recognised man's situation and understood that the solution for his purposeless existence is within himself (8). Freud saw that only man could save himself. In a similar thread, the eastern religions, especially Buddhism, did not believe in a personal god and saw man as having the capacity to find the answer to his existence within himself and reach enlightenment. It is in this vein that it can be established that both were means for human transformation.

Freud famously stated that "where Id was, there shall be Ego". It is known that Ego is a projection of Id which is modified in its aspects and characteristics to channelise the irrational energy of Id into an acceptable format. Thus, Freud wanted man to be aware of his deepest self, dig out his Unconscious to achieve clarity, and become aware of those forces that dominated and controlled him. This process of uncovering oneself and making the Unconscious, Conscious was what Freud aimed at through psychoanalysis. While Freud views the Unconscious as the domain of irrationality, Jung looks at it as essentially the seat of wisdom. Thus, the Unconscious is a grey area, made of good and evil, darkness and light, man as the early man, and the developed rational being. Inherently, the Unconscious is all that is human in its content and nature and represents the 'Universal Man' in connection with nature. Freud's idea of "Making the unconscious conscious transforms the mere idea of the universality of man into the living experience of this universality; it is the experiential realization of humanism" (Fromm 35).

The concept of *Bodhi* or *Satori*, as propounded by Buddhism, ties into the above idea of Freud. Erich Fromm defines *Satori* as:

a state in which the person is completely tuned to the reality outside and inside of him, a state in which he is fully aware of it and fully grasps it. He is aware of it—that is, not his brain, nor any other part of his organism, but he, the whole man. He is aware of it; not as of an object over there which he grasps with his thought, but it, the flower, the dog, the man, in its, or his, full reality. He who awakes is open and responsive to the world, and he can be open and responsive because he has given up holding on to himself as a thing, and thus has become empty and ready to receive. To be enlightened means “the full awakening of the total personality to reality (44).

This state of complete awareness of oneself, *Satori*, can be achieved through Freud’s process of ‘Making the Unconscious, Conscious’. Buddhism clearly states that Enlightenment can be achieved only through a change in character. Buddhist Middle way is the road provided to its followers wherein both extremes of rigid asceticism and sensual indulgence are rejected. It is “path of self-transformation: an intellectual, emotional, and moral restructuring in which a person is reoriented from selfish, limited objectives towards a horizon of possibilities and opportunities for fulfilment” (Grimshaw 175).

The amalgamation of the two fields leads to the arena of Buddhist psychology, wherein the emphasis is placed on the self and the understanding of one’s needs physically, mentally and emotionally, to achieve enlightenment. What it requires to reach the state is explored through psychological terms. The Buddha advocated to be acquainted with oneself to be aware of their condition, and what psychoanalysis does is to study oneself in scientific terms. The *Bodhi* that Buddhism preaches is the ultimate goal; the transformational journey to reach the destination is psychoanalytical.

In the psychoanalytic analysis of the primary characters in the novel, it can be seen that each of them lacks awareness of themselves. Their psyches are troubled, imbalanced and dominating. Their psyches have employed various defenses to shield them from extreme consequences. Each seems to be on a journey of discovery, uncovering dark secrets hidden by the Ego. Not all of the selected characters for analysis reach a level of awareness as proposed by Freud to transform, and there are strains of change found in each of them after the span of the novel. Each finds means to stabilise his Ego and choose a path in life that suits his conscience. Lucas’s elopement, Clement’s happy marriage, Bellamy acceptance of his homosexuality and Peter’s longing for a concerned family; each finds what he has been running after and leaves behind what was troubling him. This is their middle path. Fromm connects Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis and states that

It might be said that both systems assume that the achievement of their aim brings with it an ethical transformation, the overcoming of greed and the capacity for love and compassion. They do not tend to make a man lead a virtuous life by the

suppression of the “evil” desire, but they expect that the evil desire will melt away and disappear under the light and warmth of enlarged consciousness. (51)

Each finds the means to stabilise his Ego and chooses a path in life that suits his conscience. Each sees what he has been running after and leaves behind what was troubling him. Their ethical transformation is their middle path.

From the above-quoted extract, the transformation that each undergoes is when he begins to love and feel compassion. In Lucas’s case, his troubled psyche, driven by the battle between Id and Super-Ego, clouded his reasoning and controlled his actions. The murder plan and its failure are his first steps towards transformation. Through Clement’s confrontation and interactions with Peter, Lucas undergoes an invisible change. The second enactment and the ritual punishment are the final push off the cliff. He realises the futility of his fight with his brother and inches towards forgiving himself, along with his brother. This enables his psyche to heal and reach *compos mentis*. Though others are doubtful of his intentions to elope with Aleph, Lucas takes responsibility for a relationship built primarily on love. This is unlike his actual nature, which doesn’t believe in emotions and bondage. This is his transformation, his middle path.

Clement’s transformational journey is rather a rollercoaster ride. Since Lucas goes missing after the unfortunate night, Clement carries around the burden of his brother’s actions. Unable to wrap his head around the events of the night and troubled by guilt, Clement’s psyche is disturbed. Upon confronting Lucas, Clement learns the reason and is comforted that Lucas will not repeat what he failed on that night. But when Peter appears and shakes the newfound equipoise, Clement again takes a trip down the guilt lane. The journey of choosing his middle path reaches its peak moment during the re-enactment. The battle between his Id and Super-ego doesn’t culminate in a mid-point of balance. It stretches until the day of the ceremonial punishment. Clement’s transformational journey is guided by the change in his brother and through Peter and his actions. Another aspect that is part of his transformation is his confession to Louise about his love. His marriage to Louise is the middle way of his life, giving up years of insecurity, instability and indulgence.

Bellamy’s case is most explicit in terms of the Buddhist middle path. His denial of his homosexuality leads him to view the world in white and black. He adopts a vow of chastity, which is one of the extremes that Buddhism disapproves of. Bellamy’s choice to involve in social work and to give up his desire for monastic life is his choosing the Middle path in his way towards *satori*. Emil’s appeal and Bellamy’s acceptance of it is the starting point in his transformational journey.

Peter’s character is the most transformed in the novel. He is also the only character who is aware of his transformational journey. The discourse on a metamorphosis has been there between Bellamy and Peter since their meeting, a change that was bound to happen. The re-enactment scene is the trigger for the transformation that occurs in Peter. When Bellamy asks Peter what he has remembered, Peter replies, “God – I have remembered God.” (Murdoch 306). Peter admits to having been “wild and wanton”, “selfish”, “full of greed...envy and jealousy” before his acquaintance with Buddhism. His memory gap makes him regress to this state of psychical chaos. The ‘God’ that Peter remembers is not a personal saviour who sits upon in heaven and directs the course of his destiny. He, through Buddhism,

sought for “the Buddha in his soul”, he remembered his Self through a recourse away from his Self. His ethical transformation is seen when his former self, driven by Id, is soothed with compassion and love brought along with his memory of Buddhism. He says to Bellamy, “My dear, I have never been near enlightenment, I am just a beginner!” (Murdoch 307). From the above dialogue, it is right to say that he was aware of his transformation because he knows he has not reached his destination or achieved enlightenment. Peter’s decision to perform the ceremonial punishment is the result of his transformation. The change of heart is induced by the presence of compassion in his heart and peace in his psyche.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the characters Lucas, Clement, Bellamy and Peter are on their paths to self-realisation. In the pathway to transformation, the characters face their fears, trauma, and past and attempt to overcome them. The transformation process is varied and realised differently by each character. The paper has analysed those aspects that show how their journeys can be understood better in the light of psychoanalysis and Buddhist theology.

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