

The Different Faces of the Trickster: The Psychoanalyst and the Buddhist in Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head* and *The Sea, The Sea*

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Abstract

In Iris Murdoch's novels, characters often search for a sense of purpose in life by attaching themselves to figures of authority. Two prominent powerful figures in her fiction are the characters of the psychoanalyst and the Buddhist. This study examines the way Murdoch has used the mythical trickster figure to highlight the opposing characteristics of the psychoanalyst and the Buddhist in the character of Palmer in *A Severed Head* and James in *The Sea, The Sea*. In these novels, both characters are portrayed as trickster figures who have a healing function in the lives of those around them. But while in *A Severed Head* Palmer uses the language of psychotherapy to further his own self-interests, in James' character, Murdoch's notion of the necessity of attending to other's emotional and spiritual well-being is emphasized. This argument is supported by referring to Murdoch's distrust of the ability of psychotherapy to solve individuals' spiritual problems.

Keywords: Trickster, psychoanalysis, Buddhism, Hermes, Freud

1. Introduction

Iris Murdoch, the Irish-British novelist, moralist, and philosopher, is an influential figure in twentieth-century European literature. Her philosophical writings are influenced by Simone Weil, from whom she borrows the concept of "attention", and by Plato, under whose "ethical theory" she claims to fight all that she considers being the different forms of "moral nihilism" (Goodyer, 2009, p. 217). Her Neo-Platonism has contributed to the development of her idea of "the Good" and the importance of "counseling" as a way to build up a sense of connection with the world and with other people (Ramanathan, 1990, p. 20). Murdoch's preoccupation with the dual notions of "the Good" and "attention" is evident in both her philosophical writings and novels. Readers of her novels can hardly help taking note of the fact that Murdoch's characters are often involved in circumstances that, in one way or another, reflect their author's preoccupation with the difficulty of achieving "the Good", in the face of the psyche's natural disposition to egoism.

Murdoch's belief in the essential selfishness of human nature is attributed to her familiarity with Freud. As Bove (1993) has explained, Murdoch agrees with Freud's idea that the human psyche is naturally egoistic. The recurrence of egotistical characters torn between the demands of their "fat relentless ego", to use Murdoch's favorite term (1970, p. 52), and the desire to make sense of the inherent "contingency" of life, indicates her conviction that "the natural inclination of the psyche is

to make sense of the inherent "contingency" of life, indicates her conviction that "the natural inclination of the psyche is for consolation and protection" (Bove, 1993, p. 5). This desire for consolation takes many forms in Murdoch's novels. From the obsessive pursuit of romantic love (*The Sea, The Sea*) to an erotic fascination with dubious saintly figures (*The Unicorn*), Murdoch's characters strive to draw some sense of consolation to compensate for the pain of living in a world devoid of common spiritual ground (Bove, 1993, p. 8). At times, these characters turn to figures of authority such as priests, spiritual healers, Buddhists, and even psychoanalysts for consolation. It is not accidental that some of these powerful figures are endowed with the characteristics of the trickster, an ambiguous mythical figure that appears in the folktales of different cultures. Murdoch's trickster figures are power figures who have the ability to control other characters because they share innate characteristics with them. The use of trickster figures in Murdoch's fiction is significant as it highlights the dynamics of power and its various ethical implications in terms of human relationships. For the purpose of this study, two types of male trickster figures in Murdoch's novels are selected, the character of the psychotherapist and the Buddhist as they appear in two of her novels, *A Severed Head* and *The Sea, The Sea*, respectively. The purpose is to examine the various ways Murdoch has used the qualities of the mythical trickster in the character of Palmer Anderson, the opportunistic, self-serving psychoanalyst in *A Severed Head*, and James Arrowby, the self-enlightened Buddhist spiritualist in *The Sea, The Sea*. While the notion of magic and trickery is associated with both these characters, particularly in their roles as healers and mediators, Palmer's appeal to the discourse of psychotherapy is essentially egocentric. James' application of Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, is altruistic as it serves to guide the other characters to a higher level of consciousness. To understand the depiction of the trickster figure in these characters, it is necessary to examine Murdoch's stance towards psychoanalysis particularly the Freudian theory of the human psyche and the role of psychotherapy in treating human problems.

2. Literature Review

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a rise in anti-Freudian sentiments. Feminist critics such as Kate Millett (*Sexual politics*, 1969) disparaged Freud's model of psychosexual development for being reductionist and prejudicial as it promotes the patriarchal idea of female passivity and marginalization of women. In the field of moral philosophy, Freud's theory of the human mind is discredited for what is often referred to as its "psychic determinism" which presents a picture of the human subjects at the mercy of their own egoistic drives (Velotti, 2012, p. 44). For example, Jean-Paul Sartre, the French Existential philosopher, rejects Freud's deterministic view of human nature as it contradicts the dual notions of choice and responsibility which are seminal in Existential philosophy. In an interview with Rose (2003), Murdoch said: "I'm not Freudian. I think Freud discovered a lot of things, but I think this whole business of sexuality and spirituality is very much more ambiguous and hard to understand" (p. 26). Elsewhere, she called herself an "anti-Freud" (as cited in Conradi, 2001, p. 279). Murdoch's disapproval of the term "Freudian" may come as a surprise considering the fact that she has used Freudian ideas frequently in many of her novels. According to Conradi (2001), Murdoch was an avid reader of Freud. In fact, in many ways, the notion of Oedipal conflict became the staple for a typical Murdochian plot characterized by obsessive entanglement and messy family relationships. This issue is particularly evident in *A Severed Head* (1961) and *An Italian Girl* (1964), two of Murdoch's early novels. Murdoch's conflicted attitude towards Freud has been discussed by many critics. Rob Hardy (2010), for instance, contends that the practice of psychotherapy in Murdoch's fiction is depicted as either "dangerous at worst or comically useless at best" (p. 44). This is due to the fact that according to Murdoch, Freudian methods are not well-equipped to deal with the "self-deceiving forces of the human psyche" (Hardy, 2010, p. 44). Conradi (2001), on the other hand, ascribes Murdoch's interest in Freud's ideas to the affinity between Freud's "tripartite division of the soul" and Plato's Eros: "the enlarged sexuality of psychoanalysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato" (p. 77). According to Conradi (2001), Murdoch very much agreed with Freud's view about the darkness of the human psyche: "Freud shows us that we are dark to ourselves, moved by passions and obsessions we are scarcely aware of, powered by a mechanical energy of an egocentric mind" (p. 77). The idea of the darkness of the human mind is a reminder of Plato's cave. The Platonic image of the prisoners entrapped in the cave looking for the light outside the cave, partly corresponds to Freud's view about human beings at the mercy of incomprehensible psychic forces. However, it is about the question of the nature of the light outside the cave that Murdoch disagrees with Freud. As Conradi (2001) has explained, Murdoch believed that Freud has adequately talked us through the question of darkness of the human psyche but "has little to say about life in the Sun" (p. 77). For Murdoch, the individual's aspiration toward the light can lead him/her back to "the ego" (Conradi, 2001, p. 77). Ego is Murdoch's catchword for whatever distracts individuals from attending to the reality of the world and people around them, leaving them in a "state of spiritual immaturity... [their] consciousness clouded by illusion" (Bove, 1993, p. 6). Thus, as Rabinovitz (1968) has explained, Murdoch believed that psychoanalysis does not have the ability to address the issue of "neurosis" adequately for the very reason that it misguides people into looking for solutions inside themselves and thus neglect the healing power of attending to others (p. 28).

In a similar way, Jack Turner (1990) argues that although Murdoch has consistently used Freudian themes in her novels, the practice of psychotherapy in her fiction is often put "in a negative light, sometimes to the point of outright lampooning and derision" (p. 8). According to Turner, there are many reasons behind Murdoch's distrust of Freud. For one thing, Freud's method seems to differ from the "quasi-metaphysical approach" that Murdoch prefers (Turner, 1990, p. 9). Then, there is the question of "self-analysis" which according to Turner runs counter to the notion of the writer's creativity. Based on this view, Murdoch tends to resist the idea of psychotherapy because she does not wish to look inside herself. After all, the idea of looking inside may bring her "face to face with neurosis" (Turner, 1990, p. 16). However, of more relevance to Murdoch's moral philosophy

is the different ways the term ego has been used by Murdoch and Freud. While Freud considers ego as the rational regulating principle of the human psyche, according to Murdoch ego is equal to the Freudian concept of the id. As Turner (1990) has stated, in her fiction the good is "always battling for the control of 'the soul' against the mean appetites of ego and the id, which Murdoch conflates into selfishness" (pp. 10-11). Turner's view can be supported by Murdoch's assertion that in the face of "an irresponsible and undirected self-assertion which goes easily hand in hand with some brand of pseudo-scientific determinism", morality or what she prefers to call moral philosophy, has lost its strength (as cited in Leeson, 2009, p. 62).

Another reason for Murdoch's resistance to Freud is related to his indifference toward the importance of spirituality. According to Conradi (2001), Murdoch considered Freud a "Victorian materialist [who] has an inadequate view of human perfectibility based on hostility to religion" (p. 77). In "Against Dryness" (1961), Murdoch attributed the problem of the contemporary man to the lack of faith in a "transcendent reality" (p. 170). It is unfortunate that in "a scientific and anti-metaphysical age" in which we are destined to live, religious values have lost their aptitude (Murdoch, 1961, p. 16). The immediate result of such a loss is the agony of living in an incomprehensible world, exposed to the "mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices" over which we have little control (Murdoch, 1961, p. 17). It is interesting to note that Murdoch's notion of religion entails a blending of Christianity and Buddhism. She was highly influenced by Buddhism and even declared herself a "Buddhist Christian" (as cited in Rojbant, 2010, p. 993). In an interview with Bellamy (2003), Murdoch pointed out that for her Buddhism is a "great religion" because it is not "dogmatic" (p. 134). Considering Murdoch's faith in Buddhism, it is not surprising that the figure of the Buddhist reappears in many of her novels. In *The Sea, The Sea*, for instance, Murdoch uses the principles of Buddhist thought to explore the dynamics of power and quest for the good in the character of James Arrowby. James is a rare example of a Murdochian character who manages to approximate that type of "change in consciousness" which she considers seminal in Buddhist philosophy (Bellamy, 2003, p. 134).

The present study focuses on the way Murdoch has used the various features of the mythical trickster figure to explore the potentiality of Buddhism and psychoanalysis to alleviate human suffering. While Murdoch's interest in magic and trickery has been acknowledged by many critics, e.g., Tucker (1986), Kuehl (1969), her application of the trickster figure to explore the possibility of psychoanalysis to heal the sufferings of human beings remains unexamined. The only comprehensive analysis of Murdoch's fiction in the light of the mythical trickster has been done by Wilkinson. Wilkinson (2017) believes that the figure of the trickster allows Murdoch to explore the link between artistic creation and magic. She identifies three types of trickster figures who sometimes overlap in Murdoch's fiction. The first type is the character of the "young female outsider" who through her association with magic illustrates the connection between the act of authorship and artifice (p. 174). The second type is what Wilkinson (2017) calls the "warped Shakespearean character" (p. 188). The prominent position of Shakespearean allusive characters in Murdoch's fiction has been acknowledged by many critics even by the author herself. However, Wilkinson believes (2017) that Murdoch has used the idea of trickery in these characters to emphasize her "artistic distance from Shakespeare" (p. 163). The last type of trickster figure in Murdoch's novels according to Wilkinson is the traditional trickster characters such as the clever servant and the picaresque. These characters are often depicted as subverters of authority in their ability to "cross boundaries and blur their identities" (p. 176). Wilkinson's study is interesting as it has partly addressed the affinity between Murdoch's favorite characters, the saint and the sinner, extensively discussed by Conradi (2001), and the characteristics of the mythical trickster figure. Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis of the trickster as the healer has been left out of her study. To address this gap, the present study will examine the notion of the trickster as the healer with regard to the figure of the psychotherapist and the Buddhist in the selected novels.

As it was mentioned before, Murdoch on different occasions, expressed doubts regarding the ability of psychotherapy to solve human problems. This is mainly related to the fact that the principles of psychotherapy urge the individual to focus on the notion of the inner self. This, according to Murdoch, strengthens the self-centered impulses of the human psyche. The second reason for Murdoch's distrust of psychoanalysis is related to her belief that the notion of a purely scientific approach, of what Murdoch considers a "mechanical model of the psyche" (Conradi, 2001, p. 76), disregards the significance of the healing power of religion. As she has said, "the analyst" is endowed with "illicit power which he might abuse, and abuse sexually, only a 'saint' could be a therapist" (as cited in Conradi, 2002, p. 494). In *A Severed Head*, the idea of the "abuse" that Murdoch mentioned in reference to the power of the therapist is illustrated through the character of Palmer. In this novel, Murdoch villainizes Freudian psychoanalysis by casting Palmer in the role of the opportunistic therapist who takes advantage of the other characters' emotional and moral inadequacies to further his own self-interests. Interestingly, Palmer's self-interests are of a sexual nature. Considering the prominent position of the sexual impulse in Freudian psychoanalysis, the use of a licentious therapist at the center of the plot is far from accidental. Rather, it is Murdoch's fun way to cast doubt over the adequacy of psychotherapy to address man's problems particularly those that are related to the ethics of human relationships.

3. The Trickster

Tricksters are ambiguous creatures who appear in different forms in the folklore of a variety of cultures. From the Gods of Greek and Roman mythology (Hermes, Mercury) to the roguish animals of folktales (Rabbit, Fox, Coyote), the trickster figure is characterized by an essential indeterminacy. According to Jung (2003), the trickster is an archetypal figure that reflects "an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level" (p. 165). Although the figure is hard to define, scholars particularly in the field of anthropology have found a number of shared characteristics. The most dominant feature is liminality. Hynes (1997) describes the trickster as "anomalous, a-nomos, without

normativity", a creature who surpasses "existing borders, classifications, and categories" (p. 34). Such liminality gives him the quality of an outsider, a person who does not belong to any social order or conventional morality. The trickster can be a savior or a destroyer, a saint or Satan, and yet his actions may indicate the characteristics of both sides of these binaries. In Greek mythology, Hermes (Mercury in Roman mythology) shares many characteristics of the notorious trickster figure such as ambiguity, thievery, wit, and trickery (Doty, 1997). He is also described as a messenger and a peacemaker due to his eloquence and his ability to use words, sometimes deceptively, to mediate among the conflicting parties. In this sense, he has an affinity with the trickster in his power to help us gain "a sense of proportion about ourselves" (June Singer as cited in Doty, 1997, p. 47).

As suggested by the name, the trickster is a manipulative creature who lives off his wit and deception. Magic and shape-shifting are essential tools that allow him to exercise deception. Hynes recounts the story of the Tibetan trickster who disguised himself as a nun to be allowed to enter a cloister where he had a chance to sleep with the nuns. At this point it is important to mention that although the characteristics of the trickster figure in literary works can be found in both male and female characters, for the purpose of this study, the notion of the male trickster is selected. The trickster is also characterized by the extremity of his physical appetites such as hunger and sexuality. According to Hynes (1997), the trickster figures' extreme physicality which is sometimes expressed in lewd acts is related to their "bricoleur" aspect. He defines the "bricoleur" as a "fix-it-person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution" (p. 42). In his role as a "bricoleur", he can be both "sacred and lewd" (Hynes, 1997, p. 42). This is caused by the trickster's ability to cross moral boundaries and bring about a practical solution for every problem. Thus, as Hynes (1977) has pointed out, "the trickster traffics frequently with the transcendent while loosing lewd acts upon the world" (p. 42) which indicates the ambivalent nature of the trickster, blurring the lines between holiness and obscenity.

4. Discussion

4.1. *The Psychologist as Trickster in A Severed Head*

Much of what happens in *A Severed Head* is concerned with affairs and marital betrayals. According to Conradi (2001), the novel is "inadvertently prophetic of what were to become the 'permissive' moeurs of the 1960s" (p. 97). Bove (1993) describes the novel as a "delightful satire of Freudian theory" (p. 135). Besides its obvious Freudianism, (in the use of the notion of the Medusa head and the centrality of Freud's concept of Oedipal conflict), it is often described in terms of the Restoration comedy mainly due to its "emphasis on sex" and the swapping of sexual partners (Nakanishi, 2010, p. 885). In narrating the story through the perspective of the main character, Martin, Murdoch highlights Martin's inner struggle as to whether submit to Palmer's proposition that "all is permitted if one conducts himself in a civilized manner" or follow "his own instinct that self-indulgence is morally wrong" (Osborne, 2018, p. 228). As Leeson (2009) has stated, the novel's concern with sexuality is "symbolic of the power struggle which pervades the novel" (p. 66). The novel starts with Martin's secret rendezvous with his girlfriend, Georgie, in her apartment. As the day ends, he finds out that his wife, Antonia is about to leave him for Palmer Anderson. Much of the comic effect of the novel resides in Martin's willing submission to the role of a betrayed husband. What makes this transformation possible is Palmer's appeal to the discourse of clinical psychology. The age gap between Martin and Antonia opens the door for an argument grounded in an Oedipal scenario. Based on Palmer's diagnosis, Martin is an infantilized husband who needs to grow out of an unhealthy attachment to the maternal Antonia. He persuades Martin to let go of his marriage because it has kept them both, (Martin and Antonia) "spiritually speaking at a standstill" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 37).

In *A Severed Head*, Palmer's affinity to the trickster is emphasized in many ways. For one thing, his liminality or in-betweenness is reinforced through his physical features. He has "silver grey hair which grows soft, furry and inch-long all over his very round rather smallish head, and a smooth face which looks uncannily younger than his years" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 23). Although he is over fifty, he is "foppish" and wears colorful handkerchiefs, in what Martin describes as a typically American style (Murdoch, 1961, p. 23). He is also described as a "magician" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 24) and a "demon" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 182). The charismatic hold that he has over other characters is related to the enchanting power of the words he uses to explain the logic of human behavior. His association with trickery is emphasized by the "Japanese prints" on the wall in his study room, "bandit faces leered from behind him" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 35). In the manner of the mythical trickster, he is an outsider (American) and a shape-shifter (young and old at the same time). With regard to his relationship with Martin, there is uncertainty as to whether he is a caring benevolent friend or a sinister manipulator. Martin has "mixed" feelings about him (Murdoch, 1961, p. 27). As Palmer tries to put the necessity of Martin and Antonia's separation in clinical terms, Martin notices something "abstract" in his facial expression, "it was impossible to pin wickedness and corruption to such an image" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 37).

It is interesting to note that in Murdoch's novels, power figures often use their sexual charm to manipulate their victims. In the same way, Palmer is satirized for his excessive virility. At some points, even Martin seems to be attracted to him. His sexual exploits are masked in the bland discourse of clinical psychology. He uses the tricky language of psychoanalysis to justify his libertine ways, "all is permitted" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 206), he keeps repeating. True to the mythical trickster figure, Palmer is a rule-breaker and a creator of new possibilities. His amorality is emphasized in his sexual relationship with his sister. According to Hynes (1997), a trickster is an essentially subversive creature because for him everything is possible, "no taboo too sacred, no god too high, no profanity too scatological that it cannot be broached or inverted" (p. 37). Martin explains the reason for his fascination with Palmer in terms of Palmer's subversive personality. For Martin, Palmer is a role model because he has made

him "worry less about the rules"; he is "good at setting people free" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 9). Palmer's indifference to the rules becomes more evident in a mock-primal scene when Martin finds him in bed with Honor, Palmer's half-sister. Right after that, Martin has an erotic dream about his own sister, Rosemary. As they are skating over the ice, Martin tries to embrace his sister but she pushes him away and then a sword appears between them. Martin tries to move the sword away. Suddenly he notices a "huge Jewish face growing like a great egg above the silken wings of his gown.... Clinging in fear and guilt to what remained in my hand I recognized my father" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 168). As can be seen, the dream reflects Martin's newly acquired consciousness of the permissibility of incest and his psychic horror of the subversion of a primal taboo.

In his role as a therapist, Palmer poses as a healer. To achieve this end, he has the tricks of his profession, psychoanalysis. However, Murdoch's approach to Palmer's role as a healer and mediator is satiric. Two comic scenes in the novel can be used to clarify this point. In the first one, Martin has just been informed of his wife's relationship with Palmer. He goes to Palmer's place to talk to him: "I was lying on the divan in Palmer's study where his patients usually reclined. Indeed I was to all intents and purposes his patient. I was coaxed along to accept an unpleasant truth in a civilized and rational way" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 35). Listening to Palmer's mantra, "we are civilized and intelligent people", Martin finds himself in a state of "stupor" as if he is being hypnotized (Murdoch, 1961, pp. 35-37). By going to Palmer and lying on the couch of his own accord, Martin puts himself in the vulnerable position of an analysand and allows Palmer to "wrap up" the whole affair for him. By the end of their meeting, it is all decided that Martin should give his consent to Palmer-Antonia liaison. Martin had already fallen into the role of "taking it all well" and "let[ting] them off morally" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 38). Here, Palmer's eloquence and persuasive talent is reflected in his use of the discourse of psychoanalysis: "The psyche is a strange thing, he said, and it has its own mysterious methods of restoring balance. It automatically seeks its advantage, its consolation. It is almost entirely a matter of mechanics, and mechanical models are best to understand it with" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 39). The idea of the psyche acting in terms of mechanics is a reminder of Murdoch's objection to Freud's "mechanical model of the psyche" (Conradi, 2001, p. 77). Such an attitude about the workings of the human mind promotes the self-serving tendencies of the psyche. In *the Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch explains:

About this quality of selfishness modern psychology had something to tell us. The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity.... It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. (1970, p. 78)

As can be seen, Murdoch to some extent agrees that the human mind mechanically looks for consolation. The main question for her is finding ways to curb this instinctual selfishness. As the spokesman of modern psychology, Palmer seems to advocate the search for consolation at the expense of inflicting pain on others. With all his pretense of concern for Martin's emotional and spiritual well-being, Palmer's intentions are clear. He wants to have Antonia and the language of psychoanalysis allows him to advance his amorous intentions without taking moral responsibility. Thus, he fills Martin's head with the necessity of ending his infantile attachment to his wife.

The second comic scene happens after Martin finds out about Palmer's incestuous relationship with his sister. Here, Palmer's bag of trickery is turned against himself. According to Hynes (1997), in the course of practicing the art of deception, the trickster may lose control, "the trick can gather such momentum as to exceed any control exercised by its originator and may even turn back upon the head of the trickster" (p. 35). In *A Severed Head*, the balance of power is shifted as Martin gets the upper hand. He tricks Palmer into thinking that he intends to tell Antonia about the relationship. Out of the fear of exposure, Palmer starts pushing Antonia away. After Antonia goes back to Martin, Palmer tries to get her back forcefully. Martin interferes and hits Palmer in the face. Here, once again, Murdoch is poking fun at the Freudian concept of castration anxiety. The black eye and an earlier scene in chapter fifteen when Martin accidentally spills red wine on Palmer's white carpet serve as mock castration threats to Palmer's sense of power. Immediately after the fight, Martin tries to help Palmer stand on his feet: "he stood there like a child while I did so. I kept my hands upon him and he did not move away. What I experienced at the moment was a complete surrender of his will to mine" (Murdoch, 1961, p.180). The reversal of roles indicates Murdoch's skeptical stance toward the ability of psychoanalysis to heal and comfort the suffering human being. As can be seen in the case of Palmer and Martin, the relationship between the analyst and the analysand is a matter of power struggle. This is a direct result of what Murdoch considers Freud's deterministic approach to the question of the mechanics of the human psyche, "we are fundamentally unfree since enslaved to our unconscious impulse" (Conradi, 2002, p. 493). Palmer's assertion that the psyche "automatically seeks its advantage" (Murdoch, 1961, p. 39) expresses what Murdoch believes is wrong with the practice of psychoanalysis. That Murdoch has used Palmer, the erratic therapist and a manipulative trickster as the spokesman of Freud's views indicates her critical stance toward Freudian psychoanalysis.

4.2. *James Arrowby in The Sea, The Sea*

In *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch, once again, turns to the question of the search for consolation, this time in the form of the obsessive pursuit of romantic love. Charles Arrowby, the middle-aged retired theater director, retreats to Shruff End, an isolated area by the sea, "to abjure magic.... and learn to be good" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 8). Though Charles associates the idea of magic with the "technical trickery of theater" and its power over the audience (Murdoch, 1980, p. 29), very soon it becomes evident that the real evil lies in his urge to manipulate others and force his will upon them. As the future course of events indicates, Charles seems to be unable to release his hold over others even while he is away from theater and its temptations. Soon it becomes clear that the change that he hopes to achieve is not possible as people from his past including Hartley, the woman he was in love with when he was young, turn up in Shruff End. Charles becomes obsessed with retrieving what he thinks is his

lost innocence through forcing Hartley to leave her husband and when she refuses to comply, he locks her up in Shruff End. This leads to a series of unfortunate events including the death of Hartley's adopted son, Titus. Thus, Charles's narrative becomes "a self-observed threnody of pain", to put it in Ramanathan's words (1990, p. 75). What Charles requires to do is to get rid of his obsession with a "personal fantasy, the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 59). In other words, he needs a "change of consciousness" which according to Murdoch plays an important role in Buddhist philosophy. As Tucker (1986) has pointed out, the novel reflects Murdoch's chief concern with Buddhism "as a source of behavioral attitudes, spiritual enlightenment and ultimate liberation in a world that has lost its religious consciousness" (p. 379).

It was already mentioned that according to Murdoch, the psychotherapist's claim to easing up the sufferings of the individual is ineffectual as it is grounded in selfishness, both theoretically and practically. In an interview with Haffenden (1983), Murdoch says, "one effect of psychoanalysis is to make you concentrate on yourself, to think too much about yourself, whereas the best cure for misery is to help somebody else" (n. p). In other words, she finds the cure in the idea of "attention". In *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch's favorite notion of attention is illustrated in the character of James and his practice of Buddhism. Interestingly, like Palmer Anderson, James, the Buddhist convert, has been given some characteristics of the mythical trickster figure. But while in *A Severed Head*, Murdoch has used the trickster character satirically to problematize the psychotherapist's power over the analysand, in James' character, the ideas of healing and helping others are emphasized. One of the common features of the mythical trickster figure is his drifting nature. This quality allows him to surpass the boundaries of space. As Hynes (1997) has explained, a trickster is an "anomalous" being who defies normal boundaries and "characteristically moves swiftly and impulsively back and forth across all borders" (p. 34). In *The Sea, The Sea*, James is constantly on the move, first studying history at Oxford and then fighting as a soldier on the battlefield. As Charles says, James is always "vanishing" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 49). There is an air of secrecy about his activities in India and Tibet. In Tibet, he becomes interested in Buddhism. Charles says that he can never make sense of what his cousin really did in Tibet except that he was involved in "secret missions" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 49). James has many characteristics of the trickster as the healer. Interestingly, his healing function in Charles's life has been associated with his practice of Buddhism. He appears at crucial moments in Charles' life and functions both as the helper and the savior; once when Charles passes out at the art gallery in London, another time in Shruff End when he miraculously saves Charles' life. In Shruff End, he becomes a "center of magnetic attraction" to everyone and later on manages to convince Charles to return Hartley to her husband (Murdoch, 1980, p. 239). According to Jung (2003), the trickster is "a forerunner of the savior, and like him, God, man, and animal at once" (p. 472). In James' character, we can find a synthesis of spirituality and animal trickery. He is a shape-shifter, for example he is described as a "bat", a "lizard" and a "caterpillar" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 352). As a child, he seems to possess the kind of agility that is often attributed to animals. He is good at climbing trees and has the ability to "find his way across country like a fox" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 48).

In examining the shared characteristics of Hermes and the trickster, Doty (1997) points out that in a manner similar to the trickster's expertise in making "the cosmos more habitable for humankind, Hermes enables humans to reunite or move to a higher level of awareness or insight" (p. 55). This is similar to Murdoch's view about the importance of reorienting consciousness towards the good. In *The Sea, The Sea*, the pursuit of a "higher level of awareness" is emphasized in James' attempts to walk his cousin out of the "cavern" of his mind. "Most of what we think we know about our minds is pseudo-knowledge. We are all such shocking poseurs, so good at inflating the importance of what we think we value", James says (Murdoch, 1980, pp. 122-123). James mentions the idea of "pseudo-knowledge" in reference to Charles' claim to write his "real autobiography" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 123). What is James trying to do is to make Charles aware of the precariousness of the notion of a stable sense. The kind of self-discovery that Charles is seeking is not possible, at least not in the way Charles claims, because as James says, "we are fake objects, fake, bundles of illusion" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 123). This idea becomes evident in discrepancies in Charles' statement of remorse and his emotional manipulation of his friends. According to Dipple (1982), in *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch presents a "sustained questioning of the spiritual life, a study of devastations of magic in all its forms and a profound psychic landscape whose symbolic quality very slowly, in small, subtle ways, unfolds. James is its vehicle, and on him rests the deep infrastructure of the book" (p. 275). Despite Charles' efforts to deny his cousin's significance in his life, every aspect of his narrative is filled with James' presence. About Charles' plan to rescue Hartley from an unhappy marriage, he says:

...you may be deluding yourself in thinking that you have really loved this woman all these years. What's the proof? And what is love anyway? Love's all over the mountains where the beautiful go to die no doubt, but I cannot attach much meaning to your idea of such a long-lasting love for someone you lost sight of so long ago. Perhaps it's something you've invented now.... Another thought I have is that your rescue idea is pure imagination, pure fiction. I feel you cannot be serious. Do you really know what her marriage is like? You say she's unhappy, most people are. A long marriage is very unifying, even if it's not ideal, and those old structures must be respected. You may not think much of her husband, but he may suit her, however impressed she is by meeting you again. Has she said she wants to be rescued? (Murdoch, 1980, p. 125)

James' reflections on his cousin's actions and his final warning, "I feel it could all end in tears" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 125), indicate his role "as messenger-hermeneut or interpreter" (Doty, 1997, p. 62). Hermeneutics or the art of interpretation is associated with the Greek god, Hermes. In Greek mythology, Hermes communicates messages from gods to human beings. The term "hermeneuein" from which the word hermeneutics is derived "means to bring what is hidden out into the open; it is the practice of interpretation" (Krajewski, 2016, p. 590). The truth James tries to communicate to Charles appears to be of the

same kind. However, Charles, at this point, fails to grasp the seriousness of his cousin's warnings and dismisses them by describing James as "an eccentric pedant with a world-weariness which was simply tedious" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 123).

Another characteristic that brings James closer to the mythical trickster figure is his association with magic. James' magical power is attributed to his practice of Buddhism. A crucial moment in Charles and James' tumultuous relationship is Charles' sudden remembrance of how James saved his life by walking on water and lifting him out of "the churning whirlpool" like a "bat" or "caterpillar"; "my cousin had saved me by the exercise of those powers which he has so casually spoken of as tricks" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 352). James is one of the most complicated characters in Murdoch's fiction. It is interesting to note that, in characterizing James, rather than giving in to the temptation of elevating him to the level of sainthood, Murdoch emphasizes his human imperfection. This is similar to Hermes' limited "oracular powers" (Doty, 1997, p. 63). As Doty (1997) points out, "there is a chancy element in all hermeneutical interpretation: sometimes the interpreter makes the right choice and intuits the right solution" (p. 62). James' fallibility becomes evident in the role he played in the death of his Sherpa in India. Stuck in a blizzard and infatuated by the power he believed he had gained from mental concentration, he tried to raise his bodily temperature through concentration. But the heat was not enough to keep them both alive and the Sherpa died. "It was my vanity that killed him", James confesses (Murdoch, 1980, p. 338). In his conversations with Charles, James downplays the significance of the "tricks" he learned in India. What matters is the ability to use them in a proper context and for the right reason; "all spirituality tends to degenerate into magic" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 336). The confusion between "white magic" and "black magic" in the novel is closely related to Buddhism and the principle of transcendence. To arrive at the state of nirvana, where the soul will be free of earthly "attachments", and "out of the Wheel" (Murdoch, 1980, p. 288), one should be aware that the path is ridden with temptations.

5. Conclusion

Through the application of the characteristics of the trickster figure in the seminal characters of the psychologist and the Buddhist in these two novels, Murdoch seems to imply that the idea of spiritual healing cannot be brought about by a purely scientific approach to human nature. There is always the danger of seeking false consolations. The process of becoming good and attending to others is an ongoing journey. One is always tempted to put one's self before others. The trickster figure in these novels serves to warn us of these temptations. A purely scientific perspective toward man's ethical dilemmas is never enough. As a prototype of a man of science, Palmer falls short of that healing ideal which according to Murdoch is linked to the idea of spirituality and attention to others. However, the fact that James Arrowby advocates the notion of spiritual transformation in his interactions with his cousin, does not mean that he is thoroughly well-equipped for the task. The change in consciousness which is elemental in Murdoch's moral psychology can only be approximated. This is most visible in the character of James whose characteristic ambiguity, his spirituality, fallibility and liability to magic and trickery attest to his role as a trickster-Hermes.

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