

From Fantasy to the Reality and The Search for Human Goodness in “*The Green Knight*”

Soghra Ghasemi^{1*}, Sayyed Hassan Alamdar Moghaddam²

¹English Department of Farhangian University

²Faculty Member of Farhangian University

*E-mail: ghasemisaghi@yahoo.in

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Abstract

The Green Knight is Iris Murdoch's 25th novel, first published in 1993. It is a vast moral and intellectual masterwork, set in contemporary London, about an enclosed group of people, which is made up of characters from middle and upper class intellectuals. Murdoch through the novel evokes the story of Cain and Abel, as well as the medieval romance 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in which the magical intruder tests the integrity of the gallant Sir Gawain. Therefore the elements of magical circumstances abound. Clement's parents first could not have children and adopted Lucas, but then Clement was born. There is a strange relationship between them, which is compared to the relationship between Cain and Abel from the Biblical story.

Keyword: Fantasy, Reality, God, Religion, Goodness, Truth, Unselfishness

Introduction

Lucas Graffe is a middle-aged scholar and historian. He has long resentment toward his half-brother Clement, attempts to murder him with a baseball bat in a park one night. But quite unintentionally a stranger, Peter Mir, turns up and takes the blow instead.

It is assumed that Peter Mir is dead, and Lucas Graffe, brought to justice, is acquitted of murdering him after convincing a judge that he was only defending himself from a mugger. But Peter Mir claims he was not killed and affected a miraculous recovery and he intervened in Lucas's attempt to murder his brother. What Peter Mir wants from Lucas in repayment for his attack is something quite unexpected. He wants Lucas to acknowledge the truth and also desires to be admitted into Lucas's circle of family and friends. Peter is lonely; he wants a family and the sort of intimate relations he's been denied thus far in life. He also wishes to regain some essential part of his consciousness he believes he lost when he suffered the blow on the head and which he feels only Lucas can help restore.

Peter means both 'world' and 'peace', Peter is the rock on which the Christian church was founded. Peter Mir in the story represents the second enchanter in the novel but he is different from Lucas. Clement is a kind and sensitive actor, who is strongly related to Lucas and devotedly loves Louise. He is loyal to his brother and does not believe that he really wanted to kill him and decides keeping the event as a secret.

Other characters in the novel include Louise Anderson, a widow and her three daughters, beautiful Alethea called Aleph, bookish Sophia – Sefton, and artistic Moria – Moy. The meaning of the names is revealed by Peter as: Truth, Wisdom, and Destiny.

The opposite of kind Louise is her old schoolmate Joan Blackett, a widow, who has a son named Harvey. Harvey injures himself in an accident in Italy. Another character is Bellamy a

religious seeker. He wants to live a good life. He gives up his dog, Anax to Moy and lives in a dilapidated flatlet to prepare him for a life in a monastery.

In the end Peter recovers his memory and remembers that he is a Buddhist.

From Fantasy to the Reality and The Search for Human Goodness

The novel presents variety of characters who; ‘embrace the infinite variety of human beings and their complex pursuit of meaning.’ (Wheeler, 1995, p. 13) The novel is a story of various quests. Murdoch shows a complex picture of the approaches to the quest for good.

Murdoch pointed out: ‘The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality’ (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p. 90) And, ‘true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good’ (ibid, p. 92) She said: ‘For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity’ (Iris Murdoch, 1961, p. 290) and she further claims that, ‘we begin to lose confidence (as structuralists urge us to do) in what is made to seem the simple, old-fashioned, ordinary concept of truth and its related morality’ (Iris Murdoch, 1993, p.194)

But the ‘truth-seeking mind’ (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p.90) has to cling to this ‘old-fashioned’ truth, because it represents a vital link with reality and morality and ultimately leads to Good. (Julie Tomesova, 2011, p. 33) Good also links with truth, as Murdoch affirms, Good; ‘gives light and energy and enables us to know the truth’ (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p. 92).

The concepts of Good and truth are embedded in Murdoch’s philosophy as well as her novels. At the beginning of the novel, characters are not close to good. Lucas the previous centre of their lives disappeared and now he is in solitude and all of them are at a loss about what to rely on. He was the leading figure for them. Even he held some kind of magic power on them. He seems to be different from ordinary persons. Bellamy describes his personality: ‘he is capable of anything. . . . he is the bravest person I know . . . he lives absolutely outside ordinary conventions . . . a sort of counter-saint’ (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.171)

Lucas is described in the novel as a person ‘Beyond good and evil.’ (ibid, p. 172) Other characters don’t realize him as anything more than Murdoch’s ‘false sun’ which cannot lead them to the path of goodness. The ‘false sun’ only dazzles the wondering persons. Lucas is a demonic character like the false sun that holds the other characters in his grip and plays with them threatening power games full of fantasies and illusions. James Wood about such persons says: ‘They do not attend to the reality of other people, but distort other people into false statuary’ (James Wood, 1999, p.184)

Lucas distains people by saying: ‘Human life is a freak phenomenon, soon to be blotted out. That is a consoling thought.’ (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.72) He rejects his friends and their attention and dismisses their anxiety about his disappearance. He wants to be left alone. ‘I do not visit. Only, unfortunately, am sometimes visited’ (ibid)

Lucas bullied Clement as a child, ‘Lucas enjoyed his absolute power over his brother . . . he had soon taught Clement to accept in silence any degree of despotism’. (ibid, p. 81) When he teaches history to Sefton as her tutor it is done in a strict manner. ‘No laughing was to occur, and of course no chat or general or personal remarks before, after, or during the session’. (ibid, p.458)

Other characters do not meet him during the novel. Like Julius in “A Fairly Honourable Defeat” (Ghasemi & Alamdar, 2014). He is manipulative by nature. One of these manipulative efforts is his refusal to acknowledge the truth about the initial attack. He does not want others to know that he violently intended killing his brother. He does not want to lose control of others and their respect. He wanted Clement not to tell the truth about the events and to deny the truth that Peter tries to tell others. He tries to make Peter appear as a poor confused man. But he prizes truth in history, when he teaches Sefton: ‘What brings down dictators, what has liberated Eastern Europe?

Most of all a passionate hunger for truth about their past, and for the justice which truth begets' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p. 274)

He never changes during the novel. As Wheeler writes: '[he] remains a one-dimensional character, clearly an unchanging personification of absolute evil'. (Wheeler, 1995, p.86)

But Murdoch does not punish Lucas for his bad deeds. He along with beautiful Aleph escapes to the U.S. secretly. Wheeler interprets this as follows: 'freedom is central to humanity: she [Murdoch] does not force her character to fit the limits of goodness prescribed by her philosophy'. (ibid, p.38)

Peter in the novel is counter to Lucas, 'opposite ends of morality: Lucas is absolute lack of virtue, while Peter is absolute – if naive and insane – virtue'. (ibid, p.85) Peter is an ambiguous character; he is liked by some and disliked by others. He is not trusted by some of them. When he turns up he is close to good but not generally. For example in spite of his insistence on telling truth, he insists on retribution. He was entirely blinded by revenge. This made him harsh and violent even towards Clement, who tries to be loyal to his brother, 'he seems to feed upon images and fantasies of Lucas's death for sustenance. . . Mir's mind, we gradually realize, is possessed, even obsessed, by death'. (Carla Arnell, 2004, p. 75)

As Murdoch believes, fantasy is the greatest foe of goodness. '[it] is a stronger force than reason'. (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p. 51)

Peter has to make his soul pure and get rid of fantasies so that he can go toward Good. Here there is a strange scene, re-enactment of the initial attack. He recovers his memory and his moral consciousness remembers God and that he is a Buddhist. That is the point of his total rebirth into a good man. After that he does not want revenge and desires reconciliation and peace. As expressed by Peter himself in the novel, 'I had lost my moral consciousness – and have now regained it. I was filled with hatred and desire for revenge'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.306)

He contents himself with a symbolic retribution, a small slit in Lucas's ribs. He tells Lucas: 'I now see that vindictive rages and vengeful intentions are but fantasies, the superficial frothing of the ego. I am now able to overcome these selfish and purely phenomenal manifestations' (ibid)

Now it seems he is determined to help others. He replaces Lucas on his position in the centre of the characters, he gains their trust and begins to make good. Peter gives a grand party in his house. All characters participate in it but Lucas. He touches everybody at the beginning of the party, which Bellamy considers as an act of blessing and tells Clement: 'Accept his blessing. He will do us all good' (ibid, p. 330)

He tries to talk in turns with all the characters, and solve their problems. For example he offers Bellamy to be his secretary and help him in establishing a beneficial organization; he also massages Harvey's injured foot and tries to encourage him from his hopelessness: 'You must work too. You must have courage. Healing is a mysterious business'. (ibid, p. 330)

In the party Doctor Fonsett, a psychiatrist, arrives and he is driven away to his clinic. He leaves all of them confused, with many unanswered questions.

His hostile relationship with Lucas brings something good, 'The violent clash between these two characters leads to the culmination of the other characters' realization of truth'. (Wheeler, 1995, p. 85)

This battle between 'two great rival magicians'(Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.338) , Lucas and Peter, helps others to decide on which side they want to stand, it helps them to realize what is illusive and what is true, and it pushes them to the road leading to Good.

Murdoch claims that: 'A genuine mysteriousness attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good.' (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p. 99). And, Peter Mir is a mysterious character, as Clement says 'Of course we never really knew him'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.445)

Elizabeth Dipple by referring to the idea of the apocalyptic which in her opinion is strong in the novel notes that: 'Peter Mir, during his premetamorphic manifestation as Justice, quotes an image that, as Lucas points out, is used both in Isaiah and Revelation: 'The heavens shall be rolled together – as a scroll –' (ibid, p.253) In the apocalypse, this occurs after the opening of the sixth seal and indicates the end of life in the universe. The two brothers are engaged in a fascinating conversation about Peter's possible existence in an after-death state – in a Bardo (like Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, as cited in Alamdar & Ghasemi, 2013), or the Christian limbo, or Hades' (Maria Antonaccio & William Schweiker, 1996, p.165-66) or as Lucas puts it 'the brain may continue to operate in some twilight way, ticking on like a machine'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.254)

In apocalyptic thinking, men appear from the skies or from nowhere, rather than being violently killed and hence excluded from society. Elizabeth Dipple believes that: 'an apocalyptic arrival can be seen in the person of Peter Mir (or the Green Knight in the medieval poem) as an abrupt and unstoppable inclusion of a concealed person or spirit whose authority is imposed on the world.' (Maria Antonaccio & William Schweiker, 1996, p.166)

Dipple believes Peter's entrance into the Anderson family 'leads to a metaphoric millennium conceived through the idea of metamorphosis.' (Ibid) Apocalyptic being exists of its own free will. As we can see in the novel, Peter says to Bellamy, 'Now I can go straight on through it all'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.254)

As Dipple suggests, as a liminal figure Peter participates in both the worlds but cannot be clearly located. His places fade, and we are left remembering his transfiguration, his magnetism, his total commitment to enacting a metaphorically constructed emblem, trying to make his way in the experiential world.

What he can perceive in people is their moral, spiritual, or allegorical beings. Therefore he loves truth, and therefore loves Aleph; he realizes wisdom and admires Sefton; also he knows who Moy is. As an apocalyptic figure, in order to 'go through it all', '...he, [Peter] goes from death to resurrection and life in the world and back to death. He has begun the new era, and like Christ, the original apocalyptic figure in western culture, he departs, leaving it behind.' (Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, 1996, p.166)

Other characters like Bellamy, Harvey, Louis and her three daughters are not far from their fantasies and unselfishness. They need to be helped. Bellamy is obsessed with giving up the world and entering the monastery. He is the hidden homosexual figure in the novel. He says: 'I want to be a hermit; I want to wall myself up. But of course I'm not worthy. I just can't live an ordinary life, I can't pass the time. I can't organize myself, I don't have ordinary motives any more'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.170)

Like Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers*, Bellamy, too, hurts his friends, and most of all his dog Anax. It becomes impossible for him to come to visit Anderson family; because they take care of Anax and by his coming there Anax will suffer more. Therefore Louise and her daughters lose contact with Bellamy, who used to be their good friend.

He is in contact with the Catholic priest Father Damien, discussing the possibility of his joining a monastery. His letters indicate he romanticizes the life in a religious order. Father Damien warns him: '... your yearning for holiness and giving up the world are still . . . mere expressions of feeling, fancies which give you a thrill'. (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.95)

He seizes anything which could give him help and direction. We can partly compare him with Michael in Murdoch's *The Bell*. He loves Lucas and wants to defend him from Peter: 'I want to stay, to protect you.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.200)

Father Damien at the end loses his faith and Bellamy cannot be helped anymore with the traditional religious structures. His last advice is: 'Remember Eckhart's advice (for which he was deemed a heretic): do not seek for God outside your own soul.' (ibid. p.266)

Damien gives him a practical advice, he urges Bellamy to find a job and start helping people. Bellamy after this reversal becomes severely disappointed and attaches himself to another spiritual figure – Peter Mir. This also brings him in the end disappointment; Because Peter is taken to the clinic and dies there. Now he is alone, without a leader. At this time he understands that he has to find his way himself. It is not possible to achieve his aims by the help of other people or spiritual leaders. He gets rid of his fantasies and breaks his self-imposed isolation. Like Anne, in Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers*, when he ceases to believe fervently in personal God, he comes back to his friends and back to contact with reality. He moves with Emil and takes back his dog Anax. '[Bellamy] realizes his goal of achieving goodness not through separating himself from life, but in involving himself more deeply in the needs of others'. (Wheeler, 1995, p.31)

Then he claims: 'I got a sound upright will . . . I shall get that job helping people.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.472)

And this decision of helping takes place by saving Moy from drowning in the ocean, risking his own life. Bellamy also like Tim in *Nuns And Soldiers* in which he undergoes ordeal by the sea and finds his way. At last he says: 'I'll look after Moy.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.472) It was selfishness that caused harm to others. It is a great danger that: 'any religion or ideology can be degraded by the substitution of the self, usually in some disguise, for the true object of veneration.' (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p. 101)

The character of Bellamy moves from selfish fantasies to much greater involvement in life, and also away from traditional religion. This shows Murdoch's vision of a religion: 'without a personal God . . . but retaining the mystical figure of Christ . . . as a living force within each human soul.' (Iris Murdoch, 1993, p. 419)

Louise is another character in the novel who wants to be alone and in her isolation she seeks comfort in the reminiscence of her dead husband in vain. Even she is unable to tell Clement about her feelings and accept his love for her on the one hand and fears her loneliness on the other. For example her caring about her daughters is praiseworthy, however, as Wheeler comments; she selfishly wants to delay her own being alone. 'this kind of self-serving love is only another destructive fantasy.' (Ann Emily Wheeler, 1995, p.52)

The sudden disappearance of her daughter, Aleph and her leaving with Lucas to America is a strong blow to Louise. She says: 'I can't bear having lost Aleph, I can't bear it, I dream she is with me, I wake up and think she is here, but she isn't and never will be –' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.454)

But this could change Louise and help her to surrender fantasies and feels happy when her daughter Sefton announces her intending to marry Harvey. Another consequence of this event for Louise is that she doesn't want to be alone in the rest of her life. She goes to empty theatre to find Clement because she understands her feeling towards him. Their meeting there is the beginning of their relationship which leads to marriage.

When Louise gets rid of her fears about her future and grants her daughters freedom, she is awarded being with Clement and Harvey with Sefton and staying in the family.

Because of his unfortunate accident in Italy, Harvey does not feel well among his friends, he considers himself as a cripple and just like Bellamy seeks solitude: 'although he longed to see Louise, and to see Aleph, he increasingly lacked the will to go. He was afraid, he was ashamed, he was cripple, he was disabled. He could not bear their all feeling sorry for him . . .' (ibid, P. 60)

Harvey is not able to see anything clearly; he only perceives his own problems. Even though he loves Aleph, he is not able to really deeply connect with her, he feels isolated and unhappy. His

situation gets worse when he has to move out of a comfortable borrowed flat and return to his own tiny flat which is already occupied by his slovenly mother. And right then, when everything is at the worst for him, the most unexpected thing happens. Harvey falls in love with Sefton, showing Murdoch's use of contingency. He tells Sefton: 'I have known you for ages, we were made for each other millions of years ago, I have known you forever – (ibid, p.383)

His love changes him from a self-absorbed young man to a man who is able to perceive the world and the needs of other people. Harvey's inexpressible love brings him closer to Good, because Murdoch says that: 'when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object via the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just.' (Iris Murdoch, 1985, p.103)

And Harvey ultimately becomes more unselfish, one of his first unselfish steps being his agreement with Sefton to look after Moy, which is the same thing that Bellamy promises to do.

One aspect of Christianity is the attitude to sex. Murdoch comments that: 'Christian Western puritanism instinctively envisages as sinful aspects of carnal love which eastern religion has more freely spiritualized.' (Iris Murdoch, 1993, p. 16)

The spiritual aspect of sex in the novel is seen in Harvey and Sefton, as they think of it as the holy and religious one. Sefton wants Harvey to wait because: 'this is holy, we must be worthy of it, tomorrow let us be quiet, and rest, let us be like – in penitence, in prayer.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p. 384)

For Sefton sex resembles sacrament. Harvey says: 'you have made me into an angel', (Ibid. P. 389) and later 'we have been changed into divine beings.' (ibid. p. 390)

It can be concluded that sex is not connected to any moral failure. But the attitude to sex as something morally wrong is expressed by Sefton's younger sister Moy by saying: 'I don't want men and sex and all that roughness and disorder.' (ibid, p. 18)

Moy relates sex to losing innocence.

Sefton in the beginning is affected by her history tutor Lucas. He wants her to become a perfectly devoted historian, he teaches her: 'you must be ascetic . . . avoid remorse and guilt . . . Beware of being involved in the problems of other people . . . Do not marry' (ibid, p. 274)

Then she studied all the time without considering her mother and sisters. When she unimaginably falls in love with Harvey, she becomes aware of the reality of life. At first she struggles against her emotions but at last she comes to real life and accepts his love. She slowly realizes that she cannot follow Lucas's structures, if she wants to have a worthy life.

Moy is altruistic and cares for everybody; people, animals, and even inanimate objects. However, she is never satisfied, although: 'every day she rescued the snail or slug or worm from pavement . . . , the spider from the bath . . . , the tiniest almost invisible creatures who were in some wrong place where they might starve or be crushed' (ibid, p. 109)

She is preoccupied with this question: 'How did she know what little living creatures, and even things, wanted her to do?' This shows her conduct is motivated by caring for others.

In Murdoch's novels there are some characters who although they do not belong to any religion, take up religious rituals. In this novel we see Moy 'used to go to church sometimes' (ibid, p. 10)

Moy has a secret love for Harvey throughout the novel. Her fantasies about being with him in future make for her pain. They distance her from her sisters. She thinks she secretly loves Clement and disrupts her relationship with Clement as well. Sometimes in the novel she is described by other characters as a witch and she has: 'developed a curious power, that of making small objects move simply by looking at them with a certain concentration.' (ibid, pp. 109-110)

Moy may be taken as a little ambiguous figure. It seems she is like Murdoch's 'white magicians'. But she doesn't abuse her power and even is afraid of it. At the end she loses the power,

and realizes that she has to cope with the fact that she cannot save everyone. This cannot have any effect on her being altruistic and modest way of thinking. This is clear from her saying: 'I can't save you, I'm too small, I'm too little' (ibid, p. 462)

Dipple refers to her as 'the rock-, spider-, animal-loving animist'⁶² (Antonaccio and Schweiker, 1996, p.164) and says: 'she as a character recognizes and knows Peter as he does her. On his death and the completion of everyone else's metamorphoses she enters the sea in a pagan baptism among the seals where, like the Green Knight, she fearlessly sees death.' (ibid)

At the end Moy feels that she, like Peter, must leave the world as she has known it, perhaps to go to India where the spiritual life might be more available.

However, not all altruistic figures are always depicted as thoroughly good. Tessa in the novel engages in social work and helps people. She is quite an ambiguous figure, 'an anomaly, a misfit or enigma' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p. 52) loved by some characters and hated by others. Her contact with Doctor Fonsett is an ambiguous deed. At first she wants to show the truth about Peter Mir, and then, Bellamy sees her deed as a betrayal (ibid, p. 351) Thus, like many other aspects of this novel, Tessa's character remains a riddle. She also later undergoes some changes. She realizes that she should not have been so proud and she says, 'I thought that I could – somehow – establish holiness – make a place that is holy – even heal people – bring peace to minds – But I was wrong, I was not worthy, I am not worthy.' (ibid, p. 383)

The elder sister, Aleph's character is ambiguous because we have little information about her. Her name, Alethea means 'truth' as Peter said. (Ibid, P. 193) In spite of being in other aspects virtuous, in contrast with this meaning, she throughout the novel conceals her secret romantic relationship with Lucas. The other characters see her as Beauty from the fairy-tale Beauty and the Beast (ibid, p. 421) or as a beautiful princess threatened by a menacing dragon, (ibid, p. 203) 'She may represent the truth about Peter that Lucas steals and keeps away, just like her.' (Julie Tomesova, 2011, p. 48)

Louise fears that Lucas will destroy her. Aleph considers the state of things as 'right and good', (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.417) and 'only the future can show whether the love she indulges in is a mere fantasy, or if it can become an unselfish and transforming force.' (Julie Tomesova, 2011, p. 48) Murdoch definitely does not dismiss this hope from her outlook, when she claims: 'Our desires, our life-energy or Eros, can be purified through our attention to . . . magnetic Good unescapably active in our lives.' (Iris Murdoch, 1993, p.109)

Clement; another character in the novel cannot understand why he got easily over the fact that Lucas wanted to kill him, why he has not a grudge against him. On the one hand Clement wants to protect his brother, Lucas and on the other likes to get rid of the burden of lies. 'Why had he forgiven Lucas, if that was what he had done? He had been almost magicked into believing that Lucas never intended to kill him at all' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p. 289)

Clement is a good-natured character and Lucas manipulates him to distort the truth. Clement tells Peter: 'Why confuse and upset all those innocent people? Consider them.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.219) Throughout the story he is hesitant to tell the truth about his brother. And also he is hesitating to love Aleph or Louise. He is not even able to tell Louise he fell in love with her years ago when he first saw her. After Lucas's sudden escape to the U.S. and Peter's death, he thinks about the events and about his role. He thinks about Lucas's words: 'I forgive you' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.322) and Peter's statement: 'Look after your brother.' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.358)

He feels humble and humiliated, but tries to accept his state, 'I shall go on blindly and secretly jumbling all these things together and making no sense of them as long as I live. . . . That is being human. A very weird affair' (Iris Murdoch, 1994, p.456)

He remembered his old love for Louise and collects his courage and at last asks her to marry him.

Conclusion

The characters in the end begin to understand the truth about themselves and their place in the contingent and messy world. Arnell observes in the novel ‘a series of mythic journeys out of the shadow-land of selfish fantasy towards the discovery of a greater good beyond the individual self’, (Carla Arnell, 2004, P. 80) which caused: ‘a shift from self-preoccupation to clarified memory, a mental change that helps to precipitate the characters' moral and spiritual renewal’.

Finally, all characters accomplish their quests and getting nearer to their ultimate transcendent goal. This is renewal as the title of the last chapter of the novel is called ‘They Reach the Sea’.

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