

**Littoral Space and Self-Discovery: Stanley Middleton's *Holiday*, Iris Murdoch's *The Sea*,  
*The Sea*, and Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach***

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**ABSTRACT**

The point of departure of this essay is that seaside resort towns and hotels function as in-between, liminal spaces for visitors, while the unknown, boundless, and mysterious sea often acquires a metaphorical meaning as a symbol of monsters, madness, death, desire, and the unconscious. Thus, the liminal space of the seaside serves as an appropriate setting that facilitates self-realization. The three novels selected for study here are set in British seaside towns in the 1960s-1970s, and present their respective protagonists' struggle with their past memories and traumas.

In Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), the newlyweds get a chance of self-understanding, however, they fail at communicating their fears and desires. Ultimately, the seaside remains a symbol of misunderstandings and trauma as well as the dividing line between the times before and after the sexual revolution of the 1960s. By contrast, the protagonists in Stanley Middleton's novel, *Holiday* (1974), and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea*, *The Sea* (1978) achieve self-awareness through either a time-travel that allows for re-living the past or a journey to the unconscious, respectively. Nevertheless, these novels also end on an ambiguous tone, and the question whether real self-understanding has been attained remains open. (EM)

**KEYWORDS:** littoral space, trauma, nostalgia, liminality, self-discovery

Seaside resort towns and particularly beaches and hotels are in-between, liminal spaces.<sup>1</sup> The motif of self-discovery is intimately linked to these unique settings as people have to leave their comfortable existence behind and undergo an unusual, sometimes confusing, sometimes even distressing experience. Consequently, several literary works use the seaside as a setting to explore character development and self-exploration. Particularly in the 1950s, in the post-war period, the British seaside was a popular destination, and continued to remain fashionable during the early 1960s as well. However, due to the accessibility of other, mostly Spanish, tourist destinations via cheap package tours, British seaside towns and resorts started to embark on a journey of decline, which, interestingly enough, made them ideal for lonely ruminations.

With their run-down buildings, deteriorating small hotels, and cheap entertainment facilities, these seaside towns serve as appropriate settings for visitors to reflect and ponder on the joys and miseries of life, thus providing ample material for writers. The three literary works selected for study here all have the 1960s and 1970s as their timeframes, when the gradual devaluation of British seaside resorts commenced. In Stanley Middleton's Booker Prize-winning novel *Holiday* (1974), Edwin Fisher, a middle-aged university professor takes a solitary holiday in the east-coast resort Bealhorpe, the location of his childhood summers, to contemplate his failing marriage and face the trauma of losing his son. In another Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Iris Murdoch focuses on the theme of self-delusion mostly through portraying the retired director, playwright, and actor, Charles Arrowby, who writes a diary in an isolated coastal town on the shore of the North Sea so as to record the process of his self-analysis. In both these novels, the seaside resort and the coastal town show signs of decay since there are fewer tourists visiting, while the number of abandoned houses and decrepit buildings slowly increases. On the other hand, in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (2007), also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the Dorset seaside with its small hotels are not yet spaces of solitude and deterioration, but neither are they places of pleasure. The novella portrays

newlyweds on their honeymoon who both face their fears concerning sexuality on their wedding night, thus the beach becomes a place of alienation and irresolvable misunderstandings. The paper follows a structure dictated by the timeline of the works and the age of their protagonists: McEwan's novella, set in the early 1960s, portrays a young couple who have just finished their university studies and are at the threshold of their adulthood, while *Holiday*, set a decade later, is about a middle-aged man who has to make a crucial decision concerning the rest of his life. *The Sea, The Sea*, which also has the 1970s as its setting, poses the question whether its protagonist is able to find enlightenment and solace at the end of his life.

The unknown, boundless, mysterious sea has often been portrayed in literature as a symbol of monsters, punishment, madness, death, desire, and the unconscious. My chosen works, evoking this imagery, illustrate how the sea, its tidal phases of ebbs and floods set the rhythm for their protagonists' wrestling with their traumas, repressed selves, and hidden desires. The paper argues that the protagonists' self-reflection and self-realization is facilitated by the physical setting and that littoral space is a site of trauma in the three novels.

The significance of the seaside as a location derives from its liminal nature since it is at the borderline between the known world and the unknown; between creation and nothingness; between the world of divinities and that of humans. There has been a surge of interest in studies concerning the sea—Steven Mentz calls them “blue cultural studies” (997), suggesting that “[t]he scholarly benefits of the sea for many fields hinge precisely on its unfamiliarity” (998). In fact, until the eighteenth century the seaside was not seen as a place of pleasure, on the contrary, it was considered as an ominous place full of potential threats to people, some of which were bound to be inescapable. Partly due to the cultural influence of the Bible, particularly the Book of Genesis, people perceived the sea as an “uncharted liquid mass, the image of the infinite and the unimaginable” symbolizing the “unknowable” and the “disorder that preceded civilization” (Corbin 1-2). In several other archaic texts sea creatures were

oftentimes dreaded, and well-known monsters lived or rose from the sea.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that it being a place of danger and threat, the sea also became strongly associated with madness and with what philosopher Friedrich Schelling termed as the unconscious.

From the middle of the eighteenth century, the sea has acquired new dimensions: it has increasingly been looked upon as a source of health, relaxation, and pleasure. This transformation does not mean, however, that the seaside ceased to be threatening: it was precisely this “proximity to the sea as a piece of untamed and challenging nature that constituted some of the new appeal of the seaside” (Kluwick and Richter 8). Early modern literature “exploit[ed] the sea’s symbolic opposition to and inversion of the orderly world of land,” whereas in Romanticism, the sea emerged as “the sublime theatre of crisis and catastrophe” (Mentz 1001). When discussing Caspar David Friedrich’s works, Alain Corbin observes that Friedrich “turns the shore into the scene of metaphysical anguish” as he “places the viewer on the edge of the abyss that everyone carries inside himself” (167). Modern writers associated the stream-of-consciousness style “with a voyage at sea,” whereas in postmodern literature, the “seascape . . . mainly manifests itself as spatial strangeness or otherness” (Puschmann-Nalenz 282).

A landscape carrying all the aforementioned associations of the unconscious mind—including death, the unknown, strangeness, otherness, and the abyss that exists in us—makes the sea and the seaside an ideal location for prompting self-realization. Suddenly faced with a natural, untamed force, mysterious, incomprehensible, and free from the effects of civilization, the characters have a chance to confront their hidden desires and repressed traumas, as well as their past selves as suggested by the close association of the seaside with nostalgia in British literature (Feigel and Harris 9) in general, and by *Holiday* and *The Sea, The Sea* in particular. If these novels call on the therapeutic function of nostalgia, *On Chesil Beach*, especially, points

at the correspondence between sexuality, self-discovery, and the beach—the latter a part of the resort Corbin regards as “an erotic site” (171).

All protagonists in the selected novels are in a transitory phase in their lives since they have been separated from their previous environment in society and are, at present, working towards reintegration. Their self-questioning attitude signifies a threshold, a liminal existence that is characteristic of people who “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 95). These seaside narratives are liminal as they introduce rites of passage, that is, facilitate “a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown” (Nisbet 4), staged within “a limbo-like space often beyond normal social and cultural constraints” offering the protagonists “brief moments of freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities” (Preston-Whyte 350). These spaces provide for “spiritual rebirth, transformation, and recuperation”; however, as transitory places, they are also associated with “anxiety replete with darker images of threat and danger” (350)—the imminent presence of death is most noticeable in Murdoch’s novel and its emphasis on the sea as an uncharted territory with an unfamiliar topography, rife with danger. Being the threshold between nature and culture, land and the sea, the beach is the epitome of littoral liminality as Robert Preston-Whyte claims:

The beach is a place of strong magic. As a material space it is a boundary zone where the hint of celestial forces is whispered by the ebb and flow of tides, a space that is neither land nor sea, a zone of uncertainty that resonates with the sound of everchanging seas, a setting that is, by turns, calm, tranquil, and soothing or agitated, unruly, and frightening. As a cultural space it is a borderland that allows both difference and hybridity while facilitating the tactile tug of land or sea to reveal for many, but not all,

spaces of heightened sensibilities that are temporary, personal, and elusive—in short, liminal spaces. (349)

In all three novels, the liminal qualities of the beach are created through the interaction between characters and the littoral space, itself consisting of two zones: the natural littoral and the cultural littoral. While the former suits Preston-Whyte's description, the latter is often propagated in tourist brochures and is sought by seekers of short-term holidays. Liminality resides in this duality or, as Christoph Singer states, ambiguity, which "creates and supports a field of binary oppositions that are constantly shifting" (29), hence, "[t]he beach is a contradictory and unstable signifier: what it denotes depends on the beholder's position and aims . . . [be that] sensual experience, regeneration, pleasure, sustenance and shelter, but it can also appear as a place of segregation and as a closed border" (Kluwick and Ritter 5). In McEwan's novella, the beach turns into a site of closure and separation rather than a source of pleasure and regeneration, which also coincides with the two protagonists' attempts at self-realization ending in failure.

### **The beach as a dividing line: Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach***

The novella, set in 1962, is an exploration of the dividing line between the remnants of Victorian ideals of sexuality and the Swinging Sixties practice of liberalizing sexual discourse and behavior. Florence Ponting and Edward Mayhew, the protagonists, are at multiple thresholds: they are finishing university and reaching adulthood, which they both associate with a sense of freedom. They are about to begin their marital days, and they live in a period of historic changes in the way British society regards sexuality. As Dominic Head observes, the novella "uses the idea of the seaside as a liminal space to embed, symbolically, its central idea: that one failed wedding night in 1962 can be taken as emblematic of the dividing line between

the sexual liberation of the 1960s and the repression that preceded it” (118). Hence, Chesil Beach in Dorset is, at the same time, a geographical dividing line separating the English Channel from the Fleet Lagoon, and a metaphorical dividing line which “assumes a historical meaning” (Puschmann-Nalenz 287): it is a symbol of the aforementioned historical change as well as the symbol of the protagonists’ first steps toward maturity.

The small seaside hotel, the young couple’s honeymoon site, happens to be a liminal space by nature as well. For the ancient ritual of consummating a marriage to take place, it is in fact crucial to choose a site as unfamiliar as the act itself. As Michel Foucault observes: “[t]he young woman’s deflowering could take place ‘nowhere’ and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers” (5). A hotel next to the seaside, considering the location’s strong associations with desire and sexuality, is indeed an ideal place for such a ritual to occur; however, in this case the much wanted/dreaded sexual initiation fails to materialize, quite likely due to past transgressions, that is, the sexual abuse Florence suffered as a girl when she was underage.

I believe the protagonists’ failure to consummate their marriage is not solely the result of the rigid rules of contemporary society, as contended by the narrator, but rather by Florence’s ambivalence towards her past and Edward’s unwillingness to sympathize and help her open up. Still, the beach is a symbolic space for the protagonists since they both regard the seaside as a potential escape from an awkward situation, their honeymoon dinner, during which they both feel equally uncomfortable under the gaze of unknown waiters. Edward thinks “[t]rudging along the beach would have been better than sitting here”; his state of mind condensed into the author’s short but ever so telling description of the restaurant: “[t]he ceiling, low enough already, appeared nearer to his head, and closing in” (McEwan 14)—Edward’s feelings as well as the spatial constraints foreshadow something unpleasant on such a joyous event. When they

look out of their hotel window, the view is described with sexual undertones: there are phallic images, such as the “swollen stalks,” adjectives that connote sexuality (“dark, thick-veined”; “sensuous”), while the sea’s constant motion of “advance and withdrawal” suggests sexual intercourse:

. . . a way lined by weeds of extravagant size giant cabbages and rhubarbs they looked like, with swollen stalks more than six feet tall, bending under the weight of dark, thick-veined leaves. The garden vegetation rose up, sensuous and tropical in its profusion, an effect heightened by the grey, soft light and a delicate mist drifting in from the sea, whose steady motion of advance and withdrawal made sounds of gentle thunder, then sudden hissing against the pebbles. (6)

Both would rather walk along the beach with its “infinite shingle” (5), examining the different sizes of the pebbles than eating their honeymoon dinner, where they feel awkward and restricted by conventions of how to behave on a honeymoon; “if [Edward] had known how to propose it, or justify it, he might have suggested going out straightaway” (14). Even when alone, “theoretically free to do whatever they wanted,” they continue “eating the dinner they had no appetite for” (15) instead of going out. Hence, the seaside at the beginning of the novella has the potential to turn into a space of freedom and self-discovery. As Kevin Meethan suggests, the beach is “a place of transgression” and “the place where inhibitions can be shed” (70), which, indeed, is the desire of both protagonists. Unfortunately, the characters do not dare to rebel against social conventions, neither do they dare to face their own past. Out of the three works, *On Chesil Beach* is the only one employing an omniscient narrator who provides detailed descriptions of both protagonists’ thoughts and feelings, focusing on their inner lives while carefully dissecting their behavior. Hence, the novel at times is reminiscent of a



psychoanalytic session with the narrator as a psychoanalyst taking notes on two patients. However, the protagonists are less conscious regarding their self-scrutiny, which thus ends in failure.

Edward comes from a family which is in continuous disarray due to the brain damage his mother suffered while Edward was still a little child. The family has created a fantasy world, a fairy tale existence, as if everything were alright. However, this “fantasy could be sustained only if it was not discussed” (McEwan 42). Consequently, Edward learns, from his early childhood on, that problems should be repressed, and when his father finally tells him the reason for his mother’s strange behavior, Edward regards it as “an insult” (42). The term *brain-damaged*, for Edward, has “dissolved intimacy,” and he suddenly feels his separateness from his family: he feels “his own being . . . come to sudden, hard-edged existence” (44), after which he develops “a concealed self, a tight nexus of sensitivity, longing and hard-edged egotism” (46). Nevertheless, the fact that he has some unresolved issues, however deeply buried, can be seen by his occasional brawls outside pubs. In these fights, Edward finds “a thrilling unpredictability” and a new, “spontaneous, decisive self that elude[s] him in the rest of his tranquil existence” (54). Knowing that he is “capable of behaving stupidly, even explosively” (54), Edward cannot trust himself on his wedding night either and feels extreme anxiety, surpassed only by the “visceral dread” (7) experienced with Florence.

In Florence’s case, anxiety is palpable when she admits finding “it an ordeal to be in the street, walking towards a friend from a distance” (12). She only feels decisive in her professional life, devoid of emotions. She knows from the beginning that there is “something profoundly wrong with her” and fears being “exposed” (8) on her wedding night. She is aware of all her physical and emotional reactions throughout the short time span of the actual plot, however, she does not grasp the reasons behind her revulsion. She has a very distant relationship with her mother, who “ha[s] barely ever touched her daughter at all” (34). On the other hand,

Florence feels “a sense of awkward obligation” (34) towards her father, which seems to be connected to the boat trips the two of them made when Florence was “twelve and thirteen” (31). She sometimes finds her father “physically repellent” and “[can] hardly bear the sight of him,” whereas other times she feels “a surge of protective feeling and guilty love” (31), which drives her to “come up behind him . . . entwine her arms around his neck and kiss the top of his head and nuzzle him, liking his clean scent . . . then loathe herself for it later” (32).

The most obvious hints of sexual abuse are given before and during the climax of the story, when Florence and Edward fail at consummating their marriage. While Florence is lying in bed, still waiting for Edward, listening “to the distant waves,” her memory of the past resurfaces, “summoned” by “the smell of the sea” (59). Florence remembers “lying still like this,” her mind “blank,” feeling “in disgrace,” her father “undressing, like Edward now.” She remembers the “closed air” and being “sick many times on the crossing, and of no use to her father as a sailor,” which she believes is “surely . . . the source of her shame” (59). When Edward ejaculates prematurely, Florence is horrified, feels inadequate, and notices desperately that “memories she had long ago decided were not really hers reappear,” “far worse” and “quite beyond her control” (63). She feels “the sea breeze” on her skin, and another memory of being confined on the sea emerges: she feels the “alien milkiness” and “intimate starchy odour,” the “slime from another body . . . with it the stench of a shameful secret locked in musty confinement” (63), which prove to be unbearable for her. Unfortunately, Florence is unable to differentiate between the past and the present, which causes her ultimate rejection of Edward’s advances.

The allusion to the boat trips with her father reveals that Florence’s revulsion and dread are caused by her repressed childhood trauma of sexual abuse. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma can only be defined by “*the structure of its experience . . .*: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who

experiences it,” thus, “[t]o be traumatized is . . . to be possessed by an image or event” (Introduction 4-5, emphasis in the original). The wound caused by trauma, as opposed to the wound of the body—a simple, healable event—is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed* 4). Florence lives “in isolation within herself and, strangely, from herself, never wanting or daring to look back” (McEwan 38), which is indeed symptomatic of trauma survivors.

Only by reconstructing the shocking memory and integrating it into their life stories can trauma victims reclaim their identities, and only by sharing these memories can they re-establish their sense of community (Herman 175). Florence has a chance to reconstruct her memory of abuse after the climax of the story when Edward follows her to the beach, but she misses it. Walking on the beach, which is difficult as it is a pebble beach, is analogous with the difficult psychological task of coming to terms with all the painful memories, which have been hermetically locked away in her unconscious until that point, suddenly coming to the surface: she is at a place, both psychically and mentally, where she does not want to be. When the protagonists confront each other, “the beach . . . embodies their separation and failure to communicate” (Head 118), hence, it fails to offer room for self-discovery and transform into a safe space for Florence to verbalize her traumatic experience. Edward “remain[s] an unreadable, two-dimensional shape against the sea” (McEwan 87), and the two cannot resolve their misunderstanding. The sea with its unfathomable strangeness only emphasizes their distance, their lack of understanding of both their own selves and each other.

After their break-up, the narrator describes Edward’s future years, up until he is in his sixties, indicating how insignificant and empty his life has become after losing Florence. Quite tellingly, the novella ends with the image of Florence “hurry[ing] along the shore, the sound of her difficult progress lost to the breaking of small waves until she was a blurred, receding point

against the immense straight road of shingle gleaming in the pallid light” (94)—an image that haunts Edward all his life. Even though Florence and Edward had a chance of introspection, in the end self-discovery eludes them. Florence cannot face nor verbalize her trauma, whereas Edward cannot control his anger and frustration: they remain stuck on Chesil Beach, a liminal space, forever.

### **The beach as social space: Stanley Middleton’s *Holiday***

*Holiday* exemplifies Middleton’s characteristic style, namely “his sensitive observations of the minutiae of everyday social interaction and its contribution to individual self-awareness” (Hepworth 84). Indeed, the focus is rather on social interactions and the beach as a social space, and as opposed to McEwan’s work, *Holiday* depicts an English seaside where “towns have become like a melancholy but intoxicating Venice of the national vernacular” (Bracewell 36), that is, a place strongly associated with nostalgia. Moreover, as Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Ritter point out, “[t]he beach is often represented as a contact zone where incongruent social elements meet and mix. To a degree, social distinctions are suspended” (9). The seaside resort Bealhorpe at the Lincolnshire coast and the beach with its mixture of social classes are a particularly ideal location to increase the main character’s, Edwin Fisher’s self-awareness, as they conjure up images of his past and deceased relatives, while also facilitating his re-evaluation of his life and his crumbling marriage.

As opposed to Florence and Edward in *On Chesil Beach*, Fisher is completely aware of all his feelings, memories, and past experiences, and as the novel is mostly narrated through free indirect discourse, the reader can follow Fisher’s thought-processes and the different stages of his self-understanding. One of the recurring themes of the novel directly related to his journey of self-discovery is the father-son relationship. As a child, Fisher used to be constantly embarrassed by his father’s behavior, whereas as an adult, he often notices that he

unconsciously behaves like he did. In addition, Fisher has lost his son, still a little child, which has also contributed to the deterioration of his relationship with his wife. At the very beginning of the novel, these traumas and the portrayal of the seaside as the place of Edwin Fisher's past and childhood are established:

Nothing for him here but . . . people . . . behind gaudy wind-breaks, lying stripped and red, oiled in the sunshine. He'd . . . paddle ludicrously as his father had done [who had] kept his trilby hat on, preserved his respectability by attracting ridicule. . . . Arthur Fisher had noticed nothing untoward in his behaviour, because there was nothing except in the mind of his jumping-jack son.

. . . Here sprawled a man who'd left his wife, . . . who had thus entitled himself to histrionics, to an emotional extravaganza, but whose person had decided to perform it again through his father's antics. (12, ellipses in the original)

As this extract suggests, Fisher is extremely self-conscious and is ready to re-evaluate his earlier views of his father. His nostalgia towards a past, which coincides with the golden age of the British seaside, surprises even himself. He contemplates what kind of people come "to these places" on holiday, "now that the package deals to Ibiza or Tangiers [are] so cheap (15)"; and at first he grasps why he has chosen to escape to this dreadful location where he so clearly "do[es] not want to be" (12). As Michael Bracewell notes, these seaside resorts, with their "faded grandeur abutting seafront dereliction, accompanied by the atonal electronics of unplayed arcade games . . . make eloquent a mass of contradictions, and in their every detail you can glimpse an earlier age" (36), all of which allows for a sense of nostalgia for something lost, which seems to be the underlying reason for Fisher's spontaneous vacation.

Fisher's reassessment of his father is aided by the in-betweenness of the location, both spatially and timewise. By returning to the place of his childhood vacations, he travels both geographically and in time, to a place which partly exists only in his memories. In addition, he is at a threshold: he has to leave the resort either as a divorcee or as a husband who is willing to try to mend his marriage. By going on holiday, Fisher has found a way to escape the problems of the present and has managed to buy some time for himself to remain in this ambiguous, uncertain, transitory zone, which also allows him to revisit his past and re-evaluate his ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and embarrassment concerning his childhood and his relationship with his father. As Alexandra Harris proposes, "[t]he traditional seaside holiday is an elaborate sequence of rituals which, likewise, ensure the tidiness of things beneath the buzz of 'letting go'" (227). Indeed, Fisher adheres to the same rituals: he visits the church, even though he is not religious; buys a newspaper, as "[h]is father ha[d] always taken him out for a trot on the promenade" with "a newspaper" which he handed to his son, an act Edwin disliked. Nevertheless, as an adult, Fisher now buys the same paper, *The Times*, and surprises himself by "making conversation with the stall-keeper in his father's manner, friendly, hectoring, patronising" (Middleton 21).

However, his attempt to imitate his father evokes other feelings and thoughts Fisher has been avoiding until now. The promenade this time is "empty," and he has "nothing to say or nobody to say it to" (22). He has to confront the uncomfortable and painful truth that he "lack[s] a son to race alongside him, to know the difference between a holiday father and a workaday, to admire, to be the recipient of convictions that would have evaporated with the day's light. His son ha[s] died" (22). During his holiday, he remembers the previous weeks of his son's gradually worsening condition leading to his eventual hospitalization, the way his wife tried to cope with the situation, and the day of his son's death, probably for the first time since it happened. It is strongly implied that the loss has remained undiscussed. His nostalgia towards

his own childhood and his relationship with his father in fact work as catalysts for Fisher to finally start to verbalize his traumatic experience and integrate it into his own narrative, aiding the acceptance of his son's death and its consequences.

Besides assessing other father-son relationships throughout the novel, Fisher also encounters several women, both single and married, which helps him redefine his relationship with his wife. He feels nostalgic while remembering walking along the same paths as a boy, hoping "to meet those admired girls from the beach" (39). Then, he immediately contrasts his past with his present situation, without his wife. Even though all the sexual connotations of the seaside are evoked in the novel, and Fisher flirts with women both on the beach and in the resort town, these encounters prompt him to ponder crucial moments in his relationship with Meg, his wife, and consider all the signs he might have noticed so that he could act differently. He recognizes the women he flirts with are inferior to Meg as they are, after all, either ordinary young girls looking for fun or good marriage opportunities, or housewives chasing after some romance missing from their lives. In either case, they lack Meg's beauty and intellect. Through presenting the beach and the resort as social spaces ideal for various social classes to mix in, and even shed their inhibitions, the contrast between them and Fisher, a university professor, is striking. He considerably differs from ordinary holidaymakers, hence, he ends up feeling an outsider. Ultimately, Fisher's encounters with women remain unsatisfactory despite the initial sense of thrill. He cannot establish a sense of camaraderie with other men in the resort or at the pub, either.

In addition, he cannot but notice how the place has started to lose its previous glamour. He visits the local amusement park, which seems "languid," and realizes that there is "[n]o life [t]here, either" (79). He tries the Big Dipper, something his father never let him do, but "alone, in middle-age" (80), it is a disappointment. He often feels "lounged, bored" (119), missing what some decades ago made these seaside holidays memorable: a family. At the end of the week,

he describes this spontaneous sojourn as “[i]nconsequential” and “[h]aphazard” (166), noting that he has not even reached a conclusion about his marriage. Still, what has changed is his appreciation of his father, and, indirectly, of his wife:

That man he’d disliked, as an adolescent, who’d left him money, who worked and joked ha[s] now been elevated into a totem. Visit Dad’s town and all will be right. Put bluntly like that he could laugh the notion away, but when one staggered one neither saw nor spoke with honesty. And this man is now become god. His father, Alfred, moustache and riddling questions, squeaky voice, certainty of right and wrong, presided over this week-long rite, the recapture of the bride. (167)

The ending of the novel remains ambiguous, however, the chance of a peaceful reconciliation is there. Fisher’s decision to travel to the seaside, prompted by the desire to escape and nostalgia, helps him accept the trauma of losing his child and revisit buried feelings towards his wife. Nostalgia, its association with the general decline of the British seaside, and his encounters with the inconsequential women also make him re-evaluate his present. The time Fisher spends at the seaside is richer in reflection and self-examination than that in *On Chesil Beach*, perhaps owing to Fisher’s more introspective nature and his aim to “try to make sense . . . of his own personality” (24). Nevertheless, the most comprehensive transformation prompted by littoral spaces is found in Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea*.

### **The sea as a metaphor of the unconscious: Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea***

*The Sea, The Sea* also centers on the protagonist’s inner life made immediate through the first-person narration technique employed in the novel. Using a personal tone, the main character, Charles Arrowby recounts his own story, which provides for an unreliable narrator.



Still, as Wendy Vaizey observes, although he “is self-obsessed, selfish and thoughtless, [he is] . . . not lacking insight or a degree of self-awareness” (193). He narrates his story partly in the present tense, partly in the past; Murdoch uses this narrative strategy to reinforce “Charles’ apparent inability to distinguish the past from the present” (Spear 92). He is not even sure at the beginning whether he is writing an autobiography recalling past events, or a diary, a story of his present life, recounting his self-isolation at Shruff End, the solitary house he has purchased by the sea. However, his solitude does not last long, as different characters from his past emerge, both from his life in the theater—ex-lovers, friends and enemies—and his cousin and first love, Hartley, from his pre-theater life.

The location is described in a most detailed fashion in this novel. The plot “unfold[s] against the backdrop of the liminal seashore landscape” whereby the sea works as an “underlying metaphor” (Vaizey 194). Nature is closely observed by the protagonist and mirrors his inner psyche as Murdoch uses the sea to convey the unconscious of her protagonist. The novel starts with the narrator’s long and extraordinarily detailed description of the sea stressing the sea’s shifting qualities. Vaizey points out that there is “the idea of regression” (193) in Charles’ return to the seaside, as he has chosen the place of his ex-lover’s, Clement’s, childhood to retire to. This suggests that Charles describes the sea to avoid talking about matters he is reluctant to address, most importantly, the death of Clement. He is clearly driven by his nostalgia manifest in his obsession with Hartley. In his case, nostalgia becomes dangerous since it offers only pure escapism without healing. Unlike Fisher, Charles is for a long time unwilling to contemplate the real reason for his escape to the seaside; nevertheless, his depictions of the sea and his house reveal his journey to self-discovery more accurately than his thoughts about his past.

As mentioned before, “the sea, especially in its nocturnal clarity, symbolizes the dark regions of the subconscious” (Corbin 168). Indeed, Charles is particularly attracted to a

dangerous spot, Minn's Cauldron. As he explains: "It affords me a curious pleasure to stand upon this bridge and watch the violent forces which the churning waves, advancing or retreating, generate within the confined space of the rocky hole" (Murdoch 5). As he becomes more overwhelmed in the narrative, his relationship to the place changes:

It gave me a gloomy fatalistic pleasure to observe the waves, as they rushed into that deep and mysteriously smooth round hole, destroy themselves in a boiling fury of opposing waters and frenzied creaming foam. Then when the tide was receding the cauldron became an equally furious sucking whirlpool as the water churned itself into a circling froth in its desperate haste to escape through the narrow outlet under the arch . . . I would never have imagined that I would dislike the sound of the sea, but sometimes, and especially at night, it was a burden to the spirit. (243)

After a while, Charles grows tired of the sea and the continuous fight he has to put up to win over Hartley; or rather, his fight not to remember Clement. He feels trapped and cannot see a way out of his desperate situation. Images of death are oftentimes evoked, weaving their way to the climax of the novel, when Charles falls into the whirlpool and almost dies. For Charles, returning to the seaside is deeply connected to his own unconscious, his silent mourning for Clement, and his own death drive. Nevertheless, not only Charles's dark and negative sentiments are conveyed in descriptions of the sea; for instance, when he feels exhilarated, he perceives the sea as "joyful and the taste of the salt water [is] the taste of hope and joy" (257).

Shruff End also becomes a symbolic space. House, body, and mind are in constant interaction, and the physical structure as well as the mental image of the house shape and constrain the actions of those inhabiting them. As Charles says, "[i]t is called Shruff End. End, yes: it is perched upon a small promontory, not exactly a peninsula, and stands indeed upon the

very rocks themselves. What madman built it?” and adds that the house is “mysteriously damp . . . exposed and isolated” (10). It has a strange structure, with two inner rooms with “no external window . . . lit by an internal window giving onto the adjacent seaward room” (14); these rooms are apt metaphors for the unconscious. Several strange and mysterious events occur in this house which hint at Charles’s preoccupation with the idea of death as well as its repressions. At the end of his pursuit of Hartley, when Charles starts to realize his delusion, he notices that the house “seem[s] to be moving, shaking itself and twitching, jerking and creaking and stretching like a wooden ship” (440). He can hear “the window frames shifting, the bead curtain clicking, the front door rattling,” and “the peculiar regular slapping boom . . . produced by the water racing into Minn’s cauldron and being abruptly forced out again” (440). Charles’s descriptions of the sea and his house are to be read as his coded diary, as manifestations of his hidden self, which cannot be repressed much longer.

As Bran Nicol points out, “Charles is driven by something so deeply rooted in his psyche that it is impossible to know exactly what it is” (137). What stands for his inner monster is an actual, or rather imaginary, sea monster Charles sees at the beginning of the novel, the origins of which he cannot explain in any reassuring way. Interestingly, the same sea monster appears when Charles remembers his fall to Minn’s Cauldron after a friend’s attempt at murdering him. He realizes that “[t]he monstrous sea serpent ha[s] actually been in the cauldron with [him]” (Murdoch 466). Charles must understand the symbolic role of the sea monster; he needs “to descend into the underworld of his own unconscious and confront whatever compels him before emerging into the light” (Nicol 138). His journey by the sea ends when his descent is completed, and instead of sea monsters, Charles, who has been trying to spot seals unsuccessfully so far, finally sees four playful ones, “gulping and gurgling a little, looking up at [him] all the time” (476). Furthermore, in his diary, he eventually manages to write about Clement’s death, which then “haunt[s]” him for days (485).

Overall, Charles starts writing because he feels it “is time to think about [him]self at last” as he has “very little sense of identity” (3). Vaizey contends that by “writing about the sea” he starts “to address his incomplete mourning. The sea has both repressed and released him and is a symbol not only of death, but of rebirth” (202). However, whether his journey has been successful remains ambiguous. The last chapter presents Charles back in London, where he apparently reverts to his former self-destructive lifestyle. He confesses his failure:

I felt too that I might take this opportunity to tie up a few loose ends, only of course loose ends can never be properly tied, one is always producing new ones. Time, like the sea, unties all knots. . . . Human arrangements are nothing but loose ends and hazy reckoning, whatever art may otherwise pretend in order to console us. (Murdoch 477)

The recurrence of the detailed description of the sea as a place of change and metamorphosis at the end of the novel again suggests that the protagonist’s newly found enlightenment may not persist.

In sum, the beach in particular and littoral landscapes in general appear as liminal spaces in all the three literary works discussed. The protagonists occupy in-between places, both spatially, in a geographical sense and psychologically, in their individual lives. The coast functions as “a memorial to the past and a confrontation with an uncertain future” (May 85) in denoting a hybrid temporality of past, present, and future. Indeed, the main characters all have difficulties distinguishing their past from their present since their memories, triggered by the location, constantly interfere with their attempts to enjoy the present. Fisher in *Holiday* notes that “he [is] where he d[oes] not want to be” (12), which is valid, to some extent, for each protagonist.

Trauma and nostalgia, as has been indicated, are central concepts in the three works explored. In *On Chesil Beach*, Florence's trauma is clearly associated with the sea, the smell and sound of which trigger her memories of sexual abuse. In the other two novels, however, the seaside is the place where the protagonists come to terms with their trauma of loss—losing a child in *Holiday* and losing a lover in *The Sea, The Sea*—making the sea a realm connected to regression and imbued with nostalgia.

Littoral space has a slightly different narratological function in each novel. *On Chesil Beach* presents the resort as the site of a failed ritual and an oppressive place of social conventions and decorum: although the beach promises (sexual) freedom and a chance of self-discovery, in the end, it remains a space of separation. In *Holiday*, both the resort and the beach appear as a social space; the beach is depicted as the promenade, where the holiday rituals of different social classes unfold. In *The Sea, The Sea*, the focus shifts from the seaside to the sea itself, which metaphorically represents Charles's unconscious, placing the protagonist's inner journey and self-delusion into the focus the novel.

Finally, the novels show significant differences with regard to the success of self-introspection as conveyed by the narrative strategies used by the authors. McEwan provides all the background information for the reader needed to understand the characters' motivations and actions; as such, the reading experience resembles a psychoanalytical session. This parallel is made even more explicit by direct references to psychoanalysis, a treatment available for "wealthier people," while for the rest, "it was not yet customary to regard oneself in everyday terms as an enigma, as an exercise in narrative history, or a problem waiting to be solved" (McEwan 16). Florence gets closest to comprehending her issues when she wryly remarks at the end of their discussion on the beach: "[p]erhaps I should be psychoanalysed. Perhaps what I really need to do is kill my mother and marry my father" (87), but as long as she considers it a "brave little joke" (87), there is no real chance of lasting change. On the other hand, in *Holiday*

and in *The Sea*, *The Sea*, there are successful steps toward self-discovery. The protagonists are older and more experienced, which is also reflected in the different narrative strategies employed. Furthermore, both strive to understand their own selves and identities. In these two novels, the seaside becomes a place of mourning as well—an evident parallel with declining British coastal towns and seaside resorts. Their isolation and the vastness of the sea help the protagonists to come to terms with their own insignificance and it teaches them to accept what they have no control of. Nevertheless, whether or not the protagonists will continue their old routines after their return to their everyday lives remains an open question. In Fisher's case, there is no guarantee that his marriage will not crumble again, whereas Charles's memories of his experience by the seaside and what he has learnt already seem to be fading. Still, the image of the four playful seals instead of the sea monster spotted previously carries the possibility of new beginnings, or at least a wiser, more content old age.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The place/space distinction here is based on Yi-Fu Tuan's definition, according to which "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one, and yearn for the other" (3).

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