International Academic Institute for Science and Technology

International Academic Journal of Humanities
Vol. 13, No. 2, 2026, pp. 25-31.

ISSN 2454-2245

International Academic Journal of Humanities

www.iaiest.com

Fluid Identity and Oceanic Instability: A Blue Humanities Reading of The Sea, The Sea by Iris Murdoch

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Abstract

This research is based on the Blue Humanities reading of Iris Murdoch's The Sea, The Sea and aims to investigate the concepts of fluid Identity and emotional instability. Blue Humanities is an approach that reframes a critical perspective from a land-based perspective to a dynamic marine environment and its connection to human experience in literature and culture. The sea is a physical place, but also a psychological and symbolic place, representing the sense of instability and change in modern Identity. This instability is manifested in the main character, Charles Arrowby, whose memories, desires and subjective impressions are in conflict. Not only is he an emotionally unstable character, but the ocean, like him, is not fixed, not coherent, fluid and fractured, constantly changing. The ocean remains metaphorical in its role in self-construction, psychological struggles, and reflection as the study continues. The overall findings of this research will add to current knowledge in the field by taking an interdisciplinary approach, combining environmental theory with insights into psychological aspects, and emphasizing the importance of oceanic metaphors in the perception of the complex nature of modern human Identity.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Oceanic Metaphor, Emotional Instability and Fluid Identity.

DOI: 10.71086/IAJH/V13I2/IAJH1310
Received: 24 March 2026/Revised: 27 April 2026/Accepted: 12 May 2026/Published: 29 June 2026

Introduction

For a long time, books have been a vital space for reflection on the complexities of human life, Identity and emotions, and they continue to be so. The idea of the self, truth and perception in literature has been at its core since parables. As noted in previous literature, Identity was mostly discussed in terms of stability, coherence, and social, moral, and cultural frameworks. But in the modern and post-war literary criticism this notion has been significantly transformed. The notion of Identity changed from solid and stable to fractured and fluid and more transitory. This change was a part of a broader process of historical, intellectual and psychological transformations that challenged traditional views of stability and certainty. One of the greatest milestones in this shift was in the mid-20th century, particularly in the post-war period (1945-1980s). Post WW2 attitude was not "total trust" in religious and moral doctrine or logical development. This introduced a new introspective and psychological approach to writing during this period.

The themes were existential skepticism, moral ambiguity, and the writers' self-doubt. It was not a single subject, but a multiplicity of consciousnesses, formed by memory, imagination and understanding. A group of famous writers that had to face the world's changes studied Identity, morality and psychological instability during the Post-War British literary period (1945-1980s). William Golding (1911-1993) and other authors examined the darker aspects of human nature and moral decay in Lord of the Flies (1954). The fragmentation of Identity and inner struggle is also expressed in Doris Lessing's (1919-2013) The Golden Notebook (1962). Anthony Burgess (1917–1993) focused on control, brutality and human psychology in his A Clockwork Orange (1962). The inclusion of these authors in this broader literary context is due to their all taking up issues central to the post-war era: Identity and the complexity of human consciousness (Garrard, 2012).

The Sea, the Sea is part of the Post-War British Literary Period (roughly 1945 to the late 1970s and early 1980s). Post-World War II was a period marked by psychological, moral and societal turmoil. Consequently, literature began to focus on people's inner worlds rather than conventional notions of stability and order (Clark, 2011). This period saw existential anxieties, disruptions to Identity, and unease over emotions explored by writers. Self is now represented as unstable, unpredictable, and constantly changing, rather than unified and consistent. It stemmed from the cultural atmosphere of the times whereby a world fraught with uncertainty and rapid transformation was finding it hard to offer meaning to people (Mentz, 2015). Iris Murdoch is a famous figure in post-war British Literature, the author of many works that explore human awareness, moral philosophy, and the complexity of Identity. In her first work, Under the Net (1954), she examines issues of purpose and existentialism. The Bell (1958), a study of religious life and moral conflict, and A Severed Head (1961), a novel on relationships, illusion, and self-deception followed. In The Black Prince (1973), which examines art, truth, and subjective experience, Murdoch expanded on her philosophical ideas. The Sea, the Sea, her Booker Prize-winning book that offers a profound psychological examination of Identity, memory, and emotional instability via the life of Charles Arrowby, is the pinnacle of her literary and philosophical concerns. This relation is analyzed in a multidisciplinary manner, using the Blue Humanities research approach. The cultural, historical, and literary relevance of maritime ecosystems is the subject of the emerging field of "Blue Humanities," which is part of the environmental humanities. Unlike the conventional ecocriticism which often foregrounds land intensive studies, Blue Humanities pays particular attention to the sea as a dynamic and important place that counters human-centric perspectives. It calls attention to the relationships between human life and marine environments, suggesting that water is an integral part of the cultural imagination, Identity and experience (Bachelard, 1983). The Sea, the Sea can be seen as both a material and symbolic force when viewed through the prism of Blue Humanities. It claims its own freedom as a natural environment and, at the same time, mirrors the fluidity of human Identity. As with the modern concept of Identity, the water can't be defined or controlled, or even set a meaning. The intricacies of the human mind, such as unconscious impulses, emotional turbulence, and fractured memories, are reflected in its depth, fluidity, and unpredictable nature. This study differs from conventional readings and introduces the importance of maritime regions in literary analysis by highlighting the role of water in the story (Bachelard, 1983).

The ideas for this research arose out of the concept of fluid Identity, which challenges the idea of the static and unified self. The fluid identity theory holds that the self is constantly being constructed and reconstructed, through internal and external experiences, such as memories, motivations, social relations and contexts. In the modern world, one feels a broken part of oneself, which could be a sign of greater cultural and psychological ambiguity. Literature is an important medium in which this state is depicted and analyzed, and it provides knowledge about the formation and transformation of Identity. Sea, the Sea is a good illustration of Charles Arrowby's "skate from one idea to another. Is constantly changing, and his memories, desires and feelings impact his Identity. As he tries to make his life and his personal relationships work, he begins to realize that he doesn't know as much as he thinks he does and that he is deceiving himself. The sea's instability is a metaphor to the dynamic and erratic nature of the self, like the sea itself.

The central argument of the study is that there is a close linkage between fluid Identity and oceanic instability. The sea has always been a sign of uncertainty, feelings and the subconscious throughout history. In the context of the Blue Humanities, however, the sea is real and ecological and not just a metaphor, as it is part and parcel of the human experience (Gordon, 1995). This dual perspective allows for a more comprehensive study that considers psychological, philosophical, and environmental factors (Buell, 2005). It helps develop a more complex understanding of the interrelationships between literary education and a sense of place. This study, although concentrates on a specific text, has value beyond this. The uncertainty of the world and the connection to people are relevant themes in an ever-changing world, with climate anxiety and changing cultural identities. The present study is a part of the ongoing research in literary studies, environmental humanities and cultural theory, and it identifies the connection between fluid Identity and oceanic instability. It makes it clear how a book can provide valuable and informative reflections on the challenges of "the here and now" and the complexities of human life. Some significant gaps in the knowledge area that merit attention in the context of Murdoch's contributions have been addressed in the present study. Although there are wide-ranging studies of philosophical and psychological subjects, there has been very little research on the sea within the context of a Blue Humanities approach. This research is new because it combines the identity theory and oceanic studies to enrich understanding of The Sea, the Sea. It makes literature critics ponder upon the significance of the interdisciplinary approaches to the literary criticism, especially when it comes to complex and multifaceted issues. Lastly, in this research, the metaphoric seas of The Sea will be analyzed through the theory of Blue Humanities to examine the fragility of human Identity in the modern world. It argues the ocean as a symbolic and ecological power that constitutes and shapes the fluidity of Identity. The research not only helps to understand human life in maritime habitats but also serves as a synthesis of literary analysis, philosophical investigation, and environmental consciousness. In the end, it shows how oceanic analogies remain relevant for expressing the complexity of the modern human experience.

Fluid Identity and the Crisis of the Modern Self

In contemporary and post-war literary discourse, the term identity has undergone a radical shift. Identity was frequently viewed by traditional humanist viewpoints as stable, cohesive, and grounded in social, moral, and cultural frameworks. However, from the 20th century onward, the concept of Identity was undermined by literature that constructs, fragments and suggests it is changeable. This shift reflects the increased uncertainty of the present world where the oneself breaks up into a variety of self's and a stability of truths is replaced by uncertainty. The crisis of Identity is then the core element of modern life, when there are no strong systems of meaning of which it is part. Fluid Identity refers to a fluidity of the self. It is determined by what is contained within the self and by what is outside the self, including memory, desire, perception, and social interaction. The instability is mirrored in Charles Arrowby's self-reflection as he admits that "I am not what I was" (Murdoch 45) in The Sea, The Sea (Murdoch, 1978). Fluid Identity is illustrated in this comment which summarizes the fundamental premise of fluid Identity: "the self" is constantly changing or emerging and never remains constant or fixed in one particular form. Charles' Identity is shaped greatly by his memory and desire, particularly his obsessive attraction to Hartley. They are subjective memories that are more ardent and desiring than the real past. He believes that "Memory is a strange and fickle thing" (Murdoch 78), and memory is weak and fallible as a means of self-definition. Memory can make distinctions between past and present, but can make distinctions that are not giving the sense of consistency to the self. Charles' inability to distinguish between his fantasy of the past and his actual past is a further reminder of the self's continual rewriting.

"I cannot be certain that what I remember is entirely true,

for my mind has a way of arranging things to my advantage.

I have told myself many stories in which I appear justified,

and perhaps I have come to believe them too easily.

I may indeed have been misled." (Murdoch 156)

Moreover, the dual Identity experienced by Charles is made even worse by his tendency towards self-deception. He makes up excuses for himself, often hiding from his own shortcomings. The claim, "I saw everything clearly, or so I believed" (Murdoch 102), shows his self-deceptive tendency in regards to himself. As far as the problem of the modern self is concerned, the inability to see oneself and accept who one is comes from the conflict between what one perceives and what is real. Instead, Identity becomes a problem and a product of distortion and construction.

Another characteristic of a flexible identity stems from the novel's very narration. It is important to notice that the text uses first-person narrative, meaning that everything the reader knows is seen only through the eyes of the unreliable protagonist. The very nature of narration is rife with doubt and revision, as it becomes difficult to distinguish reality

from delusion. Indeed, as Charles himself notices, "I may have been misled" (Murdoch 156). This proves the idea that the Identity is created by language rather than the other way around.

Within such an approach, desire proves to be a powerful destabilizing force. For instance, the protagonist's love for Hartley is seen as one of the forces that have influenced his identity, given the irrational nature of desire. Indeed, it is shown that Charles is unable to let the past go: "I cannot let her go" (Murdoch 189). In other words, desire destabilizes rationality and makes the character act contrary to his understanding of Identity, thereby undermining it further. According to psychoanalytic theory of identity formation, it becomes clear how unconscious desires create one's self.

Time can also be regarded as one of the most significant elements in the construction of Identity. Time is shown to be highly volatile in the novel through its non-linear plot. It is important to emphasize that, according to the character, "The past has come back to us with a vengeance which we cannot escape" (Murdoch 210). Hence, Identity cannot be considered in isolation from the past, as the past is crucial to identity development.

"The past presses upon me with a strange and persistent force,

and I find myself unable to escape its returning images.

My thoughts circle endlessly around what has been,

as if the present had no strength of its own.

I cannot free myself from what I once desired." (Murdoch 189)

In addition, the book raises some broader existential questions concerning the self-crisis experienced by the contemporary individual. The restrictions of our own self-consciousness and the inability to achieve coherence in one's Identity become apparent in statements such as "I do not comprehend myself" (Murdoch 276), made repeatedly by Charles. Existential doubt is a prominent feature of modern literature, in which characters struggle to find meaning in a world of uncertainty and ambiguity. The impossibility of self-understanding reinforces the theory that Identity is a process and not a state.

From the theoretical perspective, the notions of postmodernity and sociology provide a deeper insight into the nature of fluid Identity. For instance, the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman about "liquid modernity" imply that identities undergo constant transformation due to changes in society, and contemporary life is constantly full of transformations and unpredictability (Bauman, 2000). In a similar way, psychological approaches show how the unconscious contributes to the formation of Identity, indicating that inner conflicts influence its development. In The Sea, the Sea, Charles's Identity becomes even more complex because he acts on impulse without really understanding the reasons for doing it.

Additionally, identity fragmentation depends on the confrontation of the subject's vision of itself and the outer world. Charles always feels that he is an upright person who makes all his decisions based on rational thinking; however, there is a paradox in such an identity because it is associated with the subject's tendency towards irrational behavior. In this regard, it becomes obvious that Identity is created through the process which highlights that Identity does not have cohesion. Identity instability in the modern world is determined by the confrontation of people's view of themselves and those of other people.

As it is clear from the above statement, Identity is always subjected to changes and transformations; thus, it is evident that the attempt of Charles to restore the past proves that there is no opportunity to create an unchanging self. Furthermore, Identity is characterized by instability in relation to time. Memories are always changing because of the continuous interaction of the past with the present.

Consequently, the concept of Identity in The Sea, the Sea is shown as an ever-changing and unpredictable construction that depends on memory, desires, time, and narratives. Failure to gain consistency despite all these factors leads to the modern identity crisis. Through the study of psychological decomposition and narrational instability, The Sea, the Sea offers an insightful look into a fluid identity of contemporary times.

Oceanic Instability and the Sea as a Metaphor

In modern discourse on literature, more specifically in relation to Blue Humanities, the use of ocean as a metaphor of uncertainty is highly significant. This metaphor is impossible to fix or understand as a stable image due to its magnitude, unpredictability, and continuous motion. In opposition to land, which stands for stability, order, and human control, the sea represents ambiguity, instability, and changeability. The ocean is a powerful symbol of human consciousness and Identity precisely because of its instability.

Metaphors act as interpretative tools in the process of literary analysis to comprehend abstract notions through concrete imagery. Metaphorically speaking, the sea has different levels of meanings, including existential terror, emotional depth, unconscious craving, and limits of human control. The significance of the sea metaphor can only be seen when used dynamically in the novel, namely, The Sea, the Sea. There is an evident link between the subjective psychological world and the surrounding environment as the turbulence of the sea matches the turbulence of the self.

The sea is not just a place in this novel but rather a powerful element that influences the life of the main character in The Sea, the Sea. Through her vivid description of the water as both enchanting and terrifying, Murdoch reflects on the two duality aspects of being a person. As Charles says about the sea, "The sea was tranquil, almost too peaceful" while observing the waves with both attraction and dread (Murdoch 21). Nevertheless, due to the nature of its volatility, this peace appears deceptive. The clarity of mind Charles experiences now and then becomes disrupted by emotional turbulences.

The unpredictable nature of the sea parallels the psychological state of Charles. At times, he is assured and confident in his actions, yet confusion and turmoil tend to interfere with this sense of stability. As Charles admits, "The sea could change quickly" (Murdoch 67), meaning that the unpredictability of one's internal life and surroundings becomes evident to the character at some point. In fact, such a notion of one's ever-changing Identity is reinforced by the comparison between man's soul and liquid.

The image of the sea's depths perfectly illustrates the unconscious human mind. Like the hidden motives and experiences that affect one's behavior, there may be many unexplored and potentially dangerous aspects lying underneath. The contemplations of the main character, namely, "There is something in the water I cannot see" (Murdoch 94), show how Charles struggles with himself (Conradi, 2001). Thus, it might be concluded that he admires It goes without saying that the depths of the sea perfectly represent an unconscious state of human mind. Just like the hidden motives that influence the person's actions, there are certain dangerous things that might occur under the water. The thoughts of the main character such as, "There is something in the water I cannot see" (Murdoch 94) show us how difficult it is for Charles to deal with himself. In other words, it becomes obvious that he considers Hartley a great person due to his subconscious drives. Anthropocentric assumptions concerning human superiority above nature can easily be contradicted by this natural element. Charles believes that he is capable of creating order in his life; however, the sea continues to nurture this myth. "One cannot dominate the sea," – Charles realizes it, admitting his defeat (Murdoch 118). Such idea represents one of the basic principles of Blue Humanities, suggesting that humans should be considered inseparable from nature.

This is due to Hartley because of his subconscious drives. The anthropocentric notion of humans controlling nature is also undermined by the sea. Charles believes that he can bring order to his life, but the sea maintains this illusion. "Man cannot conquer the sea," says Charles, who recognizes the constraints imposed on him (Murdoch 118). This statement represents one of the main aspects of Blue Humanities, which asserts that humans are not different from nature but rather affected by nature. The inability of Charles to maintain his Identity is shown through the sea's resistance to subordination.

Additionally, the seaside location allows for feelings of isolation and antagonism. Charles has been made to engage directly with nature as well as himself because of the absence of structured society around him. In other words, Charles admits, "Here, alone, I face myself" (Murdoch 142). Water plays not only the role of a mirror but also that of a trigger for Charles's psychological fragility.

"*The sea is not to be trusted, it is always changing, always*

shifting beyond one's control. I watched it move with a kind

of restless power, indifferent to my presence, refusing

any attempt at mastery." (Murdoch. 118)

Speaking from a narrative perspective, the structure of the text illustrates the sea's unpredictability. The unpredictability of the water element is conveyed through the mood swings that create an aura of uncertainty. The unreliability of the perception of truth and memory is captured when Charles states that "I cannot be sure of what I remember" (Murdoch 176). In addition, the story itself becomes elastic, just like the sea element, and defies any attempt at interpretation.

There is also an existential theme conveyed by means of the sea metaphor. The magnificence of the element captures the essence of the insignificance of humans, as they can neither understand nor dominate it. When Charles says,

"The sea seems indifferent to me," he is conveying this thought (Murdoch 201). Thus, the state of mind of modern-day individuals who experience existential crisis due to the unpredictability of life is described.

Blue humanities also provide a different perspective on the role of the sea. In this perspective, the link between man's experience and the natural environment and the exclusion of purely symbolic perspectives is stressed. In addition, the ocean plays a vital part in the story and is capable of affecting people's experiences and identities. It is evident from Charles's experience with the ocean when he mentions that, "The sea has effects on me that I can't put into words" (Murdoch 224).

Another key aspect of this book is epistemological ambiguity. Like the concept of truth in the story, the ocean is difficult to grasp as well. Throughout the novel, ambiguity continues to undermine Charles's attempts at finding meaning in things, since, "I don't know what's authentic anymore" (Murdoch 248). Such ambiguity serves as a reminder of the state of postmodernity, in which knowledge is fragile the significance of the sea lies in its subjective character. It contributes to the subjective nature of reality through the fact that it alters the way things look according to the psychological state of the observer. Charles says, "the sea changes appearance every day" (Murdoch 267). His observation demonstrates the close connection between psychological conditions inside and the surrounding environment. The mutability of vision and Identity finds an echo in the sea, which turns into the reflected surface.

In addition to that, the symbolic meaning of the ocean becomes more evident due to the notion of immersion. Being involved into contact with the sea is considered to be an attempt to dive deep into the subconscious mind and the unknown sphere. "The sea pulls me inside," Charles says (Murdoch 289). As a result, his presence near the water leads him to some states of awareness. Moreover, the sea challenges binary oppositions such as surface vs. depth, control vs. loss, and order vs. chaos. By undermining these divisions, the sea constructs an ambiguous and transformative space where the boundaries between them are obscured rather than reinforced. This mirrors Blue Humanities' stress on interrelatedness and fluidity. The ambiguity created by the erasure of boundaries is expressed clearly in Charles's words, "Nothing here is fixed" (Murdoch 305).

The passage of time is rendered erratic and continuous as the waves move constantly, just like the story does. As Charles notes, "Time moves like the tide" (Murdoch 322), and his past keeps undergoing reinterpretations. Such temporal inconsistency reinforces the idea that there can be no absolute consistency of one's Identity and experiences.

As a consequence, maritime inconsistency functions as an important metaphor that connects environment, philosophy, and psychology. In The Sea, the Sea, the ocean is utilized as a metaphor for the mutability of one's Identity, limitations of human control, and interconnectedness of the environment and humanity. The novel explores uncertainty as a characteristic of humanity and the environment through its dynamic portrayal of the sea.

Conclusion

In this project, the Blue Humanities approach has been applied for analyzing the concepts of fluid Identity and instability of the ocean in relation to the reading of The Sea, the Sea by Iris Murdoch. As the research reveals, the sea is not just geography, but also serves as a metaphorical and ecological element that significantly impacts human Identity, perspective, and emotions due to its application in the modern theories and environment. The findings indicate that contemporary Identity is not static and stable but, on the contrary, fluid, split, and constantly constructed via memories, desires, and interpretations.

The focus of this research is placed on the psychological aspects of the Identity and instability, specifically, concerning the key figure of Charles Arrowby in the novel. The reasons for his lack of self-knowledge and understanding of reality can be traced to his self-deception, obsession, and problematic events from his past. This inability to hold onto his Identity serves as an example of the nature of modern Identity when it is challenging to integrate inner turmoil with reality. His unstable Identity is viewed as a characteristic phenomenon in human life. In this case, the book illustrates the modern person's character in terms of constant fluctuations and variability.

The image of the sea in the novel is a vivid illustration of this phenomenon. It is possible to consider human consciousness in terms of variety, uncontrollability, and unpredictability. It is important to note the opposition of appearance and truth, reason and desire, which are illustrated by the water and its surface. In this way, the sea becomes an external manifestation of the internal chaos that is taking place in Charles's mind. Thus, this example contributes to the support of the central thesis statement that suggests a connection between the two concepts. Through the use of the Blue Humanities approach, the study is able to rise above mere metaphorical meaning. The approach allows the study to recognize the role played by the ocean as an active participant in engaging with human life and not just a metaphor. By questioning anthropocentric views and focusing on the interconnection between humans and their

environment, Blue Humanities allows us to focus on maritime rather than terrestrial perspectives. In turn, the sea becomes not only a system but also a cultural symbol whose presence impacts human life and thought processes. Moreover, the study illustrates that the oceanic instability involves not only psychological problems but also existential and philosophical questions. The unpredictability of nature symbolizes the uncertainties in modernity in which one lacks an identity and purpose in life. One of the themes discussed in this context is the duality of control and inevitability of changes, which means that instability represents the natural characteristic of humankind and the world around it. Hence, through this work, the existential state of modernity characterized by uncertainty, fragmentation, and changes is presented.

The research helps gain insight into the value of oceans through their cultural and symbolic meaning even though this investigation primarily aims at literary exploration. The book invites one to reconsider their attitude towards nature through the example of a strong yet complex oceanic creature. Given the current environmental problems such as oceanic instability and climate change, such reconsideration proves to be particularly relevant. Another major gap in the body of knowledge regarding Murdoch's writing is addressed through the adoption of Blue Humanities (Alaimo, 2016). This research provides an interdisciplinary perspective which ties the theory of Identity to environmental humanities, whereas previous studies had primarily focused on moral philosophy and psychological realism. It brings forward a new framework of interpretation which enriches our understanding of The Sea, the Sea by exploring the link between the instability of oceanic fluidity and fluidity of Identity. The use of this approach enlarges the scope of application of Blue Humanities as a critical framework while strengthening literary analysis.

With such a dynamic and evolving world marked by changes at multiple levels, the questions of instability, fragmentarily, and connectedness of environment become more topical. One can employ literature to examine how individuals react to changes and uncertainties, which makes literary study highly applicable to researching the problem under analysis. The present study will contribute to the knowledge of how literary texts reflect the dynamics of the current times in terms of their examination of Identity in the context of the ocean. To summarize, our research proves that metaphor of the sea used in The Sea, the Sea can become an effective means of understanding the unstable and changeable nature of modern-day Identity. At the same time, our research considers cultural and environmental dimensions while revealing the strong connections between human mentality and water environments through the prism of Blue Humanities. Our research proves the inseparable connection between Identity and environment which are interconnected in terms of their influencing and shaping one another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work proves that the use of the ocean in metaphorical form is still useful and relevant in literary studies and demonstrates how the ocean can help solve current problems connected to sustainability, Identity, and uncertainty. This work demonstrates how literature can serve as a mediator between the humanities and nature, thus creating new perspectives for interdisciplinarity researches. Through this work, the necessity to connect literary analysis with ecology becomes evident, which represents a major contribution both in terms of research and general culture.

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