

# An Analysis of *The Sea, The Sea* from Nietzsche's Philosophy of *Ubermensch*

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**Abstract:** *The Sea, The Sea* written by Iris Murdoch is a mix of journal and memoir, unfolding from the view of the protagonist Charles. By analyzing *The Sea, The Sea* through close reading, this paper illustrates how Murdoch implicitly expresses her disagreement with the concept of the *ubermensch*. This thesis argues that the essence of Charles's life is to find the meaning of life, in which he makes different attempts to transition from an *ubermensch* life in pursuit of power and control to an ordinary life. And the ending uncovers that *ubermensch* will not lead to a meaningful life. Moreover, Charles' abandonment of *ubermensch* life reflect Murdoch's thoughts about the limitations of Nietzsche's *ubermensch* philosophy and its infeasibility in modern society.

**Keywords:** Iris Murdoch; *The Sea, The Sea*; *ubermensch*

## 1. Introduction

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) is an influential philosopher and novelist in twentieth century and her philosophy is deeply influenced by existentialism. *The Sea, The Sea* is a masterpiece by Iris Murdoch, published in 1978, a novel for which Murdoch won the Booker Prize. It is a mix of journal and memoir that Charles Arrowby, a successful director, decides to retire to the seacoast, claiming that he will learn to be good. But later as more and more people related to him appear, Charles still tries to impact and control those people's lives. Directly or indirectly, such behaviors of Charles lead to a series of disasters before he comes back to London. And we will see how Charles became an *ubermensch* and how this image broke so as to find the meaning of his life.

The concept of the *ubermensch*, also known as the overman is put forward by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* at the end of the 19th century, which embodies Nietzsche's proposition of an ideal and purposeful life. "The sheer poetry in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tinged with philosophical questions, is the stamp of Nietzsche's poetic style of writing giving scope to thought, analysis and interpretation."<sup>[1]</sup> While he himself never defined what he meant by *ubermensch*, many philosophical interpretations have been offered in secondary literature. "The *ubermensch*, one of his most famous ideas, is interpreted here not as a philosophical concept but as a personal symbol of a man in turmoil."<sup>[2]</sup> Nietzsche's philosophy advocates that individuals must liberate themselves from orthodox ideologies through personal strife. The concept of *ubermensch* serves as a pathway for transcendence.

Nietzsche's conception of *ubermensch* is rooted in the assertion that God is dead. In his declaration, "Dead are the Gods: now do we desire the overman to live"<sup>[3](P66)</sup>. He argues that what can truly save people is not the illusory God on the other side, but the *ubermensch* who lives in the real world and surpasses himself. The term "overman" itself suggests that "Man is something to be surpassed"<sup>[3] (P13)</sup>. Nietzsche elevates the *ubermensch* to a higher level than ordinary men. He describes man as a link between animals and the *ubermensch*. The term "man" includes regular individuals and one's past self, a previous state of being inferior. And Nietzsche outlines three stages of spiritual evolution towards the *ubermensch*: the camel carrying societal burdens, the lion rejecting old values for freedom, and the child embodying renewal and the creation of new values. Nietzsche asserts that "the *ubermensch* is the meaning of the earth"<sup>[3](P13)</sup>.

## 2. Charles as An *Urbemensch*

In the memory of Charles, a glimpse into his life can be roughly pictured. Charles grew up in a Christian family. His family seems even more terrible in contrast to his cousin's idyllic and prosperous family. Through continuous efforts, Charles attains great success in his theatrical career. From a poor little boy to a famous director, Charles displays traits akin to *urbemensch*, such as a disregard for Christianity, the surpassing towards his peers and the awkward boy he used to be.

### 2.1 *Disregard for Christianity*

It appears that Charles maintains a strong connection with Christianity, as he is raised by his devout evangelical Christian mother, Marian. However, upon closer analysis of Charles' recollection of his mother and her religious beliefs, it becomes evident that he has a clear disregard for both. Charles holds such a deep aversion to Christianity that one could argue that God is dead in his mind.

With a name like Marian and her unwavering devotion to her faith, Charles' mother can be seen as a living example of Christianity. Throughout his entire childhood and early adolescence, Marian instills strict religious values in him until he lives alone. "My mother disapproved of going anywhere or doing anything, partly because this involved spending money, and partly because of the world vanities"<sup>[4](P31)</sup>. Marian also sees the theater as a corruptive worldly affair that jeopardizes Christian souls. "She believed that the theater was a dwelling place of sin"<sup>[4](P32)</sup>. Not only does she restrict Charles from engaging in theater, the thing he likes, but she also demands that him be industrious.

As we can see from the later story, Charles is diligent. But this is not obedience to his mother Marian, but an action to surpass his former self and the pursuit of a better life. After all, "one can be good without believing in God. That God creates a single, supreme value system for humankind she (Iris Murdoch) finds unacceptable."<sup>[5]</sup> In fact, Charles still goes to theater and watches Shakespearean plays secretly, and Charles deceives his mother by using school work as an excuse to visit Wales with his friend for a month. Even as a little boy, Charles has demonstrated a disregard for Christian morality. Moreover, as an adult, Charles exhibits a complex attitude towards his mother, who symbolizes Christianity in his life. When contrasting Marian with his father and aunt—both of whom are viewed as more beloved figures—this feeling becomes clear.

In their three-person family, Charles perceives his mother, Marian, as being excluded from this close relationship between him and his father. He expresses, "Of course I love my mother too, but she possesses a sternness that my father lacked. She believed in a just God"<sup>[4](P31)</sup>. Charles' love for his mother is diminished by her religious beliefs. Not only does Marian hold a lower place in Charles' heart compared to his father, but also to his aunt, Estelle. She is a non-Christian American woman and the marriage between Uncle Abel and Aunt Estelle liberated Uncle Abel from his religious identity. When Charles realizes this, he describes it as "Aunt Estelle taking him away into the world of light"<sup>[4](P26)</sup>. The phrase "world of light" reveals Charles' desire to escape the influence of Christianity. Even in old age, when Charles reflects on these two women, he mentions, "I stumbled upon a photograph of her (Aunt Estelle). I could not find one of my mother"<sup>[4](P66)</sup>. After all these years, Charles still cherishes a picture of Estelle, but holds no memory of his mother. Charles' indifference and even subtle disgust towards his mother can only be explained by his distaste for Christianity, which he associates with his mother to some extent.

In short, mother Marian's religious beliefs does not influence Charles; rather, they have made him more indifferent to her. And this indifference is enough to see Charles's disregard for Christianity, which is a prominent feature of *urbemensch*.

### 2.2 *Surpassing Himself and others*

Charles lives in poverty until he gets his own job, this poor life appears even bleaker in the face of his aunt's prosperous family. Driven by a strong sense of self-worth, Charles committed himself to being diligent. In the end, he not only surpasses his former self but also those around him, especially his cousin James, who served as an imaginary enemy in Charles's mind.

Charles's childhood was shaped by two different families: his own and his cousin James'. Charles feels inferior to James in various aspects. James not only enjoys affluent living conditions but also excels in personal performance: he knows Latin and Greek, he is good at mathematics and geography, etc. As for Charles, "I had only a little French and less Latin"<sup>[4] (P68)</sup>. And the difference in social status between the families is responsible for the disparity in material conditions. Uncle Abel is a successful barrister,

and Aunt Estelle is a rich heiress, while Charles' parents are just a common clerk and a secretary on a farm.

Such differences are so obvious to a child like little Charles, "who perhaps, like a dog, reads signs which have become invisible and the conventions of the grown-up world."<sup>[4](P25)</sup> He desires a better life and wants to surpass his inferior self and James, Charles says, "I knew that a great fight was coming and I wanted to win it, and win it quickly"<sup>[4](P32)</sup>. Although this fight is only Charles's unilateral effort, it represents his determination to transcend of his past poor life and his past incompetent self. Charles works hard and eventually succeeds in the theater career. In the fight between James and himself, Charles wins the game since, as a director, he is more successful than the general James. In his love life, Charles, is not only surrounded by beauties in London, but meets his first love Hartley. In contrast to James, who has always been single, Charles considers himself a triumph.

When Nietzsche talks about surpassing activities of an *ubermensch*, he also emphasizes that *ubermensch* is a higher type than the ordinary people. And Charles' diligence in his theatrical career, which has helped him surpass himself, continues to assist him in surpassing others. In the world of theatre, a director is naturally endowed with a position higher than others like actors and logistics workers. Director Charles enjoys reputation at home and abroad. His career achievements have garnered the admiration of many young women who willingly offer themselves to him in exchange for assistance from Charles. His prestigious position is enough to elevate him above his peers. Moreover, Charles is not known for being kind in both his career and personal life. The press describes him as a "tyrant".<sup>[4](P3)</sup> His approach to directing involves a dictatorial mindset, viewing actors and actresses as submissive individuals who must obey his every command. Even in the offstage, he is exerting dominance over almost all his acquaintances. As a renowned international director, Charles has surpassed most people in his life.

Charles embodies Nietzsche's concept of the *ubermensch* throughout his life stages, showing indifference to Christianity despite his mother's devout beliefs. Rather than conforming to religious teachings, Charles is driven by a desire to surpass himself and others, as evidenced by his pursuit of achievements in his theater career. This relentless pursuit of self-improvement distinguishes Charles from ordinary individuals. With these experiences and traits, Charles can be reasonably regarded as an *ubermensch* in Nietzsche's way.

### 3. The Collapse of the *Urbemensch* Image

As we mentioned above, Charles surpasses himself and others in his life, and he takes it for granted that everyone else should submit to him. But there are several people and some events contribute to the collapse of the *ubermensch* image on Charles, directly or indirectly getting rid of his control. For example, Hartley, his first lover, they accidentally met in the Shruff End in their middle age; Peregrine, whose conjugal relation is ruined by Charles; Titus, Hartley's adopted son; and James, Charles' cousin.

#### 3.1 *The Frontal Collapse of the Urbemensch Image*

Hartley is an active rebel against the *ubermensch* Charles. Charles stubbornly wants to save her from what he sees as a failed marriage, he believes that Hartley's current husband is inferior to him both physically and financially. Finally, he even put her under house arrest, trying to force her to agree to elope with him. With the assistance of James and others, this unfortunate woman is allowed to return home. She is not quite free, though, since Charles regularly looms near her house and shows that he is eager to take back control of her. Ultimately, it is Hartley's own determination that sets her free from Charles' power. She has repeatedly made it clear to Charles that she does not want to be involved with him, and her life is good, though not as rich as Charles'. Facing constant harassment, Hartley makes the decision to relocate to Australia with her husband. The physical distance between England and Australia prevents Charles' from disparaging her husband and also his will to control from influencing Hartley.

Peregrine contributes to the frontal collapse of the *ubermensch* image as well, directly challenging Charles by pushing him into a deep pit in the sea. This near-death experience diminishes Charles' *ubermensch* image, revealing his vulnerability to mortality and shaking his supremacy, even after being rescued by James. And Peregrine even openly admits, "If you have been discussing who killed Charles or failed to kill Charles, it was me"<sup>[4] (P425)</sup>. Peregrine once again challenges Charles' authority and disrupts his pursuit of power. Charles is unable to comprehend the motive. Peregrine explains, "Why? Because you thought everybody always went on liking you whatever rotten things you did because you

were wonderful wonderful Charles Arrowby”<sup>[4]</sup> (P426). Charles had previously destroyed Peregrine’s marriage by seducing his wife. Despite this, Charles maintains a friendship with Peregrine and continues to exert influence over his life. Over time, Peregrine reaches a breaking point and can no longer tolerate Charles. This murder is further evidence of Charles’ shattered image as an ubermensch.

### 3.2 *The Lateral Collapse of the Ubermensch Image*

In addition to the frontal attack from Hartley and Peregrine, the collapse of Charles’ ubermensch image was indirectly affected by the death of James and Hartley’s adopted son, Titus.

Innocent Titus visits Charles to discover if he is his biological dad. Even after learning the truth, Titus is told to stay with Charles. Unlike others, he doesn’t reject Charles explicitly. Titus is only unsure if Charles truly cares for him or just sees him as a pawn. But glib Charles dispelled Titus’ doubts little by little. In other words, Charles controls Charles in a good way. But Titus just dies, the death of Titus leads Charles to acknowledge his role in the young man’s tragic end: Charles’s willingness to assert mastery over Titus and to maintain a facade of strength keeps him from informing Titus of the dangers of the sea. The guilt he should bear for the death of a young life haunts in his mind. “I went over and over these things in my mind, thinking of what I might have done and what I should have done.”<sup>[4]</sup>(P431) And the death of Titus leaves him contemplating the futility of his will to surpass and control.

Charles is more removed from the ubermensch after James’s death. Charles receives the sad news by letter. “I (Charles) read the letter through twice and a terrible cold quietness fell upon me and I sat like a statue motionless for a long time.” <sup>[4]</sup>(P508) James’s death reminds Charles of their day together in a heartfelt way and makes him feel incredibly lonely. The fleeting joy of being in control pales in comparison to the anguish of losing James. Throughout the night, Charles finds himself stayed outdoors, attuning to the soothing melody of the sea and staring at stars. Though he does not vocalize the solace sought from these stars, his subsequent decision to leave the seacoast Shruff End and back to London says a lot. He never revisits Shruff End again.

Those who are controlled or surpassed have challenged a lot in breaking an image of ubermensch. Many people are affected by Charles, and many things happen, such as Hartley’s move, Peregrine’s revenge and the deaths of Titus and James. Finally, not only the mastery of Charles is destroyed but also the vanity in such a life of ubermensch is recognized.

## 4. Ordinary Life Without Surpassing

Returning to London, Charles lives a simple life in retirement lifestyle. This is in contrast to the ubermensch existence he previously led. A significant change is the absence of striving to surpass others. In London, Charles Arrowby abandons the pursuit of social hierarchy. And it is worth noting that Charles also keeps writing a diary and reflects on his past and present by reading it.

There is no existence of surpassing in Charles’ ordinary life in London. Upon his return to London, Charles is invited several times to take part in plays, but he declines every time. The famous director, who used to be keen to control actors, now choose to silence his phones in order not to be disturbed. Charles slowly drifted away from the career he used to be crazy about. Additionally, Charles naturally puts an end to the competition between himself and James. His enduring ambition to surpass James vanishes. It is only after James passes away that Charles learns of his reputation as a renowned orientalist through letters from scholars. Surprisingly, this news does not evoke any jealousy in Charles, as it might have in the past. Instead, Charles forwards these letters to someone at the British Museum who has an interest in James’ studies. These actions are intended to enhance James’ fame. If Charles were still the ubermensch he once was, he would never have allowed James to surpass him. However, as Charles embarks on a new chapter in his life now, he places little importance on such matters.

To make a supplement, Charles engages in the practice of writing and reading his personal diary, which provides him with valuable insights into his own life. The postscript part of *The Sea, The Sea* consists of Charles’ diaries, which record his ordinary life after his transformation from an ubermensch to a normal man. In his diaries, Charles meticulously records his thoughts and reflections, particularly regarding his feelings for Hartley. He initially thinks Hartley might be faking hatred to hide her love for him, but after careful consideration, he comes to the conclusion, “But perhaps the fundamental bond was not love at all, but guilt?” <sup>[4]</sup> (P533) Despite James suggesting this to him before, Charles refuses to accept James’s warning until he really realizes it himself. Ultimately, he admits that “I fought for a phantom Helen.” <sup>[4]</sup>(P528) To Murdoch, “love is a form of unselfing, illustrating how close attention to another, and

the way they really are, again, takes us out of a narrow focus on the self.”<sup>[6]</sup> He doesn't know about his so-called love until Hartley is really far away. For Charles, writing and reading serve as more than simple activities and they are a means of reflecting on his past life as an ubermensch and gaining valuable lessons.

Throughout the whole story, we can see the process of turning back to the daily life involves subverting the ideas and actions of an ubermensch. Charles has done numerous things that he would normally avoid to do in past, such as refusing to participate in theater work, giving up his social status, being kind to others, taking others' feelings into consideration but not to make use of them to acquire a sense of mastery. These various attempts contribute to a completely different life. It is a new attempt for Charles, who remains committed to the pursuit of life's meaning, while also recognizing the futility and impracticality of the ubermensch image centered on surpassing others.

## 5. Conclusion

Charles appears to live a meaningful life for a short period of time since everything goes as planned and everyone behaves as he wishes. In the isolated world of directors and life by the seaside, Charles is an ubermensch, a master of the earth. But his image of ubermensch at last is broken directly or indirectly by many people. And the death of his cousin James let Charles leaves that hurting place and turns to an ordinary life without surpassing in London. He learns to retrospect from his past life calmly and gains some lessons. And the ubermensch life of Nietzsche is proved to be vanity. With lessons from his failure to find a meaningful life, Charles continues his journey.

Therefore, this thesis argues that Charles's life purpose is to discover the meaning of life. While it is not explicitly stated that Charles has found the true meaning of life, the rejection of the ubermensch lifestyle signifies the progress to reject the ubermensch life, which has been proved to be unreliable and meaningless. Also, Charles' abandonment of ubermensch life reflects Murdoch's view on the impracticality of Nietzsche's philosophy in today's society. The ending of the story suggests Murdoch's disagreement with Nietzsche's ubermensch concept, implying that the true meaning of life is found when we get rid of ubermensch. Though Murdoch's philosophy is shaped by existentialism, she challenges certain aspects of it, such as the concept of ubermensch. Her novels encapsulate profound philosophical ideas, intertwining existentialism with her writing and that's warranting further exploration.

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