

## The Sandcastle

*I. Murdoch*

June 29, 2005

This is an early novel by Murdoch. Thus in plot and execution rather conventional, although not without one or two rather quirky characters. The story is about Bill Mor, a housemaster of a public school trapped in a joyless marriage to a domineering woman, thwarting his one transcendent ambition in life, namely to stand as a Labour MP in a safe district. A young woman, a portrait painter on a commission (the reference to her fee constituting the initial lines of dialogue opening the book), is thrown in his path. Mutual sympathy arises, easily mistaken for love. The character of the middle-aged man, maritally faithful up to now by habit, education and lack of both initiatives and opportunities, which is easily translated into one of principle and conviction, is then thrown into the agonies of taking the plunge. For the faithful man, the breaking up of a marriage being his main matrix of habit, is a momentous decision, because it not only involves the seizure of a new opportunity, but also the destruction of something beyond mending. The mutual attraction is never convincingly portrayed, maybe intentionally so. Murdoch may mean it as a mere sandcastle, built not on solid foundation but on wishful thinking, without any definite plans and structure. Their future together, in spite of, or maybe because of their fervent reassurance of mutual love, remains a vague thought in the nature of a day-dream. Predictably the whole thing is about to sizzle out, only coming to a definite break through the resolute action of the wife. The protagonist realises that his deepest commitments are to his children, maybe his infatuation for the young woman was nothing but a father-daughter one, especially in view of its sentimental as opposed to carnal nature. (Technically the husband has not performed any act of adultery.) One assumes that he will go on becoming a member of parliament and a devoted father.

From a novel by Murdoch you expect something more than conventional melodrama and standard psychological insight. At least some quirky characters and twists of plot or some original philosophical speculations. Of that there is precious little, except some digressions on paintings in general and the act of portrait painting in particular mouthed through the only quirk in the cast - the art-teacher of the school. There are also some 'physically' dramatic scenes, each described in great, if somewhat confusing detail, making very little sense as a whole. The first details the sliding of a car into a river, the second the rescue of the son from a mishapen climbing expedition on top of the school's tower. Lamentably there is little sense of the 50's, which otherwise might have provided the enduring charm of the novel. A natural comparison to Murdoch is Lodge, both taking a rather frivolous attitude towards their own fiction, as well as showing a strong academic bias. Lodge, in spite of his flights of fancy, is a more consistently realistic writer, always concerned about getting the mundane details right; while Murdoch is more prone to write in the manner of a fairy-tale, accounting perhaps for the so called 'magic quality' of her writing, so often attributed to her by critics.

June 30, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*