1-1-1955

Reality or anti-reality: A study in the humanistic novels of Iris Murdoch.

Ruth Lake Heyd

University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/6351

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000 ext. 3208.
REALITY OR ANTI-REALITY:
A STUDY IN THE HUMANISTIC NOVELS
OF IRIS MURDOCH

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES THROUGH THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

BY
RUTH LAKE HEYD, B.A.
ASSUMPTION COLLEGE, 1955
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI Microform EC52531
Copyright 2008 by ProQuest LLC.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 E. Eisenhower Parkway
PO Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
APPROVED:

[Signatures]

93463
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Thesis is to examine Miss Murdoch's concept of reality where human relationships are concerned, and conversely, to show why many of the characters in her novels have a false concept of reality (anti-reality). The anti-reality in this case, is chiefly concerned with an erroneous definition of freedom. Tied in with this imperfect freedom are problems of communication and obsessional involvements. It is the middle-aged characters who become enmeshed in the net of illusion, and we contrast their state with that of the more realistic oldsters and young adults in the novels. Miss Murdoch's use of satire and symbolism to emphasize these illusory states will be discussed.

In Chapter I the dream of freedom without responsibility, as opposed to the author's vision of freedom entailing sacrifice, is analysed. Lack of communication, the impossibility of heroic action, and submission to power figures created by the self-deluded seekers, are other points considered in this first section of this work.

In Chapter II the idea of renunciation, of crushing and reshaping the romantic spirit along painfully realistic lines, is probed. The author's satiric method of exploding comfortable illusions is shown. Finally, the contrast between the groping middle-aged pilgrims and the coldly rational aged characters or the pitiless children, is outlined.

Chapter III restates the central problem of a search for false freedom and the compulsive attachments which the seekers hope will lend value to meaningless lives. Miss Murdoch's solution, although there
are no easy answers, involves selflessness and an other-centred concept of reality.

The Postscript covers an account of the interview with Miss Murdoch last August at Stratford.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Respect for Reality</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) The search for freedom, and the price it exacts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) The impossibility of heroic action.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Obsessional relationships to establish identity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) The role of god-figures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 The Pain of Freedom</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) An act of renunciation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) The saving grace of satire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) The middle years as a pilgrimage.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) The old and the very young - a study in reality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111 Concluding Remarks</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcript - An Interview with Miss Murdock</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

In Miss Murdoch's study *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, her own early expression of the novelist's position and function is set forth in these lines --

The novelist proper is, in his way, a sort of phenomenologist. He always implicitly understood what the philosopher has grasped less clearly, that human reason is not a single unitary gadget, the nature of which could be discovered once for all. The novelist has had his eye fixed on what we do, and not on what we ought to do or must be presumed to do. He has a natural gift, that blessed freedom from rationalism which the academic thinker achieves if at all, by a precarious discipline. He has always been, what the very latest philosophers claim to be, a describer rather than an explainer; and in consequence, he has often anticipated the philosophers' discoveries.1

This statement was Miss Murdoch's attempt to introduce and formalize the problems involved when such a writer as Sartre - philosopher first, reformer second, and creative novelist last - applied the techniques of his academic background and firmly held moral theories to the more fluid and intuitive craft of fiction. She wondered whether Sartre's "typically philosophical self-consciousness" tended to weaken his artistic awareness. This seems to be an equally valid point of inquiry when discussing Iris Murdoch's own novels. Less dogmatic than Sartre, providing less in the way of solutions where man's intellectual loneliness and desire to clothe the nakedness of his existence with a few shreds of purpose (to paraphrase Miss Murdoch) are concerned, she also faces certain barriers as a creative writer. Though no longer within the

---

I Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (New Haven, 1961), pp. IX-X. All future references to this work are from the same edition, and will appear as S.R.R.
Existentialist framework, (Miss Murdoch's own statement in regard to her break with Existentialist thinking appears in my Postscript), Miss Murdoch shares Sartre's tendency to analyse her fictional creations into stillification. Her creations are self-absorbed in their own search for identity, poorly integrated into the social milieu (if this can be termed a flaw), and find communication difficult -- if not impossible. As in the case of Sartre's people, her eccentric English types have a "dream of human companionship, but never the experience ... (they) touch others at the fingertips. The best they can attain is to an intuition of paradise, un drole d'amitie." They think prodigiously, they brood; they examine relationships and situations from every possible angle, but in the modern fashion, rarely solve anything. According to Miss Murdoch, the supreme virtue in Sartre's credo is reflective self-awareness, and she too seems to prize this quality in her own characters. However, this state of awareness eludes the seekers - at least during their middle years - and is achieved by only a handful, at the close of their lives. The eerie intuition and honesty of Miss Murdoch's fictional children, is matched only by that of certain elderly manipulators in one or two novels. All the strength, vitality and selfish activity of youth and old age in her novels contrasts sharply with the aimlessness and self-delusion which typifies the bulk of the characters. We wonder whether the period from adolescence to middle age is pointless? Does anything worthwhile emerge from this time of groping, exploring and unsatisfying inter-personal encounters; has it any meaning? And, as we see these wryly, merciless oldsters taking intense pleasure in exploiting their contemporaries or their juniors, we doubt that they have come through this trial period with

any of the mellow tranquillity usually associated with the "senior citizen". A certain knowledge has been gained but it is a prickly, uncharitable knowledge, that subjects both the critic and the one observed to an equally glaring vision of truth.

A critic writing in the Saturday Review of Literature feels that Miss Murdoch's style gently ridicules the Existentialist code, and its torturous choice-making. He doesn't deny however, that there is a philosophical structure upon which her novels rest.

We all live in the interstices of one another's lives, and we would get a surprise if we could see everything; one never gets to know thoroughly another human being; love is attainable only 'after one has realized the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it.' This is not unlike Sartre's emphasis upon man's aloneness and nescience that nevertheless leave him free consciously to choose his fate.3

Although Sartre and other writers in the Existentialist camp have admittedly influenced both Miss Murdoch's early philosophic position and, indirectly, her creative technique, references to Sartrian views are employed in this paper as only one among several, tools to probe the core-images in Miss Murdoch's work. We then intend, in this paper to investigate, rather than dogmatically prove, certain facts related to her design for social and individual conduct, (whatever schools of philosophy have prompted her to adopt such beliefs) and then to examine the imagery, satire and other devices employed in her novels to project this vision of truth.

In discussing her method, or style, certain key phrases used by George Woodcock, in a review of The Flight From the Enchanter, will be analyzed as one signpost to clarify the vision. They include: "grotes-

3 Harvey C. Webster, "Grasp of Absurdity", The Saturday Review of Literature, xxxvii (July 3, 1954), 15.
querie", "irony", "compassion", "interlocking lives", "obsessional relationships", "feeling for the trapped", and "bewitched".  

Secondly from Miss Murdoch's treatment of children and the aged in such novels as: An Unofficial Rose, The Flight From the Enchanter, and The Sandcastle, we will assess the author's reaction to the conflicts which result when these two groups impinge upon one another's world, or when each attempts to clarify his role in the farce. There appears to be a definite relation between the ruthless self-knowledge exhibited by these characters which bridges the chronological gap. This leads logically to an examination of these important intervening years.

Several main characters, in middle life, who brush against each other without understanding, are less truly themselves during this interim of awkward seeking than the others are in the ugliness of age. They have, as well, lost the clarity of intuition, and the forcefulness which Miss Murdoch's shocking young people display. What Miss Murdoch says about self-sufficiency, and the few characters in her novel who achieve this state, will be investigated. They seem less alive than the middle aged, who admit dissatisfaction.

The people in Miss Murdoch's books lack validity within themselves, and only when they are involved in this welter of abrasive relationships, or in a duel with natural forces do they gain dimension. In The Bell, and other novels, the "strength through contact with nature" image plays a central role. Emotional and creative revitalization and peace are sought through such activities as designing fireworks, watch repairing, growing vegetables in a communal garden, and generally occupying oneself

4 George W. Woodcock, "Fiction Chronicle", Tamarack Review, 1 (Autumn, 1956), 76
with physical tasks. What Miss Murdoch is implying in these man-earth situations is that the Imber Court atmosphere of *The Bell*, for example, may restore the equilibrium of the central figures. Total involvement in projects of this type seems essential for stability.

Finally, Miss Murdoch creates several god-like or "power" figures in her novels, who feel a burdensome sense of responsibility for weaker acquaintances, yet who often substitute cruelty for tenderness in arranging their affairs. Discovering the significance and qualities of these superior beings, in works which bypass "traditional" Christian morality, should also prove interesting.

When I chose this field of inquiry, I had read very few critical reviews, and only two of the Murdoch novels. Yet I was immediately fascinated by the macabre blend of the concrete and the incredible, by the wildly humorous and the grotesquely unhappy, which exist side by side in Miss Murdoch's stories. It was then that an examination of the style, themes and involvement in human confusion upon which all this technical and creative brilliance rests, seemed worthwhile.

Iris Jean Murdoch is the author of numerous scholarly articles, an analysis of Sartre as novelist, and seven novels. The first, *Under the Net*, published in 1954, the latest, *The Unicorn*, appearing this spring, bracket a series of increasingly original and mystifying books. Facts concerning her early background, and academic career may be obtained from such volumes as *Current Biography*, for 1958, and the 1963 edition of *Who's Who*.

To restore my aim, Miss Murdoch's imagery will come under scrutiny; certain re-occurring situations or character-types will be probed, in an effort to co-relate values and attitudes which seem to lie at the very heart of all seven novels. I shall occasionally refer, in the following
chapters, to comments made by Miss Murdoch, during our interview last August. Her remarks substantiated certain critical opinions expressed in the already developed Thesis, but on other points I have retained my original, dissenting views.\(^5\)

In conclusion, I wish to extend warm appreciation to my Thesis director, the Rev. C. P. Crowley C.S.B. for his encouragement and practical assistance. The sound critical advice offered by the Rev. Dr. Temple Kingston and Mr. Eugene McNamara was also most helpful. Mrs. Helen Haberer deserves commendation for a superbly typed manuscript.

---

5 See the Postscript for a detailed account of that interview.
CHAPTER 1
Respect for Reality

The terms "reality" and "anti-reality", as used in the thesis title, that is the concept of freedom versus "illusion", is a reasonable starting point from which to launch an inquiry into the central problems confronting key figures in the Murdoch novels. One core difficulty, met head-on in The Sandcastle, is that of a false definition of freedom. Freedom from "self" and the bondage of longing - not freedom to manipulate natural forces or men - makes the human condition bearable.

In The Sandcastle, Miss Murdoch's most conventional work, the surface situation is that of the rather prosaic triangle: a middle-aged man, suffocated by the simultaneous sense of superiority, and lack of sympathy, on his wife's part, falls gradually in love with a much younger artist. The girl is drawn to him also and there is much talk of starting a fresh life in France. However it is obvious that the lovers will separate.

Bledyward, art instructor at Mor's school (the butt of student humourists, with his annual pedantic lecture, speech impediment, and general eccentricity) evaluates this painful situation objectively. He represents sanity and self-restraint outside a general tangle of emotionalism. He is perhaps more obviously than in any other Murdoch novel, the voice of controlled will, of a strong ethical code with its own unbending rules. Not pleading, but insisting, that Mor accept family responsibilities, he intercepts the schoolmaster one Sunday after chapel. Compelled to "attempt some sort of judgement", Bledyward wades into the personal waters of Mor's ambivalent state with such phrases as:

1
There is such a thing as respect for reality. You are living on dreams now, dreams of happiness, dreams of freedom. But in all this you consider only yourself. You do not truly apprehend the distinct being of either your wife or Miss Carter...(and)...You imagine...that, to live in a state of extremity is necessarily to discover the truth about yourself. What you discover then is violence and emptiness. And of that you make a virtue. But look rather upon the others - and make yourself nothing in your awareness of them...(or, finally)...You do not know even remotely what it would be like to set aside all consideration of your own satisfaction. You think of nothing else. You live in a world of imagined things. But if you were to concern yourself truly with others and lay yourself open to any hurt that might come to you, you would be enriched in a way of which you cannot now even conceive. The gifts of the spirit do not appeal to the imagination.6

Bledyard is so intent upon these dogmatic, solemn outpourings that he loses his stutter. Thus the repetition of the key theme, abnegation of self and awareness of others, lies at the heart of this novel. This is the only road to inner freedom. It forms part of the bedrock of all Miss Murdoch's fiction.7

Bledyard's solution is almost naive in its singleness, and we are tempted to share Mor's irritation and discomfort over such an intrusion. Miss Murdoch cannot resist employing these oracle-philosopher characters in her novels, who reduce complex, highly emotional problems to one cheerless, inevitable, truth. Mor had become depressed by Nan's sarcastic rejection of his plan to enter labour politics, and of all his half-submerged rebelliousness. Nan, in turn, was only jolted out of a smug assurance that she understood Bill perfectly (and could handle all marital crises superbly) when she came face to face with the lovers embracing in her own home. Rain, though more analytical and intuitive than the middle-class Mor, is hampered in her approach to the situation

All future references to this work are from the same edition, and will appear in footnotes as T.S.

7 See the Postscript, p. 40-41, for Miss Murdoch's own definition of freedom as compared to the Existentialist viewpoint.
by the vestiges of a father-fixation, and the sentimental trappings of innocence. All three grope about, either antagonizing, or attempting to console, one another. In Bill's retreat into bitter protective silence, Nan's blundering assertiveness, and Rain's dreamy sidestepping of central issues, Miss Murdoch demonstrates their inability to face and to resolve tensions.

Mor, torn between various versions of his first letter to Rain (following the fiasco with her automobile), establishes a pattern of behaviour throughout the novel. Indecision, and wariness typify his relations with Nan, Rain and his son.

It was not a simple task. There were interesting problems about how to begin, and end it, how much to say, and how exactly to say what was said. Mor had several tries.8

Half-paralysed by his own mental processes, Mor examines all angles of the letter, making a major effort out of an otherwise straight-forward action. Caught in the small deception over the ride in the Riley, Mor is forced to cover his tracks with a cryptic note. But there are certain undertones of which he is only partly aware. The desire for secrecy goes deeper than the whole ridiculous episode, and his feelings for Rain still lie dormant.

A similar scene occurs in A Severed Head when Martin Lynch-Gibbon composes a discreet letter to excuse a sudden irrational attack upon Honor Klein's person. The first draft is Freudian, the second obsequious, the third reasonably honest. Martin chooses the second. Bill Mor came off slightly better by selecting the most direct version. An inability to resolve problems, and lack of perception in recognizing the motives that prompted the original situation, is characteristic of both men.

8 T.S., p. 100
These men are similar in another sense. They are bumbling and obtuse, but scarcely evil - yet they lack an essential awareness of others with whom they are closely involved. Martin praises Georgia's frankness, reasonableness and uncomplicated passion, but has no idea how deeply hurt she has been by the abortion, and their whole affair. Bill worships Rain's fragility and youthful unconventionality, yet is much more concerned with the effects of a potential family break-up upon himself.

Bledyard's comments on the enrichment and emotional freedom which renunciation of self-interest brings, contrast forcefully with the attitude of these two men who are unable to achieve a state of loving where they forget self. Miss Murdoch defines Jean Paul Sartre's use of the word freedom as:

Spiritual discipline, ... it is a purging of the emotions, a setting aside of selfish considerations, a respect for the autonomy of another's creative power, which leads on to a respect for the autonomy of all other men... To be at the peak of one's freedom is clearly, as Sartre uses the phrase, both difficult and morally admirable.9

This is the freedom of which Bledyard speaks, and toward which Martin, Bill, and certain characters in the other novels appear to be working -- or toward which others press them.

James Tayper Pace and Michael Meade of The Bell also speak of spiritual freedom and innocence, an innocence that shields and insulates. James defines the good life as living without any image of oneself. He warns his Imber Court co-religious that the concept and study of human personality is a real danger to obedience. Scornful of the probing, overly scrupulous sinner who examines his sins as unique and complex, Pace advocates total reliance upon His Law. Acts are either enjoined or forbidden according to Scripture; that is the end of the matter. Submer-

9 S.R.R., pp. 67-68.
ging one's preferences, moral prejudices, and very identity, in the unalterable Plan, brings peace. Candor, simplicity, an involuntary bearing of witness (recall Bledyard's involuntary urge to confront Mor), are the substance of James' sermon. Rigidly orthodox, untroubled by doubts, and suspicious of intellectualism, Pace counter-balances the tormented Meade. In his sermon, again on the theme of the good life, Meade takes the opposite approach. He advocates self-knowledge, and a realistic concept of one's capacities to mobilize one's energies when doing God's will.

Rather than rely upon the uncritical force of orthodoxy to avoid evil, Meade suggests that the scriptural "wisdom of serpents" proves as effective as innocence in turning man from moral destruction. For him, the road to salvation lacks Pace's unswerving continuity, taking many individualistic detours. Pace rarely analyses a situation; everything is perfectly clear and permits no exceptions. Meade continually peels away the layers of his own moral difficulties, without making a permanent decision. Pace makes choices effortlessly, while Meade reneges on his vows to lay the ghost of young Nick Fawley, to extend adult compassion to an older Nick, and to give up illicit dreams of Toby Gashe. Inaction results when Michael endlessly re-evaluates his emotional position. James Gindin in his *New Accents and Attitudes*, speaks of the breakdown of personality as seen in Existentialism-centred novels (Gindin places Miss Murdoch in this group). In Miss Murdoch's stories:

> The sensible man must deal with experience concretely whereas the man who fits experience into an abstract essence is made ludicrous or vicious...The characters search for definition, try to reduce experience to the manageable and comprehensible, but none of the definitions, none of the identities, provide any meaningful satisfaction.\(^\text{10}\)

---

\(^{10}\) James Gindin, *New Accents and Attitudes; Postwar British Fiction* (Berkeley, 1962), pp. 231, 226
For example, Jake Donaghue (Under the Net), Michael Meade, Bill Mor, Martin Lynch-Gibbon, and the father-son duo in An Unofficial Rose, seek love—love from the past, love hopefully anticipated for the future, or love currently enjoyed—in an attempt to establish an objective foundation for their own personalities. Although they (e.g. Jake, or Randall Peronett) cling to the illusion that they are self-assertive individualists, with freedom to direct their activities, the men or women with whom they become involved are emotionally stronger. They try to focus upon concrete realities, yet finally build an existence around some dream-illusion which seems permanent. This may be either the passionate relationship Mor hopes to establish with the vital, elemental Rain, or may take the form of religious vocation, as in The Bell. Hugh Belfounder in Under the Net seeks stability in intricate fireworks, (a limited physical occupation), while the lay order at Imber Court tends its feeble market garden. Gindin sums up this restless desire for the understandable, this essential insecurity (that makes the characters doubt the worth of their lives unless merged with some external project) when he states:

Man's interest in structure is, in Miss Murdoch's novels, part of his interest in precision, in defining himself and his world. Almost all the characters in the novels seek some form of definition, some means of coherently explaining what they are. Even the enigmatic hero, Mischa, wants the tangible and the precise. He leaves photographs of scenes important to his childhood with the scholar, Peter, and he also uses photographs, much as a blackmailer does, to keep his hold, his enchantment, over others.11

Photographs are merely one way to capture objective reality, to prevent time from washing away one's past existence.

The image of the sandcastle, erased by lapping waves, or by a rain-storm, is expressive of diminished selfhood. Miss Murdoch's people fear

11 Ibid., pp. 186-87.
a segment of their past may escape, and feel extinguished when this happens. Existence is such a tenuous, elusive quantity in their eyes; they must have the assurance of solid, imperishable relics.

Two inter-related themes seem, then, to emerge in the novels. First: there is this dream of freedom - interpreted by the middle-aged seekers as escape from intolerable psychological pressure or from relationships in which communication has become impossible. Opposed to their escapist illusion, is Miss Murdoch's definition, stressing self-sacrifice and involvement. Second: there is a gradual dissolving of personality, as aimless individuals indulge in mechanical tasks, in an effort to shore up ineffectual, crumbling personalities. Having no vital impetus for action, these anti-heroes find action itself both agonizing and fruitless. This freedom from restraint, which they pursue, will involve new decisions and irrevocable action. Yet they prefer interminable rationalization as an alternative to positive measures.

Again, Gindin states in his chapter headed: "Identity and the Existential", that the intellectual, or quasi-intellectual characters created by Sartre, Camus and by British novelists John Osborne, John Wain or Kingsley Amis, find freedom of action bewildering.

The individual has the freedom to act, but he must act in a highly complex and difficult world, with little assurance about the value or consequence of his action. That he must act when he knows so little is dreadful; that he must act when the effects of his actions are so trivial, yet the action itself so meaningful, is absurd. The heroism of a freely acting individual is severely limited once the dread and the absurdity of the situation is clear. Similarly, most contemporary British writers diminish the heroism of their central characters.

Though heroes, in the work of Iris Murdoch, John Bowen and Amis, are both free and responsible, they are not heroic in the sense of being admirable and effective leaders of society or champions of new causes. Man's situation and his problems, in addition to his own fallible humanity, make heroic action unlikely.12

12 Ibid., p. 235

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Coupled with this action-crippling uncertainty is the disturbing tenuousness of past experience -- as we have previously suggested. At the conclusion of An Unofficial Rose, Hugh Peronett, leaning on the rail of a liner carrying him toward a temporary escape-holiday in India, glories in his mock freedom. He feels lighter, happier than ever before; or so it seems, at that moment.

Yet how did one know? One forgot. What hold had one on the past? The present moment was a little light travelling in darkness.13

Half reassured, half wistful, he reflects that the anguish experienced by Penn, Randall, Ann, and even by himself, during this past summer, would fade mercifully from their consciousness. He calls his own consciousness "a tenuous and dim receptacle" that would soon become extinct. Pushing away this sober notion, Hugh gives himself over to the "now", the "starry night" and the "great erasing sea". As he turns back to the cabin where cosy Mildred waits, he is totally unaware of the new enslavement which his more astute and realistic friend is preparing for him! Poor Hugh, a kindly, muddled ex-civil servant, is easily manipulated by the two women in his widower's life. They are stronger, more cunning, with definite ends in view, while he drifts along -- bewildered by the violence of his re-awakened emotions for Emma.

Mildred and Emma, both unsympathetic personalities, inevitably clash. Mildred mistrusts Emma's scholarship, eccentricity and dark influence, realizing that the occult segments of her nature are a force to be reckoned with. Yet, Mildred's earthiness, native shrewdness, determination and spirit of camaraderie, will permit her to triumph. Emma

13 Iris Murdoch, An Unofficial Rose (London, 1962), p. 348. All future references to this work are from the same edition, and will appear in footnotes as A.U.R.
wields as demonic a power over Randall's destiny as she does over that of his father. She holds the purse strings where Lindsay's future is concerned, thus is in a position to direct the Randall-Lindsay love affair. There is also a hint of Lesbian relations, with the actual Lindsay-Emma intimacy never wholly penetrated. Randall finally separates Lindsay from the older woman, but we suspect that the young girl's mercenary mind will return to visions of the inheritance she lost by fleeing to Rome. We see another Emma-substitute claiming Lindsay's allegiance in the near future. Essentially cold-hearted and shallow, the girl's infatuation for Randall will dwindle when the money runs low.

All the characters in middle life who inhabit An Unofficial Rose, (Ann, Randall, Felix, and Hugh, who may be included because his innocence and uncertainty gives him an affinity with this generation) fail to resolve personal frustrations. They either attempt to escape the mothering influence of out-worn lovers, or to compel lukewarm lovers to respond in equal fashion. Although resentment, misery and twinges of hatred characterize these affairs, the persons involved lack the strength of will to break free, to stand alone in the dignity of solitude.

George Woodcock's phrases "interlocking lives" and "obsessional relationships", previously introduced in the Preface, dovetail neatly with the tortured mood of An Unofficial Rose, and with the emotional dependence of its middle-aged people. A lack of warmth characterizes the entanglements (if we exclude Felix's dog-like devotion, or Mildred's tenacious friendship) and a knowledge of what makes the beloved "tick" is never achieved. Love is an illusion, based partly on mistaken notions of the other's nature, and partly on misapprehensions regarding one's own motives.

Quoting once more from Miss Murdoch's Sartre: Romantic Rationalist,
we learn that in an Existentialist treatment of love - or any interpersonal situation - "there seems to be no middle ground between the insight of the analyst and being completely at a loss." And further, that: "All human communion is impure and opaque, and reflection dissolves it without purifying it. Fruitless and precarious cognition is the alternative to a descent into the meaningless." Miss Murdoch, using Les Chemins de la Liberté and La Nausée as points in fact, states that Sartre's individuals do not experience a "tormenting entanglement of misunderstanding", but merely "bump into each other in an external fashion."14

Some of the above statements are equally valid when outlining the Murdoch method. However, tormenting entanglements do afflict her characters through the very imperfection of communication. Even those who are gifted with psychiatrist-like perception - e.g. Emma, Mildred and the child Miranda, find little joy in their intuitiveness. None are free (not even Emma who is wrapped in the disinterestedness of approaching death and her essential aloofness) from the pain of frustrated hope. Amid forcefulness of personality, there lives a treacherous tenderness which keeps them vulnerable.

In the Murdoch novels the essential problem of communication merges with another theme - the futility of concrete action. What form should activity take, and secondly - what point will be served in making this move, if relations with the people most important to oneself are so nebulous? Hugh pursues Emma, or at least, Emma's shell, throughout the length of the novel without realizing that she no longer responds emotionally to anyone, beyond a wish to meddle and manipulate. Hugh is a

pleasant chap with integrity a bit above the average, yet we marvel at
his lack of perception. Having brooded about Emma since her startling
appearance at the funeral, he eventually gathers enough courage to call
officially at her flat. Even more deeply moved than he expected to be,
he is humbly grateful to be back in her presence after so many years.
Emma's only attitude is one of curiosity, mild disappointment that they
are unable to talk to one another. Admitting his "need" to see her again,
Hugh lightly dismisses Emma's honest assessment of her present state of
mind as "gloom".

Can't you see I'm an old dry object like a stuffed alligator? A
voice comes out, but the thing is hollow really. It's no good
looking for a soul inside me now. 15

He blithely rejects her astute self-analysis, and blunders along in
a welter of illusions and half-formed plans for their future. Eventually,
Hugh and Emma hold this final interview, and she informs him that marriage
is out of the question. A new companion, Jocelyn, is arriving to replace
Lindsay. Hugh claws at her dress - trying to rebuild his splintering
hopes.

It is too late for reality, (she said)...It is better that you
should dream about me. Why spoil your dream? Keep it intact, till
the end. I'm terribly ill-natured really, and not to be lived with
or even near...Hugh stop believing in magic. You are just like poor
Randall after all, who thinks he can conjure up pleasure domes and
caves of ice just by boarding a plane and sending off a few
letters.16

Emma is quite final. She may have wanted him once, and was humili-
ated when he lacked the forcefulness to go away with her then. Now she
is content to bully Jocelyn and drink her gin.

16 Ibid., p. 326.
Ann and Felix are similarly stalemated by misconceptions of one another's personality. Felix is inhibited by a stupidly chivalrous opinion of Ann's loyalty to Randall, while she is half-longing to be swept off into an affair. While Ann verbally thrusts him into Marie-Laure's arms with her pious statements about a repentant Randall for whom she must wait, she secretly hopes Felix will over-ride her objections:

If he had as much as touched her, or if at the end he had simply shouted her down, she felt she must have submitted. If she had only not for that instant tried him with the words of denial everything might have been different. Yet had she not merely and exactly done as she had decided beforehand she would do? And had he not acted as she must have known he would act? It was scarcely a matter of motives. She had no motives. Her whole life had compelled her. They had each of them their destiny.17

In brief, this inability to cut through fallacies, through artificial speeches, gives the aborted action of the characters in An Unofficial Rose (as well as in other Murdoch novels) a preordained quality.

Ann regrets the conventionally noble response each has made to the situation, but lacks the spirit to rectify the error. Hugh does appear stronger, since he rejects Emma's mocking solution to their impasse. Yet it was his mooning courtship that led the woman to propose such an humilitating idea. As Gindin suggests, fictional heroes today are bewildered by free choice, and in An Unofficial Rose, we note that they either make the wrong choice through hypocrisy or cowardice, or allow themselves to be submerged by a more energetic ego.

Obsessional involvements have reduced the muddlers in An Unofficial Rose, as in other Murdoch novels, to impotence. A possessive identification with the loved-loathed object, merges with projections and false images concerning the love object's nature. This theme of enchantment - self-induced enchantment - is a third element in the Murdoch formula.

17 Ibid., p. 333
The seekers are under spells, enthralled by power-figures who give some external direction to random behaviour. In *Flight From the Enchanter* and *A Severed Head* god-figures are a logical creation of wavering searchers. Unable or unwilling to accept responsibility for the darker elements in their natures, these middle-aged wanderers transfer violent emotions to one or two persons who already inspire a fearful respect. These power-images then master their limp creators.

Thus far in the paper, the accent has been placed upon freedom from the restrictions of insatiable selfhood, as opposed to the dream freedom which forces itself, over obstacles, toward physical or emotional goals. The middle-aged characters in the Murdoch novels jog along after this dream, a state wherein the burden of overcoming barriers, (either lack of communication, or external situations which block the road to satisfaction) of choice-making itself, will be suddenly removed. Yet, this is not freedom at all, say both Miss Murdoch and the Existentialist school.¹⁸

Now let us return to the power figures - the second, related, anti-reality - that inhibit action as surely as does the delusion of freedom. To discover how Miss Murdoch uses this aura of illusion as a breeding ground for the power figure, we once again use George Woodcock's selection of key phrases (in that they touch upon obsessional states of mind which impede action). Examine "bewitched" and "grotesquerie" - particularly as they apply to *The Flight From the Enchanter* and *A Severed Head*. Gindin aptly entitled his chapter on Miss Murdoch "Images of Illusion", and opens it by saying:

> Miss Murdoch deals with a different sort of illusion (in T.F.F.T.E.). All the characters are held in a kind of emotional captivity by

¹⁸ See: Robert Olson's *An Introduction to Existentialism* (New York, 1962), p. 511 for a Sartrian analysis of "the anguish of freedom."
another person, or force. The principal agent of enchantment, an ephemeral cosmopolite named Mischa Fox, exercises a spell over a number of the other characters in the novel; yet he feels no responsibility for the spells he exercises and the spells themselves provide no real meaning or satisfaction for the characters caught in them. Emotional enchantment works no better than the weaving of conscious and rational nets, and the characters are eventually forced, by their own natures, to flee enchantment as they must unravel nets. 19

Delusion, as we have stated earlier is at the centre of Miss Murdoch's work, with the various characters subscribing to emotional fictions of various sorts. Rosa, in The Flight From the Enchanter, feels that she must continue the bizarre menage a trois with the Polish brothers to protect and comfort them. In fact, they are far stronger, and use their artificial dependance to enslave her. Although she recoils from the situation, her will is overcome by pity, and later, fear of violence.

However, Mischa Fox, as Gindin points out, is the pivotal figure in this novel, and holds not one, but several people in subjugation. With vast holdings in the publishing field, plus sinister deals brewing on the side, Fox's power is partly based on money and its influence. Yet there is more to it than that. His personality (and how others interpret it) is as enigmatic, and as diffuse as the home he assembles from four old Kensington houses. This is the central source of his control. A description of Fox's mansion, as noted by Rainborough on the night of the party, could serve to describe Fox's nature and activities.

Within the strange palazzo, so rumor said, the walls and ceilings and stairs had been so much altered, improved and removed that very little remained of the original interiors. By now, it was reported, there were no corridors and no continuous stairways. The rooms, which were covered with thick carpets upon which the master of the house was accustomed to walk barefoot, opened directly out of each other like a set of boxes, and the floors were

19 Gindin, op. cit., pp. 178-79
joined at irregular intervals by staircases, often themselves antiques which had been ripped out of other buildings. The central structure, which, it was noticed, had few windows, excited yet wilder speculation.\textsuperscript{20}

The mysterious business ventures and personal relationships with which Fox concerns himself, also creates speculation. It is Peter Saward alone, who has any real insight into Fox's motives. Entrusted with Mischa's childhood photographs - mentioned earlier - he is privileged to share a portion of this strange man's life which has more substance than the activities of his adult years. The others who half-adore, half-resent Fox (Nina, the refugee seamstress, Annette Cockeyne with her undisciplined teen-age infatuation, and Rosa, who almost breaks through the protective barrier) have little knowledge of his personality. Their attachment is fed by delusion and by the air of controlled cruelty which flows from his being, answering some need in their souls. Delicious terror, the feminine penchant for interpreting enigmas, and pride in being chosen by someone of such dynamism, are factors which captivate Mischa's women.

Annette pursues Fox relentlessly at the party, plunges her arm into his fishbowl (later all the fish, symbols of the elusive nature of reality, are destroyed), and is taken on a fantastic ride to the ocean-side. Here she makes the first dramatic, insincere, suicide attempt. Nina, the seamstress, waits in her sombre flat for infrequent visits from Fox, bound by the cord of gratitude. Only Rosa seems, in any way, an equal. She comes so close to success with Fox, that Calvin Blick (or that part of Fox personified by Blick's brand of evil) feels threat-

\textsuperscript{20}Iris Murdoch, \textit{The Flight From the Enchanter} (London, 1956), p. 200. Future references to this work are from the same edition, and will appear in footnotes as \textit{T.F.F.T.E.}
aned. He uses the photograph taken in the Polish brothers' room, to make her leave the villa without settling affairs. We believe that it is of such a woman as Rosa eventually becomes, that Fox speaks when he warns Rainborough of the dangers of consorting with perpetual virgins or perpetual sirens. There is a third type, says the blase Mischa, "a free woman", who is the only sort of person worth struggling with and for. It is in this sort of person that Miss Murdoch sees an element of salvation. The others are victims of self-delusion and self-imposed subjugation, to the god, or power, figures they have created. But these free individuals have strength borne of an uncomfortable confrontation with reality.

In Chapter II, the themes of renunciation, and a final coming to terms with truth, will be examined. Miss Murdoch's use of satiric over-emphasis in describing the love relationships, and the pilgrimage from anti-reality to reality as made by several middle-aged characters, will also be developed.
CHAPTER II

THE PAIN OF FREEDOM

There is a kind of wise woman ... one in whom a destruction, a cataclysm has at some time taken place. All structures have been broken down and there is nothing left but the husk, the earth, the wisdom of the flesh. One can create such a woman sometimes by breaking her ... what must happen first ... is the destruction of the heart. Every woman believes so simply in the heart. A woman's love is not worth anything until it has been cleansed of all romanticism. And that is hardly possible if she can survive the destruction of the heart, and still have the strength to love ...21

This element of destruction, of crushing and remoulding, is strong in Fox's credo - an essential part of the cruel God-symbolism with which Miss Murdoch surrounds him. Rosa, with all illusions destroyed by the situation with the Polish brothers, approaches this supposedly ideal condition which appeals to Fox's imagination. Nina has suffered in an emotional and material sense in her role as an anxious refugee, yet she lacks the sensitivity and insight to achieve this final state. Annette, hopelessly romantic beneath a light veneer of sophistication, is too young and resilient to satisfy his specifications.

In spite of Fox's omniscience and surly charm, "grotesque" is the only suitable adjective to apply to him, and to his relationships. In Flight From the Enchanter, as in The Severed Head, this atmosphere of fantasy and of irrational forces at play, is felt strongly. Submission to these elemental forces seems to be the only effective method of stripping away the layers of hypocrisy and self-deception. The process of disintegration, and reshaping from the splintered pieces, of which Fox speaks, is apparently necessary before the characters can achieve maturity and self-knowledge. Man is submerged in illusions, confident of his rationality and intellectuality; yet Miss Murdoch mocks these fortifications against chaos, revealing their inadequacy. Symbols of

21 T.F.F.T.E., p. 144
nature, or of some blindly powerful antithesis to intellect, are always intruding in the novels.

Gindin illustrates how Miss Murdoch's favourite illusions - "romantic love" (The Sandcastle) "the power of reason" (A Severed Head and The Bell) and "man-made structures" (Under the Net and others) - are continually defeated by the god-figures which she creates.

Like Miss Murdoch's other novels, A Severed Head mocks the spurious kind of rationality man invents for himself... Honour, a severed head, a representation of primal human force without the addition of civilization or rationality, is the id. As Martin loses hold of the complex and superficial network of his comfortable alliances, he is drawn further and further, to the simple and emotional centre of being, to the id. But the id, the strong and irrational quality of the creature, is no solution, no final answer for man.22

In the first four Murdoch novels, Gindin shows how god-figures are pitted against the idea of the "spontaneous, unstructured creature". The god-figure represents man's wily dodging about to achieve "structure and permanence". But the god image is merely flimsy rationalism.

In A Severed Head, both the god-figure, and the idea of the creature are satirized. This creature, or the id, which Miss Murdoch inflates to the status of pseudo-god figure (complete with samurai swords, relentless power and an impossible knowledge of human affairs) blasts our former faith in the creature, from her earlier novels.23

If then, as Gindin suggests, we must reject all of Miss Murdoch's healing, revitalizing, abstractions: (1) return to nature as in The Bell, (2) minute, concrete, physical detail as in the fireworks and watchmaking of Under the Net, and (3) surrender to elemental, primitive

22 Gindin, op. cit., pp. 190, et passim.

23 Ibid.

(See also: pp. 42, 45 of the Postscript, for Miss Murdoch's comments on Calvin Blick and the general purpose of her power-figures).
emotion as symbolized by Honour Klein and other god-personalities, as
imperfect solutions to the meaninglessness of life, what alternative
does the author leave? Having given us these anti-intellectual forces,
Miss Murdoch then appears to destroy their validity through satiric
cover-emphasis. Is there any release for man from the tyranny of the
absurd? Intellectualizing leads to sterility and inaction, but a return
to basic emotions—seems equally useless—just illusions at the other
end of the scale. Perhaps further analysis will uncover a middle ground.
The Existential view of human action falls short of Miss Murdoch's eval-
uation. There is a grotesque element in the selfish, groping movements
toward freedom from illusion, made by her middle-aged characters. Yet,
Mischa Fox's statement about women who gain a primitive strength through
suffering, evokes the Christian viewpoint on sacrifice. Only when we
have renounced everything, even the dream of attainment, are we free to
give, to follow a clear path. To love without self-interest, to accept
loss without bitterness, frees one from the labyrinth. For those who
are too weak to make a voluntarily act of renunciation Miss Murdoch has
created these god-figues (or they are created subconsciously by the
characters, themselves), who will strip them of illusion. Her characters
are prodded along on an unwilling pilgrimage to the terrifying region of
total truth.

If, then, theoretical discussion and primitive action are equally
ineffectual in healing emotional wounds or determining a purposeful
course of action, what recourse is left open to the Murdoch characters?
Few signposts guide these later-day pilgrims to the purgatorial region.

24 See: the Postscript, pp. 41-42, for Miss Murdoch's statement
regarding "a failure to love" and enslavement through obsessive concerns
with self, a core theme in her novels.
Miss Murdoch delights in leaving the reader at a loss as to the outcome of her protagonist's search, and declines to impose comforting, conventional solutions. Jake Donaghue of Under the Net wanders off to develop as a "creative" writer — or perhaps he merely becomes entangled in further abstractions. Michael Meade and Dora Greenfield have equally uncertain futures, although Dora comes close to independent action and a realization of her potential as an individual. Martin Lynch-Gibbon and Honour Klein seem a horrifying combination, yet there is a redemptive note in his surrender to the unattractive, totally realistic enchantress. She points out the futility of self-deception, offering no rationalizations.

Martin's future is unpredictable, as is the future of any character in a Murdoch novel. But he has chosen to act out of motives that may help him and will probably save him from his weaker self. Honour Klein would say the future is unknown, but you can put one foot carefully ahead of the other. With luck, this method could take you where you want to go, wherever that may be, and however strange your method of deciding why you wanted to go there in the first place.  

Bill Mor in The Sandcastle, is left with the rubble of an unsatisfactory marriage and the knowledge that he was too conforming to play his role in Rain's vision. Hugh Peronett of An Unofficial Rose escapes from one forceful woman, only to be sunked into the more realistic ego of a second. Rosa Keepe is also thrown upon her own resources, without Fox's power to provide the contradictory balance — impetus core of her personality. In short, Miss Murdoch either places her pilgrims in a position where they must eventually unite with a stronger identity, thus being cured of illusion by contact with realists, or they are stripped of all

false supports and must painfully move alone along the road to involve-
ment and maturity.

Francis Hope's analysis of the Murdoch novels for *London Magazine*,
stresses the central themes of freedom, (with its inherent difficulties)
and the idea that "no satisfactory points can be made." Only actions
can be completely genuine; talk is time-consuming and escapist, says
Hope of *Under the Net*.26

Hope believes that Miss Murdoch rebels against too much seeking for
explanations, which may be the chief reason why she compels her characters
to reach the final page without having evolved a workable life-pattern or
accepting any of the stock answers. The only solution seems to lie in
freedom from a false estimate of one's own nature, and the resultant ab-
ility to then act with honesty toward oneself and others. Speaking of
deception as a core problem in *The Bell* and in *The Sandcastle*, Hope de-
cides that: "...In the long run, self-deception is not so much immoral
as impossible."27 Or rather, the critic attributes this view to our
novelist.

Mor is rather afraid of Nan, and submerges the growing anger and re-
sentment which her attitude has created. Only through his love for Rain
does he find courage to externalize these undercurrents of hatred. Yet
in the final confrontation, Mor is not entirely frank with Rain either,
and conceals his dream to stand as local candidate because it may com-
plicate the issue. The term "issue" comes through repeatedly in *The

26 Francis Hope, "The Novels of Iris Murdoch", *London Magazine*, 1
(August, 1961), 85.

27 Ibid., p. 86
Sandcastle:

But she (Rain) went on to say that there was no issue. There was after all, no issue...Mor had said in his heart, there must be an issue...It was upon this strength, he knew, that he would have to rely to carry him through to what he must believe to be possible, an issue. 28

Rain with her essentially rational approach, realizes that nothing will come of their relationship. The issues have long ago been resolved. The ties of his marriage - however barren of communication - will ultimately crush Mor's feeble attempts to reshape his life. She accepts the fact of her love for him almost immediately, while he draws back, wanting more time to think, to rationalize. The silent gypsy, who confronts them in the woods during the escapade with the Riley, (and again, when they are on the point of being discovered by Nan) is symbolic of guilt, arising from Mor's deception of his wife, of Rain, and of himself.

The man looked at him silently. He was wearing an old mackintosh which reached well below his knees. From out of the upturned collar, his streaming head, carved by the rain into something more unmistakably Oriental, was turned in Mor's direction. There was no comprehension in his face; but neither was there questioning or any alarm. He looked at Mor as one might look at a momentary obstruction. In that instant it occurred to Mor that the man might be deaf. 29

Whether the gypsy is physically deaf (or whether he has any physical existence beyond the lover's emotional turmoil), he is not deaf to the intellectual dishonesty of the situation. The characters talk to, and at each other incessantly, but truth is evaded. Rain sends Mor with a few coins to appease this symbol of offended truth. When the man ignores this emotional bribe, Mor makes up another soothing lie to lessen her anxiety. The gypsy is a silent reminder of Bledyard's speech about responsibility and redemption through comfortless self-knowledge.

29 Ibid., p. 168.
The monastery bell, dredged up from the lake by Nora and Toby in *The Bell*, serves in a similar capacity. According to the legend, it originally fell from the tower when a medieval nun's vow of chastity was found to be broken, yet she refused to confess. Those who hear its prophetic tolling are the guilt-ridden. Having no way of knowing that the bell which strikes on the eve of the new bell's arrival is far from mythical, Catherine Fawley believes that her phantasy desire for Michael and lack of vocation are being disclosed by supernatural forces. The attributes of the bell (candour and innocence) are outlined in Chapter 9 of *The Bell* by James Tayper Pace during his sermon about bearing witness. "Truth will out" is a crude method of expressing the power supposedly exercised by the water-logged bit of iron. Michael is now forced to re-examine his conflicts; Nick betrays Michael and Toby to Tayper Pace; Catherine's mind breaks beneath its burden of repressed emotion. The gypsy from *The Sandcastle* in his way foreshadows an equally catastrophic chain of circumstances. Nan descends upon the lovers from the Dorset cottage; Donald narrowly avoids death in a tower-climbing venture; Tim Burke makes a complete fool of himself. The point at which these revelations erupt in the two novels, marks the spewing-forth of an accumulation of masquerade and emotional falsity. Whether the bell-gypsy symbol represents a deeper-than-logic return to communication, or primitive justice overwhelming timid rationalizations, the two images set free a shattering torrent of circumstance. The characters in both novels were chained by sterile "talk", and it required a supernatural mechanism to set events in motion again.

Through all this torturous self-examination and theorizing, is woven Miss Murdoch's cool wit. Without these moments of objectivity, when our
author steps outside the net of theory in which she has enclosed her middle-aged characters, breaking free from her own philosophical-political lobbying, the novels would be tracts— not creative fiction. The ridiculous, the macabre, are united in her satiric method.

In a final reference to Woodcock's phrases, an examination of his seemingly disparate terms "compassion" and "irony", may highlight Miss Murdoch's method of presenting situations inside which she first locks her people, then liberates them, with this same satiric key. Mockery is a precise and effective instrument in the novelist's hand, as she pares away the illusory encasement constructed by the characters.

One example of the ironic statement was stressed by James Gindin, as he contrasted the image of the god-figure as it appears in A Severed Head, with god-figures in the previous Murdoch novels.

Recall Belfounder (from Under the Net) with his obsession for precise, mechanical detail, or Mischa Fox with his imprisoned, emasculated fish, or the whole Imber Court way of life, or finally, the deaf, selfish, garrulous Demoyte. These gods prove inadequate to reassure their aimless worshippers, and their half-solutions fail to satisfy the complex nature of man. Thus, sole reliance upon either the ego, (rational shell) or the id, (essential core) leads the characters to disenchantment. After building up these involved symbols and giving them a potential for salvation (or at any rate, they arouse such a hope in other's minds), Miss Murdoch then smashes them with the hammer of ironic overemphasis. Honour Klein comes reasonably close to an ideal Murdoch saviour-figure. She is an Oxford don and a Jewess—both qualities which normally signify powers of intellect and the rational approach—but she simultaneously personifies the dark irrational forces in life. The esoteric ritual of the sword,
the silent struggle with Martin on the basement floor, and her relationship with Palmer, are images of blind emotionalism - they evoke an atmosphere of ageless fatalism. Miss Murdoch admires Honour's dual approach, yet man must free himself, rather than merely fall under a second spell.

Stronger than Miss Murdoch's tendency to make sport of these false gods, is her pleasure in ridiculing love - middle-aged infatuation in particular. Theories fail, heroes prove impotent, even romantic love is a ludicrous deception. For example, in An Unofficial Rose, the intricate and frustrating relationships between Hugh and Emma, Randall and Lindsay, Anne and Felix, provide a coldly humorous patchwork of mistaken motives and disillusionment.

In Robert Taubman's lukewarm critique for The New Statesman, he concludes that our novelist wrings every bitter chuckle from this love-among-the-aging farce.

Miss Murdoch gets her own kind of comedy out of it - not only that of the narrative pattern, but the crypto-comedy that goes with a rather weird blend of horror and spirituality. Either way there are no easy laughs, and some unpleasant aspects - for instance the dominant role of the women, so long as they are 'women with darkness in them,' which implies here a Mona Lisa smirk even in old age at having men crawl to them on hands and knees (a posture that occurs, too, in A Severed Head.)

Taubman's reference to 'women with darkness in them' recalls a statement by Emma, in which she shatters Randall's exultation over the sale of the Tintoretto and his impending departure with Lindsay. Having blandly informed him that he will not steal her "gaiety girl" after all, but will merely fulfill his role in the plans she and Lindsay have already agreed upon, Emma cuts short Randall's outburst with:

---

Never mind...and please don't shout. Never mind. One must not play the god in other people's destiny. In any case, one can never do it properly.

The author here comments that Emma spoke in "a tone of rather casual disappointment". Emma does indeed enjoy the swift deflation of Randall's new mood of caddish freedom, the sudden stripping away of his selfish, violent accomplishment. The reader is provided with both a moment of satiric amusement, and the knowledge that Randall won't get off scott free. Later in an hotel room in Rome, Randall lies awake, obsessed with the image of Emma's controlling hand behind his flight from responsibility.

It was as if Emma had produced the situation in which he had desired Lindsay. Emma had been, as it were, the impresario of his passion. He had loved Lindsay as the enticing but untouchable princesse lointaine which Emma had (how deliberately and with what end) made of her; and in now possessing Lindsay Randall experienced, though very rarely and for a second at a time, the touch of disappointment analogous to that of the girl who desires the priest in his soutane, but wants him no more when he has broken his vows to become, less ceremoniously, available.

This image of the middle-aged lover, who wishes to rescue an imprisoned figure, around whom his own romanticism has built a false fragile cloister, is repeated in Miss Murdoch's latest novel, The Unicorn. This is a delusion, where the loved one's real nature is distorted by sentimental abstraction until the lover prefers his fabrication to her actual personality and their concrete situation. Here we find another method used by the author, to highlight the basis of dishonesty in so many love relationships. The princesse lointaine is more a victim of insincerity than of external force.

Thus the element of the ridiculous is central to An Unofficial

31 A.U.R., p. 207.
Rose and *A Severed Head*, particularly in connection with off-beat romantic entanglements. The actual term "ridiculous" is used by Mildred Finch (of *An Unofficial Rose*) who makes a fond yet realistic appraisal of Hugh, when he seeks her advice about selling the Tintoretto:

"...He looked like a big podgy elderly faun. He said, 'I know this is a monstrous imposition on you, Mildred. But one must use one's friends, mustn't one? When one's old and ridiculous anyway, one may as well do as one pleases in this respect?'

"...'But I'm dying precisely to be used!' said Mildred. 'I refuse to say we're old. And I could never see you as ridiculous.' How adorably ridiculous he is, though, she thought. 'What's it about? I'm all agog'."

Concealing her jealousy and her plans to prevent the Hugh-Emma merger from going through, Mildred appears all camaraderie and common-sense to the simple Hugh. Aware of Hugh's grotesque position as an aging widower blown about by the indiscriminate winds of passion, Mildred is equally objective in accepting her own wry dilemma.

In *A Severed Head*, the wild pairing-off of one character with another is a satiric indictment of the contemporary vogue for marital variety. In Chapter 28, Martin is faced with a further test of his famous rationality and civilized attitude toward infidelity. The wordiness of this Martin-Antonia exchange exhibits Miss Murdoch's impatience with sterile conversation.

'Darling', said Antonia, 'I don't know how to say this, because I don't know how much you know.'

'Know about what?'

'Well, that I and Alexander - well, to put it quite bluntly, that Alexander has been my lover?'

'Oh, Christ,' I said. I got up. Antonia tried to retain my hand but I pulled it away.

'You mean you didn't know at all?' said Antonia. 'Surely you must have guessed. I was sure you knew. Alexander wasn't so certain.'

'What a fool you must both think me,' I said. 'No I didn't know. Of course I realized you were fond of each other. But I didn't

33 A.U.R., p. 185-86.
know this. Fo you imagine I would have tolerated it? How little
you know me.'
'Well, you tolerated Anderson so well,' said Antonia. 'That was
one thing that made me feel you must have known, you must have
understood about Alexander. Besides, it was so obvious.'
'You are stupid,' I said. 'Palmer was different.'
'I don't see why,' said Antonia. 'And what do you mean by saying
you wouldn't have tolerated it? I loved you both, you loved both
of us, Alexander loved - .'
'You make me feel ill,' I said. 34

Martin, and the reader, are intentionally made ill by Antonia's
narcissistic desire to gather all her masculine acquaintances into a
fellowship of immoral compliance. Martin's behaviour makes a poor show-
ing as well. He refuses to come out from behind his insular world of im-
ported wines, the military tactics of Gustavus Adolphus, and dignified
reasonableness. Rather than expose himself to the vulgarity of a de-
ceived husband, Martin prefers to obey Palmer Anderson's humiliating in-
struction, and take the whole thing like a good fellow. Also, his dis-
honest relationship with Georgie, leaves him little justification to play
the injured spouse. The ludicrous, pattern of intrigue and counter-
intrigue in A Severed Head demands considerable adroitness on the reader's
part to remember exactly who is making love to whom at any given moment.
A Severed Head, recently on the London stage, was jointly dramatized by
J. B. Priestly and Miss Murdoch. This farcical, "sick", presentation of
complicated liaisons, was stressed, for dramatic purposes, to the exclu-
sion of Miss Murdoch's philosophical contributions to this novel.

In Flight From the Enchanter, the Chapter 15 scene between Rain-
borough, the inept Selib executive, and his ambitious assistant Agnes
Casement, at Fox's party, is a satiric cameo. While being clumsily

Future references to this work are from the same edition, and will appear
in footnotes as A.S.H.
seduced by Miss Casement, Rainborough's hand (burned earlier at Agnes' flat, when her nylons caught fire) is gripped compulsively by the young lady. In pain, he snatches away his throbbing palm, and topples off the sofa, to the amusement of a lurking Calvin Blick.

Later, Rainborough is again the subject of Miss Murdoch's wit, when he attempts a second amatory adventure. One evening Mischa Fox pays an unexpected social call, as Annette Cockeyne and Rainborough are struggling on the carpet. Rainborough pushes Annette, partly clothed, into a cupboard and perspires anxiously as Fox chats on, only feet away from the offending closet.

These vagaries, frustractions and humiliations of love or lust during middle life are accentuated by the novelist's sense of the macabre. However, there is gentleness too, as Miss Murdoch handles such themes with an unsentimental acceptance of man's defenselessness during unguarded moments.

Riley Hughes, in a Catholic World review, sums up the satiric facets of The Flight From the Enchanter, and his statement is valid for her other novels, also.

"Surrealistic scenes are often succeeded by comic scenes straight from the comic tradition of the English novel - a curious mixture of Dada and Dickens."35

At this point in the thesis we have seen how Miss Murdoch, using satire, explodes the twin myths of happiness and selfish freedom. Through such spokesmen as Bledyard, Tayper Pace and Max Lejour, (The Unicorn), she substitutes the harsh realism of self-abnegation and rejection of illusions. Spiritual freedom, the innocence that comes from

35 Riley Hughes, "The Flight From the Enchanter", Catholic World, CLXXXiii (July 1, 1956), 313.
simplicity and candour in both motive and action, points to a possible exit from that maze (of tormenting falsity and an inability to communicate) in which so many of the author's characters are imprisoned. The tangible, the solidly practical, attracts the less reflective, more orthodox, people in each novel, as a refuge from the futility of rationalism. It is the artists - Jake, Randall, Michael and Rain - who seek explanations, who attempt to circumscribe nature with ideas. The heroism of the central figure is debunked; even the concrete activities of a Bel-founder, a Patchway or a Mrs. Mark, prove ineffectual in the final analysis. Worthwhile actions stem from free choice, and true freedom is impossible for these pseudo-heroes who bow to self-pity and self-mistrust. The freedom of which Miss Murdoch speaks is too stark, too difficult, in its essential objectivity to reclaim her lost people. When Mischa Fox spoke of women whose hearts have been purged of sentimental hope, and in whom only the wisdom of the flesh has survived, he uncovered one aspect of this freedom. In the interview with Miss Murdoch at Stratford, (see The Postscript for a detailed report), I inquired whether the term "romantic rationalist" - as it is used in her study of Sartre - could be used to describe her own style or mood. She replied in the negative, as she had intended an unflattering connotation when choosing the word "romantic" for the title of her book. It is this romanticism which ensnares middle-aged Martin Lynch Gibbon, Bill Mor, Randall Perronett and Effingham Cooper in Miss Murdoch's novels. The desire for the elusive, the improbably exquisite, prevents the heroes from acting nobly, or even lucidly. With a pointlessness which parallels Jake Donaghue's picaresque ramblings, these other middle-aged children are too late, too timid, or too obsessed with their search to either claim what can be claimed, or to completely renounce the unobtainable.
William Van O'Connor, reviewing *A Severed Head* and other Murdoch novels for *Critique* calls the Imber Court characters in *The Bell* "injured and hurt creatures," who carry their emotional deformities with them into whatever environment they chance to inhabit. Outside traditional middle-class morality, yet scarcely strong enough to formulate their own code, these people pursue intangibles. Miss Murdoch sees all the absurdity of such pursuits, all the barriers to adult self-knowledge, yet does not dismiss the whole journey as an aimless, dead-end affair.

For although aware of the truly terrible elements which harass men spiritually, she avoids melodrama and includes in her work these other elements which few of us are so fortunate as not to know exist. It is sometimes very rough going, says Miss Murdoch in effect: we and our lives are often ugly and absurd as we pretend to know what we do not know; but most of us enjoy a good part of life, enough of it at least to go on living, enough of it to think we can do something about the rest; and perhaps we can, for we are of an incredible variety.

Although freedom which involves sacrificing oneself artistically, intellectually and physically through charity, is the ideal, Miss Murdoch also gives points in the novels to those who just muddle along in the best way possible. Involvement with the mechanical or the elemental in life, which reoccurs in her novels, marks a limited transition from self-analysis to self-forgetfulness. A back-to-the-soil movement is not the complete answer, however. The novelist's sketch of Imber Court disension over the moral implications of hunting wood pigeons, or of substituting a mechanical cultivator for manual labour, is a satiric glimpse into communal eccentricity. As I have stated previously, Miss Murdoch at once softens, and outlines, the absurdity of this muddling with her grotesque humour. John Raymond stresses the Murdoch satire and breadth

36 O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 74

37 Thomas Fitzsimmons, "Four Novels", *Sewanee Review*, LXIII (Spring, 1955), 331.
of vision, in a *New Statesman* review:

Next, there is Miss Murdoch's comedy - dry and acute, yet with a
tenderness for human frailty that is first rate among contemporary
satirists. She is an amused connoisseur of the pure in heart...It
is this rich ambiguity of moral vision exercised through charity,
the result of her sense of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of
people and of their relations with each other, that most distin-
guishes Miss Murdoch as a novelist.38

The bulk of satiric emphasis is directed against the middle-aged,
the forty-fifty age bracket in her novels. Adolescents also feel the
prick of the Murdoch needle. Annette Cockeyne and Toby Gaske wade in the
currents of adult sin - yet, in the end, are able to move off to new ex-
periences without having been deeply touched by their encounters. On the
other hand, Miss Murdoch has a certain respect for the aged, who have
come to terms with reality, who have shed defences to be totally them-
selves.

The feminist Mrs. Wingfield of *Flight From the Enchanter*, boasts
to Rosa, while swilling champagne, of how she cracked her husband's
skull with a flatiron. Demoyte, former headmaster in *The Sandcastle*,
heaps sarcasm upon Nan, Mor, Bledyard and "poor Evvy" his successor at
St. Brides. These are tyrannical Murdoch eccentrics who relish the dis-
comforture their caustic comments produce. These elderly terrors have
achieved a brand of freedom; a freedom from social pretense and post-
uring, without goodness. The approval of their peers is no longer im-
portant, and security purchased with pain leaves no room for gentleness.

The children in Miss Murdoch's novels - Felicity Mor and Miranda
Peronett in particular, enjoy their own form of freedom. Both the old
and the young are unburdened by the claims of conventionality - the former
because they have outlived externals, the latter because the world of

38 John Raymond, "The Unclassifiable Image", *New Statesman*, LVI
(November 15, 1958), 697.
private phantasy shields them from adult responsibility. Egoism and a tendency to manipulate, characterizes both age groups. There is a positive, yet insular quality, about these characters, which the formless middle-aged seekers lack. Malice and mischief are the delight of Miss Murdoch's oldsters, as they repossess the powers of childhood. The shadowy Mrs. Tinckham, (of Under the Net) surrounded by her cats, is a symbol of knowledge deeper than intellect. She accepts the secrets of Jake Donaghue, and his friends, as homage due an earth mother. Felicity Mor, an adolescent, invokes occult assistance in her battle against Rain Carter. Comforted by the invisible power of Angus (a dark deity who assumes quite ordinary disguises), she bares a resemblance to the psychic Mrs. Tinckham. Spiritual forces, which the middle-aged are too prosaic to accept, surround these malevolent ancients and their youthful counter-parts. The ritual sacrifice in Chapter 14 of The Sandcastle, involving a Tarot Pack, a supersonic whistle, a silk stocking effigy of Miss Carter, and other symbolic paraphernalia assembled by Felicity, represents a mysterious reality that defeats rational middle-aged explanation.

The image was burning fast. Felicity stepped quickly round the circle, keeping her feet inside the triangle, picking up the poppies and the wild roses which she then threw into the sea. The tide was coming in. Already the water was gurgling to and fro on three sides of the rock. The sun was almost hidden now and the outline of the land was purple and heavy. The moon was beginning to shine. It had become very small, a button of bright silver in a patch of greenish sky. It shone balefully down on Felicity. She stood, her eyes staring from her head, watching the image burn. A chill breeze blew from the sea, fanning the flames.39

Nature scenes, simply drawn, yet tinged with an element of cruelty, reoccur in the novels. Felicity has an affinity for the macabre potential of nature, but even she cannot control its force. The quicksand

39 T.S., p. 204.
episode in *The Unicorn* is a second instance of man's impotence when con-
fronted by the uncontrollable. Whereas the child Felicity is in league
with the elements, Effingham (of *The Unicorn*) the logical, uncommitted
adult, is overwhelmed by them, and his sanity reels. The fairy fire,
glowing greenly on the treacherous surface of the bog, the fear roaring
in his ears, and the ooze creeping up to his waist, all remind Effingham
that death is the final fact.

Effingham had never confronted death. The confrontation brought
with it a new quietness and a new terror. The dark bog seemed em-
pty now, utterly empty, as if, because of the great mystery which
was about to be enacted, the little wicked gods had withdrawn.
Even the stars were veiled now, and Effingham was at the centre of
a black globe. He felt the touch of some degraded, gibbering panic.
He could still feel himself slowly sinking. He could not envisage
what was to come.40

The film of ordinariness which hides the fearful mysteries of ex-
istence from adults is unformed in the child, for whom fantasy and fact
are interchangeable. Yet Miranda Peronett, viciously decapitating her
doll collection in Chapter 32 of *An Unofficial Rose*, is suddenly aware
that her toys cannot protect her from the pain of approaching maturity.

It came to her eerily that the dolls were all dead. The life with
which she had endowed them was withdrawn. They were nothing now.
She looked at them with widened eyes and touched her lips with her
tongue. They were rows of dead semblances, mocking her solitude.41

She had watched, even hastened, her father's departure, waiting for
the inevitable move by Felix toward Ann. The full impotence of her pos-
ition as half-child, half-woman, (of interest to Felix only as Ann's
daughter) has come home to her. The child's world of imagery and mystic-
ism offers no consolation now; this first major frustration arouses rage
and misery. In later life, Miss Murdoch's characters replace Miranda-

40 Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* (Toronto, 1963), p. 188
41 *A.U.R.*, p. 310.
like violence with ineffectual resignation, and wander aimlessly, searching for lost powers of action. The rituals of childhood soon lose their validity, and when men enter adulthood without values (moral or intellectual), there is nothing left to sustain action. Martin Lynch-Gibbon's circle represents a rootless segment of middle-class society. Promiscuity, intellectual dishonesty (even in love relationships) and reliance upon the spurious rationalism of psychiatry a la Palmer Anderson, are the foundations of their world. As we have said earlier, Martin reaches the middle years with nothing more lasting than a taste for gourmet wines, an interest in military history, and pride in always doing the civilized thing. Jake Donaghue's milieu is shadier, less affluent, but his approach to others is equally immature and egocentric. He used women, he uses Finn. He indulges in such stupid schemes as kidnapping a canine movie star, or posing as a hospital orderly to rescue Belfounder.

Michael Meade and his co-religious submerge personal inadequacies by busying themselves with plain chant, bird banding and photography - or with unprofitable market gardening. They lean upon the ancient framework of the Church, plus the impractical ideals of quasi-socialism, rather than face basic issues. Evasion of responsibility - responsibility in the political, religious or marital sphere - is what the novels are about. The final evasion involves living for oneself, ignoring unpleasant realities, and failing to care about other people. Jake Donaghue, Randall Peronett, and Bill Mor desire freedom - freedom to develop along new lines, without emotional pressure. However, Miss Murdoch continually defines freedom as something entirely different - a paradox involving servitude. Bill Mor addresses the Marsington WEA:

'I'm sorry Mr. Staveley,' said Mor, 'I've said nothing to the purpose. Let me try again. You say freedom is a virtue - and I
hesitate to accept this phrase. Let me explain why. To begin with, as I was saying in my talk this evening, freedom needs to be defined. If by freedom we mean absence of external restraint, then we may call a man lucky for being free - but why should we call him good? If, on the other hand, by freedom we mean self-discipline, which dominates selfish desires, then indeed we may call a free man virtuous. But as we know, this more refined conception of freedom can also play a dangerous role in politics. It may be used to justify the tyranny of people who think themselves to be the enlightened ones. Whereas the notion of freedom which I'm sure Mr. Stavely has in mind, the freedom which inspired the great Liberal leaders of the last century, is political freedom, the absence of tyranny. This is the condition of virtue, and to strive for it is a virtue. But it is not itself a virtue. To call mere absence of restraint or mere kicking over the traces and flouting of conventions a virtue is to be simply romantic.42

The problem, in the final analysis, is this flirtation with freedom (or rather a flirtation with various ideas of freedom, which must eventually be replaced by submission to true freedom). In the Murdoch novels, the middle-aged have erroneous notions of freedom. Or, if they grasp the truth, are too weak to face the inevitable choices which freedom demands. In a few isolated cases, it is the young and the elderly, who come to terms with the Murdoch ethic.

42 T.S., p. 50-51.

UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR LIBRARY

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

It is precisely this romantic view of freedom, carried into middle life, that casts a net of illusion over many of Miss Murdoch's characters. The title of her first novel - Under the Net - symbolizes the escapist mentality which reoccurs when Miss Murdoch creates people for her later works.

Hugo Belfounder speaks for the author when he reminds Jake Donaghue that theory is pointless, while action is the only reality. Jake states that Hugo is a theoretician, but of an unusual type - acutely interested in the essential nature of everything, yet with no general theories about anything. Even with this intense desire to probe, to extract truth, Hugo has the ability to simplify, to cut away theory until an element of truth is exposed.

During their early intimacy, Jake and Hugo spent a good deal of time analysing the falsity in verbal communication. Hugo believed that the overt expression of an idea, or the recreation of a mood or past experience, could only be sham.

"All the time when I speak to you, even now, I'm saying not precisely what I think, but what will impress you and make you respond. That's so even between us - and how much more it's so when there are stronger motives for deception...The whole language is a machine for making falsehoods."

"What would happen if one were to speak the truth?" I asked. "Would it be possible?" 'I know myself', said Hugo, 'that when I really speak the truth the words fall from my mouth absolutely dead, and I see complete blankness in the face of the other person.' 'So we never really communicate?'

'Well,' he said, 'I suppose actions don't lie.'

43 Iris Murdoch, Under the Net (London, 1955), pp. 67-68

37

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Action then, says Hugo - Murdoch, is a tentative solution for a sterile talked-to-death existence. The concrete, the actively creative (whether of fireworks, a market garden, or novels) man has the greatest measure of authentic freedom. Hugo, in the final interview at the hospital, tells Jake that he has sold the movie studio and will become a watch-maker's apprentice in Nottingham. He denies that his viewpoint, his influence generally, has been responsible for either the Anna fiasco or for Jake's abortive literary career.

'I don't recognize the reflections', said Hugo. 'The point is that people must just do what they can do, and good luck to them'.

'What can you do?', I asked him. Hugo was silent for a long time.

'Make little intricate things with my hands', he said.

'Is that all?', I asked.

'Yes', said Hugo. We were silent again. 44

Hugo, Jake's god-figure, (created out of a need to find reality and permanence in someone who gave the illusion of strength) tries to free his friend, to throw him back upon his own resources. Jake still fears the naked responsibility of the now, the end of rational explanation-seeking. What about our search for truth, for God, our endless talking around the point, whimpers Jake.

'What more do you want?', said Hugo.

God is task. God is detail. It all lies close to your hand. 45

Vincent Miller in reviewing An Unofficial Rose states that the "English muddle" is basic in Miss Murdoch's attitude to her characters. Miss Murdoch surely rises above "muddle" as a definition of the human situation, though there are muddlers to spare in her novels. The passages from Under the Net, quoted above, are more relevant. Whatever measure of sanc-

44 Ibid., p. 258

45 Ibid.
tity, or even of reality, we may achieve can best be found through doing the small, honest jobs that arise, with unselfish involvement and un-demanding charity. Abstract speculation is often an unworkable answer to bad faith, which mars so many relationships in the novels.

To restate the issues which have been analyzed in this thesis, we may say that they all revolve around one basic problem. The search for false freedom or anti-reality, the sentimental obsession to perform heroic actions when there are no heroes and, the compulsive entanglements with power-figures, are all part of the same illusion. Reality, or legitimate freedom, is a painfully won prize, and few of Miss Murdoch's people compete, or even fulfill the entrance requirements. Only in brief, perceptive flashes, can they see how demanding the rules are. An objectivity so purely impersonal that it transcends the personality itself, an emptying of self, is Miss Murdoch's stipulation for freedom.

In "Against Dryness", an article for the periodical *Encounter*, Miss Murdoch rejects the deceptive smallness and self-containedness in the work of T.S. Eliot, Paul Valery and others. Her own philosophic position regarding the nature of freedom and what is entailed in gaining such freedom, then concludes her rebuttal.

This quotation from "Against Dryness" in a sense suggests what I have found in my examination of Miss Murdoch's novels.

The technique of becoming free is more difficult than John Stuart Mill imagined. We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom and to picture in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality...We need to return from the self-centred concept of sanctity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like faculty; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulties and complexity of the moral
life and the opacity of persons. \(^{46}\)

Miss Murdoch's statement outlines a position, but my examination of her fiction shows that there are no easy solutions. Although the comments quoted on the preceding page synthesize central issues in the novels, the raw substance of Miss Murdoch's thought requires the flexibility of her dramatic fictional style to fully develop all the verities.

POSTSCRIPT

Highly praised, from critics on both sides of the Atlantic, Miss Murdoch's work has aroused considerable controversy. Her rictous wit, her ability to make fantasy seem probable, and her humanist - socialist values, are essential elements in all her fiction. Esoteric symbols, a penchant for the abnormal, ("eccentric" is Miss Murdoch's gentler term) plus an acceptance of all that is unpredictable in human nature, is counterbalanced by her desire for the Platonic "good" and for compassion and sacrifice in inter-personal relationships.

Faced with these conflicting qualities and divergent aspects of her philosophy, I was most anxious (when such an opportunity presented itself), to meet Miss Murdoch.

On the 8th of August, 1963, I interviewed Iris Murdoch at the Festival Theatre in Stratford, where she and her husband, John Bayley, an Oxford don, had been attending the Shakespeare Seminars sponsored by McMaster University.

Miss Murdoch generously gave up the second seminar of the morning to spend an hour discussing certain basic themes in her novels, and to answer various questions relating to character delineation, and to the novelist's problem of remaining outside his material.

The comments that are to follow are, we hope, a reasonably accurate representation of Miss Murdoch's views, as she replied to questions, or as she discussed other writers and ideas which have influenced her as an artist.

The core problem of freedom for the individual, and how one may attain true freedom, re-occurs in her novels. In a passage from Sartre:
Romantic Rationalist, Miss Murdoch reveals Sartre's definition of freedom:

...'freedom' is the mobility of the consciousness; that is our ability to reflect, to dispel an emotional condition, to withdraw from absorption in the world, to set things at a distance.47

Asked whether this statement would also satisfy her requirements, Miss Murdoch replied that Sartre's viewpoint was too narrow and that she no longer subscribed to Existentialist doctrines on this point, or in some other areas. She felt that one achieved freedom and an enlargement of enrichment of one's personality ("release of the spirit" was a term used by Miss Murdoch to express the results of such freedom) only by self-forgetfulness. As we became less obsessed by our own goals, drives and desires, and substituted involvement with others, we matured spiritually and creatively. The philosopher's desire to withdraw from human affairs is a negative reaction, and Miss Murdoch is too much of a practical humanist to reject people, and the individual's responsibility toward his fellow man.

The failure of love, this inability to feel genuine concern and compassion for others, is the central issue in The Bell. Miss Murdoch stated that her own attitude to the whole question of self-giving on an emotional level, may be summed up in the Abbess's admonition to Michael Meade:

Where we generally and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves - and because it is mysterious we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us draw back. God can always show us, if we will, a higher and a better way; and we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.48

47 S.R.R., p. 56

Meade is immobilized by guilt and self-analysis, and can neither forget the early fiasco involving Nick or the whole problem of his homosexuality, long enough to extend a saving hand to an older, lost Nick. Remarking on the moral implications of homosexuality, Miss Murdoch permitted Meade to feel the full weight of social guilt, but she herself does not share society's condemnation of such acts. Only when the corruption of minors is involved does she oppose this form of love, which she considers totally natural for some individuals. Meade's "failure in love" or charity, is only one example of how self-absorption closes the door to compassion. To become immersed in the outward and the simple is a mark of virtue in Miss Murdoch's ethics, and Hugh Belfounder's fireworks and watch repairing, or the market gardening at Imber Court, are symbols which she employs to externalize this theory.

In "The Sublime and the Good", Miss Murdoch refers to "...The notion of a loving respect for a reality other than oneself..." This acceptance of external reality, of the unique even eccentric characteristics of one's friends, without a desire to impose one's code or preferences upon this reality, is essential to Miss Murdoch's thought.

The god-figures in the novel (or power-figures as she called them during our interview) are examples of man's tendency to project his own fears or longings upon his acquaintances. Mischa Fox, the animal, or nature god, may be something quite simple, really - stated Miss Murdoch. Yet Rosa, Hunter, Annette and Nina, have invested him with omniscient qualities and tremendous power until the reality beneath has been lost. The same situation applies in The Unicorn, where Hannah Crean-Smith is at once the creator, but also the victim, of the princesse lointaine


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
image built up around her. Effingham adores the story behind Hannah's imprisonment, but cares less for the real woman than he does for his dream. We eventually prefer the illusion to the reality, and as in The Unicorn, our illusions render us impotent to save others or ourselves.

Simone Weil, that socialist mystic whom scrupulosity prevented from crossing the final barrier to Catholic conversion, has influenced Miss Murdoch's writing. After recommending her (Simone's) Notebooks as an excellent introduction to Miss Weil's life and spiritual pilgrimage, Miss Murdoch stated that many of the views expressed on sacrifice, guilt, and essential goodness by Max Lejour in The Unicorn originated in "Weilian" philosophy. Quoting a Weilism: "It is of no avail to act above one's natural level;" Miss Murdoch suggested that this inability to react to situations in other than a predetermined way (determined by one's own emotional and intellectual makeup) imprisons Michael Meade and other Murdoch characters.

Kierkegaard's writing is also an effective tool when examining Miss Murdoch's novels. She used Kierkegaard's image of the "knight of faith", who resembled a tax collector, in speaking of certain characters in her books who have achieved the certitude and power which are the gifts of faith. The normalcy, even ordinariness, of such characters as Bel-founder, Tayper Pace and Anne Peronett, conceal the mysterious radiance beneath their external dullness. Miss Murdoch commented upon the sheer formlessness of such saintly people as Anne of An Unofficial Rose, whose capacity for self-sacrifice stifled her husband. There seemed to be nothing within her personality that Randall could challenge, and her

50 Iris Murdoch, "Knowing the Void, Spectator, XCVII (November 2, 1956), 613-614.

softness smothered him. Miss Murdoch elaborated upon this contrast between saint and artist in her novels. Meade, Donaghue and Peronnett are the creative personalities, who attempt to impose form upon essentially uncontrollable nature, while Tayper Pace, Belfounder and Peronnett's wife are totally unconcerned by theory and speculation. For them, actions, not ideas, count.

When questioned about a further quotation from "The Sublime and the Good":

...The world which is haunted by that incompleteness and lack of form, which is abhorred by art...52

Miss Murdoch remarked upon the terror inherent in the contemplation of multiplicity. Nature, in the guise of accidental events, crushes man almost incidentally. Tragedy in literature arises when the hero is overpowered by an avalanche of malevolent circumstances. The fact of death is the ultimate, whimsical gesture of nature, in its duel with man. Miss Murdoch felt that our age is particularly disturbed by the failure of metaphysics, morality and all reassuring values to stand up under close investigation. However, this total formlessness has always been the artists' and philosophers' antagonist admitted Miss Murdoch.

One of the novelists' chief problems is keeping outside his material, and permitting his characters sufficient scope for development. Miss Murdoch is most objective about any flaws that her work may have, and is particularly sensitive to weaknesses in character delineation. Some of her characters fail to emerge as independent individuals, and are mere extensions of her own emotional and philosophical bias. Miss Murdoch attempts in each new novel to create stronger characters, who

52 "The Sublime and the Good", 55.
will seem realistic and valid. As a case in point, Miss Murdoch spoke of Hannah Crean-Smith of The Unicorn, and how she eluded the pattern laid down by her creator. Intended as an almost Christ-like symbol, a saviour who would expiate the sins of those about her through suffering, Hannah became involved in falsehood and guilt herself. Her personality took unforeseen paths of development until she became an unsuitable image of redemption.

There has been some controversy among critics as to whether Calvin Blick of The Flight From the Enchanter participates in that novel as a concrete personality, or whether he is merely a symbolic representation of evil existing only in the minds of the other characters. Miss Murdoch assured me that he was entirely corporeal, but acted as the instrument of Mischa Fox's evil intentions (Fox may have subconsciously willed the acts which Blick, as his alter-ego, performs). On the whole, Miss Murdoch admits to a particular fondness for the forceful, nature-symbol characters in her novels - Honor Klein, that conqueror of self-deception, stands high among her favourites.

Miss Murdoch (if one is justified in formulating general impressions from such a brief meeting) appears to practice this policy of involvement and self-abnegation, in her personal life. An unsentimental gentleness, an ability to make others feel that she is genuinely concerned about their difficulties, was immediately apparent during our interview. Not only on the public level of left-wing politics, but on the personal level of chance encounters, does this down-to-earth woman balance intellectual brilliance with unaffected goodness. When asked why so many of her characters exhibited such eccentric patterns of thought and behaviour, Miss Murdoch laughed, rather ominously. She predicted that when I have had the
privilege of knowing my friends more intimately, I will learn that people are eccentric! Miss Murdoch has a wide knowledge of the vagaries lying beneath man's social mask, and an equally broad charity toward human weakness. Interviewing this novelist provided not only a valuable key to her aims and techniques as a writer, but an insight into the motivation of a charming humanist.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


Murdoch, Iris. "Knowing the Void", The Spectator, CXCVI (November 2, 1956), 613-614.


SECONDARY SOURCES

(a) Books


48

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


(b) Articles


Clayre, Alasdair. "Common Cause; A Garden in the Clearing", *The Times Literary Supplement,* (August 7, 1959), supp. XXX.


Derrick, Christopher. "Truth on a Hill", Tablet, CCXV (June 24, 1961), 609.


Jackson, Robert B. "The Unicorn", Library Journal, LXXXVIII (April 15, 1963), 1688.


Quigly, Isabel. "Miss Murdoch and Others", Tablet, CCIX (May 18, 1957), 472.


Sisk, John P. "Uncrystalized Matter", The Commonweal, LXIV (May 11, 1956), 158.


Warnke, F. J. "Some Recent Novels: A Variety of Worlds", The Yale Review, L (Summer, 1961), 627-633

Webster, Harvey C. "Grasp of Absurdity", The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXVII (July 3, 1954), 15.

VITA AUCTORIS

1934 - Born in Walkerville, Ontario, on May 30th. Resided in Amherstburg, Ontario, until 1953, where she received her elementary and secondary education.


1956 - Graduated from the University of Toronto Library School with a B.L.S. degree. Joined the staff of the Windsor Public Library in May of 1956. Later served as 1st assistant to the head of the Reference Department.

1963 - Appointed acting head of the Reference Department.