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HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NOVELS OF IRIS MURDOCH

Milada Franková

The multilayered plurality of today's English novel is well reflected in the form of Iris Murdoch's novels as well as in her portrayal of characters and their relationships. In fact an important part of the concepts of Murdoch's thought – 'attention to the great variety of the world' – points towards acceptance of difference.

Starting within the realistic tradition in the mid 50s, Murdoch soon began to baffle easy classification as her rich blend of serious moral concerns, playfulness of form despite her continual commitment to the traditional novel, and exuberant inventiveness gave her novels a uniquely Murdochian hallmark. Her novels reflect the battles and development of both novel writing and social attitudes to moral issues of the decades since the Second World War, which makes her as much a writer of our time as her broader moral concerns make her work timeless.

Of novelists now writing Iris Murdoch is probably the most prolific and her 24 novels to date met with popular success as well as a creditable number of critical studies major and minor. They classify Murdoch's novels as philosophical, symbolist, moralist, didactic, novels of ideas, realistic, fantastic, Gothic and allegorical. Criticism of her novels has mostly focused on the characters, the form and the emerging patterns, her elusive symbolism and, in broader terms, her moral concerns and realism. Human relationships, which I consider central to Murdoch's novels, have received comparatively little critical attention apart from by-the-way references in character analysis.

I believe that the vast range of relationships in Murdoch's novels is neither a by-product of the characters nor a mere product of her elaborate plots, but that the varied human relationships are conscious, serious studies in their own right. It is not my intention to attach yet another label to Iris Murdoch and classify her work as the novel of human relationships, nor do I want to superimpose a grid on the canvass of relationships to map out yet more patterns. On the contrary, I wish to trace the seemingly recurrent kinds of relationships in broad outlines and show how multifarious they really are. This is where the author's concept of contingency is best employed and illustrated and where her realism is at its most real.

For this purpose I have concentrated on five areas of relationships that underline some of the concepts and concerns debated in Murdoch's novels: the artist – saint relationships, power relationships, incestuous relationships, relationships where a symbol constitutes a bond between individuals and love relationships as attention to otherness.

It may be argued that characters and ideas are what make up a novel. The story was already discarded by Modernists and has ever since been looked upon as the simplest device to keep the reader's attention through an appeal to his curiosity. However, even the greatest characters become uninteresting unless they are thrown into interaction with other characters, because only then do they become alive. Without this the ivory tower of ideas and resolutions remains closed and illusory like a theory never put into practice.

Murdoch's characters may resemble each other from novel to novel to the extent that they are sometimes regarded as types rather than real individuals. Nevertheless, the roles and relations in which they are cast are of infinite variations, thus driving the lesson home that it is not individuals in a vacuum but their contingent interplay that constitutes the constant flux of life.

Besides the realistic detail in her novels, human relationships are Murdoch's main link with reality. Whereas her plots or individual episodes reach into fantasy, symbolism or allegory and fit ingenious patterns, she achieves the contingency, which she considers so important in novel writing, by putting her characters at the mercy of real enough pitfalls of human situations of personal involvement. They may be orchestrated by the author's hand, but, unless they make clichés, this is not much different from the randomness of events in real life. Murdoch's inventiveness does not allow her situations to become clichés. The reality is thus our reality, with the details of life styles, attitudes and problems of today, but also with an undercurrent of unanswered questions as old as mankind.

Murdoch's commitment to the problems of human relationships was already shown in her early book on Sartre, where she points out Sartre's lack of interest in this side of the human situation. 'Sartre by-passes the complexity of the world of ordinary moral virtues... The novel, the novel proper that is, is about people's treatment of each other, and so it is about human values'.¹

Murdoch's interest in human relationships may best be seen in the light of her moral philosophy and the above quotation amply illustrates the link she sees between moral philosophy, human relationships and novel writing. *The Sovereignty of Good*,² a slim volume of philosophy,

¹ Iris Murdoch, *Sartre Romantic Rationalist* (London: Bowes Bowes, 1953; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989) pp. 60, 138

² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970; London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985)

explains Murdoch's concepts of moral philosophy and also touches on some of her ideas concerning art and the novel. It is not by chance that she elucidates many of them through relationships between people. The concepts of internal struggle as a moral activity, of freedom and of love all share one important prerequisite, which is attention. It is attention to the surrounding world and particularly attention to other people.

Murdoch demonstrates the existence and legitimacy of internal struggle by means of the relationship of a mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law, who originally dislikes the younger woman, though never showing her dislike, comes to apprehend her differently by conscious, positive attention.

The concept of freedom involves not only how we choose, but also what we choose. The choice is again aided by attention to what or who we have to consider in order to act rightly.

Murdoch believes that the temptation to equal love and the Good should be resisted because love is usually self-assertive and selfish. Nevertheless, in her examples of unselfish love – of a mother loving a retarded child or of love for a difficult elderly relation – she sees love as permeated by the Good, love purified and unselfed.

This brief excursion into Murdoch's moral philosophy allows us to ascertain the extent to which human relationships are instrumental in the formulation of some of her concepts and thus support my assumption that they play an important part in her novels, too. At the same time, however, we should heed Murdoch's warning that 'as soon as philosophy gets into a novel, it ceases to be philosophy; it becomes a plaything of the writer'.³

Among the many relationships recurring in Murdoch's novels that between the artist and the saint appears to be the most prominent. The recognised artist-saint contrast has been much discussed by the author and critics in connection with Murdoch's philosophical conception of the Good and her theory of art and the novel. It may also be directly traced to Plato's thought.

The saint-figure is the Platonic man questing for the Good, the embodiment of the pursuit for the real and the truth. His opposite is the artist, condemned by Plato as the harmful living image of fantasy, magic and illusion, a view contested by Murdoch. Murdoch's artist is also a questing hero forever trying to come to grips with the role of art and its form in the contingent world around him, often fighting Murdoch's own battles.

Critical assessment of the two characters invariably refers to binary oppositions to set off the differences in the two respective arguments. Nevertheless, dissolving rather than upholding the opposites seems to me to be the case in all Murdoch's novels that employ the contrast.

A variety of this is also the teacher-pupil relationship, with resemblan-

³ Bryan Magee, 'Iris Murdoch on natural novelists and unnatural philosophers' (*The Listener*, April 1978) p. 533

ces of characters but greater emphasis on the actual relationship. The teacher often corresponds to the saint figure while the pupil is not an artist.

The relationship in one or other of its varieties is already present in Murdoch's very first novel and continues to appear at intervals with more or less prominence, but always a new development until it truly culminates in her latest novel, *The Massage to the Planet*. Development of thought may be followed not only in the discourse of the opposites but also in the relations of the actors, the two interwoven into a complex whole. The preoccupations and tensions between the protagonists run along very similar lines and the obsessional character of the relationships is also shared by both. Stripped of their background and purpose, which makes each of the relationships different and in its quality unique, they reveal more common features. Most importantly, neither the artist-saint figures nor the teacher and his pupil remain clear-cut opposites, as through intense interaction of thought their roles merge.

In *The Sea, the Sea* Charles eventually lives in James' flat, constantly aware of James' existence and thought. In *The Massage to the Planet* the teacher's role is subverted by that of the pupil who, at least for a time, appears to guide his teacher. Murdoch succeeds here in paralleling the development of thought with the development of the relationship. The fusion of the contrasts is not enlightenment or reconciliation but one, albeit small, step towards it.

The theme of power is perennial to literature of all times and while power is glorified by some, its evil potential is shown by others. In handling the theme Murdoch starts from her philosophical argument that today's philosophers explain will as an isolated principle ending up with 'on the one hand a Luciferian philosophy of adventures of will, and on the other natural science. Moral philosophy, and indeed morals, are thus undefended against irresponsible and undirected self-assertion which goes easily hand in hand with some brand of pseudo-scientific determinism.' She disputes the accepted post-Kantian, existentialist concepts where 'the sovereign moral concept is freedom, or possibly courage in a sense which identifies it with freedom, will, power'.⁴

Murdoch's studies of power usually employ her evil enchanter-figures, which have been discussed abundantly in various critical studies and compared with Muriel Spark's, Anthony Burgess' and William Golding's portrayals of evil. However, Murdoch does not stop at power and evil. She also creates well-intentioned good characters who already find themselves in a position of power and has them tread the precarious borderline where good may turn into evil.

Murdoch asks what gives the evil enchanters and the good godfathers power over others to become manipulated and subjected. What are the relationships that allow these situations to develop? When set in our

⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 48, 81

sober, rational times the notion of dark forces at work and modern, free people succumbing to them may seem ludicrous. Murdoch overcomes this by making the relationships plausible.

All the power-figures – not dissimilarly to Shakespeare's – are extremely egocentric characters, incapable of ordinary relations with other people. They initiate relationships but are unable to sustain them since they do not really see others as separate beings. The victims find themselves under the spell of the enchanter's charisma or sexual attraction or simply the powerful pull of the forbidden. The relationships are thus curiously one-sided, as if the enchanter had the power to paralyse other people's will. A similar mechanism works for the good power relationships only they are less violent and consequently may last longer.

It does not require closer inspection to note that without adopting feminist attitudes Murdoch shows many female characters in various situations of subjection to a dominant or exploiting male. Female power figures have far less than their fair share of either power or frequency of appearance, while the relationships have a more pronounced mythological air.

Perhaps over-optimistically, Murdoch always shows the power as finite, dependent on the fantasy or illusion that helped it to develop. The power relationships are just episodes or at most phases in the lives of the protagonists and they invariably collapse in the end. In *The Time of the Angels* Carel exceeds his power and oversteps the limit of endurance. When Pattie learns about his incestuous relationship with Elizabeth, the spell is broken, the fantasy is over. 'She felt as if she were holding Carel and that he had shrunk into a little thing the size of a nut.'⁵

Guarded as she is in passing judgement in her novels in most respects, Murdoch's rejection of power in human relationships as antithetic to love is quite explicit and this is probably what earned her the label of didacticism on the part of some critics.⁶ Still, whether we want to observe Murdoch's power relationships as individualised mythologies or appropriate them to our times as timeless and unchanging concerns makes little difference to the novelist's weighty statement.

One of the numerous attempts at classifying Iris Murdoch has been with symbolists despite the fact that her symbols are seen as vague and indefinable.

The human mind is full of dreams, illusions and fantasies, some of them wild and unbounded, others more down-to-earth wishes or little superstitions. Murdoch's characters are no different and some of the symbols she employs are the product of her characters' minds when formless feelings find expression in a symbol, particularly a symbol of a

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968) p. 210

⁶ Richard C. Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles. Didactic demons in modern fiction* (Associated University Presses, 1988) pp. 44-46

private nature. These symbols are highly emotionally charged because they stem from the emotional life of the characters.

Often a symbol like that is shared by two or more people and becomes a bond that is something like a mental shortcut where words can be dispensed with. It may establish instant communication and understanding or even be an obstacle to verbal communication. This kind of bond is also produced by symbolic acts which people perform together and which echo the unifying power of old rituals. The age-old need for connection with others finds its expression at this more private level.

For Felicity and her brother in *The Sandcastle* their fantasy about the dead dog Liffey and the 'blood and tears' act always renew their closeness and provide a point of contact where they might find communication difficult at their age. The lost parrot Grey is both a bond and a bar to communication between Gerald and his father in *The Book and the Brotherhood*.

In Murdoch symbolic experiences sometimes verge on the supernatural, one of the characteristic features of many of her novels and one she is frequently criticised for. She does not dispute the fact that this is where she deliberately diverges from the realistic tradition.⁷ These experiences reflect the psychological forces working in us, unexplained and unexplainable by science, which are also the driving force of human relationships.

The bond created by a symbol lasts as long as the people concerned feel or are willing to yield to the power the symbol has over them. They respond to an externalised product of their own emotions and the power they have endowed it with is limited. Murdoch does not use any patterns here and the symbolism is part of the contingent character of the relationships. If or when the symbol loses its meaning for the characters, the relationship moves on to a different plane.

The increasing size of Murdoch's novels affords more space for detail and consequently allows more attention to be paid to the inner life of the characters and to brief episodes where symbolism of this kind emerges. It also moves from the comparatively clear symbolic images of the early novels to more elusive symbolism, though no less rich in emotion that needs to be expressed.

Murdoch's interest in what is usually rather euphemistically referred to as Freudian themes is apparent in every one of her novels. She has expressed great admiration for Freud's thought; nevertheless she is at variance with his theories in two essential aspects. The first concerns the ego and the will and here her argument is similar to that against Sartre's existentialism, the second on the other hand parallels her arguments against Plato in his attitude to art and artists. Murdoch's generally sceptical stance regarding psychoanalysis results from the former.

The myth of Oedipus or Freud's interpretation of it in the omnipresent Oedipus complex and its wider implications are not the only focus of

⁷ Ronald Bryden, 'Talking to Iris Murdoch' (*The Listener*, 4 April 1968) p. 434

Murdoch's study. Often it is incest between siblings or relationships which through family ties acquire incestuous overtones.

Incest was already one of the taboos in primitive societies and we as yet do not know the origin of the incest dread which is still with us today. It is the unanswered questions of the incestuous relationships as well as the labyrinthine nature of the human subconscious with regard to sex that Murdoch tries to deal with.

In her early novels the theme is hinted at where twins fall in love or have sexual relations with one and the same person. *A Severed Head* is the first novel where incest is handled openly. In full agreement with Freud, the incest dread is palpable both outside the novel, as critical reactions have proved, and inside it, as shown by the author. But whether Murdoch writes about incest or milder forms of Oedipal variations she lays them before us as part of life and although she does not eschew the puzzlement or horror of witnesses, she does not analyse or judge.

Peter Conradi describes Murdoch as an 'anti-puritan puritan', but he adds that her puritanism is by no means sexual.⁸ Sex does pervade Murdoch's novels, but it does not have the prominence and Freudian superimportance one might expect. Murdoch certainly does not evade the dark side to sex, including incest and occultism involving sex, but she does not pander to today's reader's appetite for a lot of sex in art. The slightly scandalised critical comment on Murdoch's characters exchanging partners as if they were playing musical chairs or even having incestuous relations does not seem to take into account that eroticism is played down and what Murdoch gives prominence to are psychological and moral issues, though without moralising.

Murdoch shows the complexity of sexual relationships that no scientific theories of psychoanalysis can reduce to manageable patterns of pairs of rational egos. She therefore never adduces an explanation or solution, never a simple thread of causes and effects. She makes the reader bow to the inevitability of an impenetrable tangle of accidental events, experiences and emotions that are in constant flux.

'Plato gives to sexual love and transformed sexual energy a central place in his philosophy... Plato's Eros is a principle which connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality and to the pattern of divine creativity of the universe.'⁹

In agreement with Plato Iris Murdoch's philosophy places love high in the hierarchy of concepts, of which the Good is the highest.

'The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.'¹⁰

⁸ Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (London: Macmillan, 1986) pp. 68-70

⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun. Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford 1977) p. 33

¹⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 66

Love thus defined as seeing the other is also necessary for freedom, which Murdoch understands as the experience of accurate vision free from fantasy rather than exercise of will. Attention for Murdoch means unselfing, while attention to self in order to gain self-knowledge amounts to indulging in a delusion.

These concepts of Murdoch's moral philosophy are easily translatable into human relationships, because moral philosophy is about human relationships. This is where her philosophy and novel writing are closely linked and although Murdoch is not, as she herself claims, a philosophical novelist, the concerns of moral philosophy are also what she has to express as an artist.

The ideas of attention, unselfing, otherness and the real that make up Murdoch's conception of love are to be encountered in all her novels and are not so much contrasted with as shown alongside self-absorption, fantasy and illusion resulting from and resulting in a failure to see. It usually comes as a shock to many of the heroes from Jake in *Under the Net* to both Jack and Ludens in *The Message to the Planet* that they have all along been making fantasy scenarios, involving the others like pawns in a game of chess, never stopping to look at them as real persons with lives of their own.

The death of the self that Murdoch hints at as the ultimate goal of love is at the same time shown as an impossibility, as yet another of the endless moral tasks that elude one's grasp. The ever repeated striving for improvement, for more attention to the outer and less to the self, defeats the notion that Murdoch settles for imperfection. Imperfection is a part of Murdoch's realism, but nevertheless not its boundary.

While Murdoch describes power relationships and incestuous relationships as a phase, the love relationships constitute a process. It is a process where it is a long way from falling in love or feeling love and moving via overcoming the ego's natural desire to dominate or absorb, to respecting the other as a separate being and still loving them.

Murdoch generously embraces all possible kinds of love relationships and it would take statistical evaluation to ascertain their frequencies. They range from sexual love, including married love and homosexual love, through love between parents and children, siblings or friends to the more poignant love for a dying or dead person. The last mentioned always revolves around remorse at not having done enough and said enough to impart one's love. This intense remorse reminds one of Freud's study of the ambivalence of human emotions where obsessive self-reproaches of the mourner are seen as a result of the unconscious wish for the death, which Freud connects with the archetypal fear of death and fear of the malevolence of spirits.¹¹

In Murdoch, however, there is a closer link to the question of communication, which is central to all human relationships and to love relationships in particular. She poses the problem as an acute lack of com-

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1938) pp. 37-106

munication which stems partly from a natural secrecy in people, partly from a lack of common context, and partly, and most importantly, from the inadequacy of words.

The memory of the parrot in *The Book and the Brotherhood* was a bond between the father and the son, but also a taboo as a subject of communication where words failed them completely. It is an ever recurring sigh of many of Murdoch's characters that they simply cannot read each other's minds. The impossibility of seeing inside one another's minds is not helped by people's general unwillingness to reveal at least some of it by means of words. Murdoch's characters, too, mostly prefer to go by signs and conjecture, more ephemeral than the play of the signifiers and the signified.

It has been repeated time and again with a critical tone that Murdoch creates patterns of types and patterns of behaviour to fit the elaborate plots of her novels. It cannot be denied that some patterning of this kind is traceable, as thanks to psychologists and sociologists enough generalisations of human behaviour have been drawn to make such patterns emerge. They have acquired the shape of mechanical models which, set in motion, let the machinery of behaviour grind relentlessly on. Yet, when confronted with an individual in his unique situation both psychologists and sociologists are often baffled.

Murdoch is aware of the machinery, but first and foremost she is sensitive to the human difference, and it is not the difference of the individual self but apprehending others as different. The anti-existentialist credo of her philosophy is reflected in her novels in human relationships, in the directing of attention from the ego to other people and things in the surrounding world. She therefore creates human relationships with a serious intent and thus saves them from being swept under the carpet as mere tools for writing a thrilling story.

Murdoch breaks the machinery by unpredictability. The unexpected twists and turns which the relationships in her novels take and the way the complicated emotional entanglements are disentangled shift the patterns. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, when the trials and tribulations of unrequited loves, hates, rides into myth and the occult are over, the casualties buried and everything is now only wistfully remembered with serene nostalgia, it all seems to click back into pattern. For there is no finality to Murdoch's endings; they dissolve into a vagueness suggestive of the ever recurring cycle of life, of human relationships being so similar and yet so different, of everything repeating itself but never quite in the same way.

There is a clear development in Murdoch's portrayal of human relationships. In her first novel there is little actual interaction and the relationships more or less go on inside the hero's head. The other characters in the story are marginal and, most of the time, the hero does not know where they are or what they are doing and he is not even interested. The following early novels until about the mid 60s have much more interplay although the casts are comparatively small even if we

include the absent characters that provide the link with the outside world by letters.

Whereas in the early novels Murdoch's ideas and concepts are more clearly visible as they are reflected in the interplay of the characters, in the later novels with their vast casts and often parallel stories being told all the issues become interconnected in a much more complex manner. The relationships in the recent novels have become more intense with the more space and time they have gained. They have thus been given the definite advantage of being allowed to grow on the reader and appear more real and insistent in his mind and consequently all the more intriguing.

Murdoch throws little light on the working of the relationships she creates, leaving them as ambiguous and multilayered, inscrutable and unpredictable to us as their actors remain indefinable to others as well as to themselves. This does not mean, however, that Murdoch rests content with this rather bleak picture as a conclusion. In her prolific work she keeps probing the manifold human relationships to press home the message that man is not an isolated will but that he is always striving to meet others.