

Art and Ethics in the Novels of Iris Murdoch

By Gary B. Reierson

Art and Ethics

We post-moderns usually don't think of art and ethics as related. We are much more likely to think of art having intrinsic worth and hold the more-popular art-for-art's-sake point of view. We tend to think of art as, perhaps, edifying or enriching but not having much to do with how we act towards others.

Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* points out how very recent this perspective is. Up until about 100 years ago, people "took for granted" that art criticism meant appraising "the ethical value of works of art." So what changed? Censorship, or the threat of censorship. Out of a desire not to censor artists, for that would open themselves to the charge of being moralistic, critics pulled back altogether from any effort to evaluate artistic works ethically. The prevailing view became that of Oscar Wilde, who pronounced, "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all."

Iris Murdoch on the Relationship of Art and Ethics

One twentieth-century artist who believed very much in the relationship of art and ethics and whose works demonstrate the relationship supremely well is the British novelist Iris Murdoch. Moreover, since Murdoch was also a moral philosopher, we have the advantage of having both her novels and her philosophy to work from in understanding her point of view.

Murdoch was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1919. She studied classics, ancient history, and philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford University in the 1930s and held a postgraduate fellowship in philosophy under Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1947. During World War II she worked as an assistant principal at the Treasury, experiencing the bombing of the Blitz. After the War she worked for the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Association in camps in Belgium and Austria, which informed her feelings about homelessness and exile and the "utter breakdown of society."

Murdoch became a fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford University in 1948, a position she held until 1963 when the strain of both writing and teaching meant she had to give up one of them. She was a very prolific author: 26 novels, 5 books of philosophy, and countless articles, published lectures, and reviews. She received major prizes for her novels: the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973), the Whitbread Literary Award for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974), and the coveted Booker Prize for *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). Her work as a philosopher was also widely recognized by the invitation extended her to give the Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh which were published under the title, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in 1992.

In 1956, Murdoch married John Bayley, also an Oxford don who became Warton Professor of English, and they forged a famous literary partnership, touring the world and giving joint lectures. Following her death in 1999, Bayley wrote two compelling books about her life, including her last two years of suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Against the art-for-art's-sake perspective of much of the twentieth century, Iris Murdoch argued "art for life's sake." Art teaches us about our world and about human nature:

Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life.

Great art is liberating, it . . . stirs and satisfies our curiosity, it interests us in other people and other scenes, and helps us to be tolerant and generous.

In particular, art helps us to see suffering and sin in our world. Here Murdoch found T. S. Eliot's perspective particularly illuminating: "Mr Eliot observed that 'the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom and the horror and the glory.'"

Beyond its teaching role, however, and more to the point about its relationship to ethics, art makes us better people. Art "to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul;" it "improves us morally." "[W]e can all receive moral help," she observed, "by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, . . ."

And how does art make us better people? By checking our selfishness. One of the greatest challenges we human beings face, in Murdoch's view, is our self-centeredness, and one of life's tasks is to engage in a process of what she called unselfing:

The appreciation of . . . art . . . is . . . a completely adequate entry into . . . the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real. . . . It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self.

Even more significantly, art has the capacity to move us beyond ourselves:

There is . . . something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human beings which automatically suggests that 'there is more than this'. The 'there is more than this' . . . must remain a very tiny spark of insight. . . . [I]t seems to me that the spark is real, and that great art is evidence of its reality. Art indeed, so far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the centre to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return.

Hence, in a fundamental way, Murdoch argues for a unity of art and ethics, and so she asserts confidently:

Art and morals . . . are one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love.

Art and Ethics in the Novels of Iris Murdoch

Beyond her philosophizing about the relationship of art and ethics, Iris Murdoch successfully brings the two together in her novels. Many of these novels have figures of good who "show how immensely difficult it is to be or to do good in a world increasingly mad." Readers of her novels will recognize these figures as Brendan Craddock in *Henry and Cato*, James Arrowby in *The Sea*, Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*, William Eastcote in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice*, Jenkin Riderhood in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, Marcus Valler in *The Message to the Planet*, and, to the lesser degree, Arthur Fisch in *A Word Child*. These good characters rarely are the focus of the novel, and they usually do not succeed in overcoming evil. They are more often a hidden presence for good. "[G]ood is subjected . . . to overwhelming attack . . ." and rarely triumphs. Hence, Murdoch's novels are deeply moral without being moralistic.

Murdoch's novels have a compelling power. At the most basic level she is a great story teller. Her intricate, often double, plots; her evocative, and sometimes playful, detailing of her novels' settings; her insightful portrayals of her characters wrestling with the ordinary "muddles" of life; and her sheer inventiveness all mark her distinctive style.

At a deeper level Murdoch examines serious moral concerns, portrays the quest for good in life, and includes a strong symbolism. One illustration of all three is her novel *The Bell*. Set in an Anglican lay community on the grounds of the fictitious Imber Court near Oxford, *The Bell* presents a series of events surrounding the replacement of the bell in the adjoining abbey tower. The central characters work to define their identities and relationships and wrestle with moral questions, such as, How do we get beyond our own self-interest to value other people fully for themselves? How can we use power appropriately and not be destroyed by its capacity for evil expression? What should we make of our lives so as to fulfill our sense of vocation fully? Should we attempt the best acts we know or the second-best ones we can be sure we will succeed at? Can our religious life rise above the imposition of our own view and wishes to become something greater?

Michael Meade, the leader of the community who is a failed priest and a failed teacher, seeks to redeem his relationship with young Nick Fawley whom he wronged earlier in his life. Nick's sister Catherine seeks to come to terms with her sense of guilt at love for Michael and to live out a discipline based on Julian of Norwich's belief that "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Dora Greenfield, who seeks transcendence in art, faces up to the real and intractable difficulties of her marriage to her boorish, art historian husband Paul and to her own promiscuity, and determines to become "an independent grown-up person" and an art teacher.

And, of course, the bell itself – actually two bells, old and new – is richly symbolic, variously, of "a lost order and faith;" purity, clarity, and the ambiguity of love. Michael Meade says we, like the bell, "must learn to understand . . . our spiritual energy, and find out where, for us, are the hiding-places of our strength." James Tayer-Payce, a rigid moralist character in the novel, sees the bell as an emblem of innocence, for it has "no hidden mechanism." The bell is a "thing from another world" which serves as "a reflection of the relation, in art and in life, of the natural and artificial, the unutterably particular to the intellectually ordered and arranged, the simple to the complex form."

Assessing her novels herself, Murdoch commented:

The novel itself, of course, the whole world of the novel, is an expression of a world outlook. And one can't avoid doing this. Any novelist produces a moral world and there's a kind of world outlook which can be deduced from each of the novels. And of course I have my own philosophy in a very general sense, a kind of moral psychology one might call it rather than philosophy.

Goodness Really Matters

Peter Conradi, whose study of Murdoch's works is probably the most definitive, concludes his analysis with the observation, "[The French literary critic H. A.] Taine remarked of [Charles] Dickens that his whole work might be reduced to the phrase, 'Be Good, and Love'. So might Murdoch's Both attack human self-centredness." In many ways she shares the perspective of the American novelist and critic, John Gardner, who argued that "art is essentially and primarily moral – that is, life-giving – moral in its process of creation and moral in what it says." So Murdoch's novels are filled with generally imperfect individuals struggling with the ordinary acts of everyday life in their particular web of human relationships seeking to do good.

Murdoch probably also shared the perspective on writing of James Baldwin who believed "you write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world." (Murdoch once described the writing of literature as a "moral pleasure.")

Certainly Murdoch's literature has become an indispensable feature of our post-modern world. Little wonder then that her obituary in Great Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper noted that she "was one of the best and most influential writers of the 20th century." High praise but praise richly deserved for one whose novels vividly portray what her philosophical beliefs conclude, "Are we not certain that there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct, that goodness really matters . . . ?"

¹ *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 25.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 382.

³ Peter Conradi, "Dame Iris Murdoch: A witness to good and evil," *The Guardian*, February 9, 1999.

⁴ *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Duckworth, 1998) (published in the United States under the title *Elegy for Iris*) and *Iris and the Friends: A Year of Memories* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

⁵ "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review* (Autumn 1959), pp. 42-55, later collected in Peter Conradi (ed.), *Iris Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 218.

⁶ Iris Murdoch, "On God and Good," *The Anatomy of Knowledge*, ed. Marjorie Grene (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 233-35, reprinted in Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 65.

⁷ Iris Murdoch, "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," originally shown on BBC Television, October 28, 1977, later substantially reworked and collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 14-5.

⁸ "T. S. Eliot as a Moralist," T. S. Eliot: *A Symposium for his 70th Birthday*, ed. N. Braybrooke (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), later collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 169, quoting Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p. 106.

⁹ Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," delivered as the Leslie Stephen Lecture, 1967, published in *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 85.

¹⁰ "The Sublime and the Good," *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 218.

¹¹ "On God and Good," *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁴ "The Sublime and the Good," *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 215.

¹⁵Suguna Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990), p. 2.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 301.

¹⁹G. S. Fraser, "Iris Murdoch and the Solidity of the Normal," *international Literary Annual*, no. 2, 1959, quoted in A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 76.

²⁰*The Bell*, p. 204.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 135.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 200.

²³*Degrees of Freedom*, p. 77.

²⁴Speaking at the University of Caen, 1978, quoted by Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 1.

²⁵*Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*, p. 9, quoting H. A. Taine, "Charles Dickens, son talent es ses oeuvres," *Revue des Deux mondes*, February 1856, later incorporated into his *History of English Literature*, book 5, chapter 1, and collected in Stephen Wall (ed.), *Charles Dickens* (London: Penguin Critical Anthologies, 1970), p. 103.

²⁶*On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 15-16.

²⁷Quoted in *The Company We Keep*, p. 482.

²⁸"Art is the Imitation of Nature," *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 257.

²⁹Conradi, "Dame Iris Murdoch."

³⁰"On God and Good," *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 60.

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