Life and Career:

Iris Murdoch, one of the most critically acclaimed British writers, was born in Dublin on 15th July, 1919, to Anglo-Irish parents. The family moved to London when Murdoch was very young and returned to Ireland frequently to visit relatives. Murdoch, the only child of the loving couple, grew up in the Hammersmith and West Chiswick districts of London. Murdoch’s father, a civil servant by profession, was a taciturn and morally upright man. His voracious reading influenced her interests, especially in art and writing. Music is an essential element in the lives of Murdoch’s characters. This was primarily due to the influence of her mother who was a trained opera singer before marriage. Murdoch did her schooling in the Badminton School in Bristol. She recalls this as being ‘rather left-wing’ with ‘enlightened liberal views’ (qtd. in Bove 2). In Somerville College, Oxford, she studied Latin and Greek Languages, Literature, History and Philosophy. After graduating, she was conscripted into the Civil Service as an Assistant Principal in the Treasury, in the year 1942. Murdoch’s close association with London – her working years during the Second World War, her life at Oxford and her Kensington residence – made her well acquainted with not just London’s museums, parks and river areas, but also with its life style. The knowledge of the same is brilliantly portrayed in her novels.
From 1944 to 1946, Murdoch worked as an administrative officer with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in London, Belgium, and Austria. Her experiences there appear in her novels through the displaced Eastern Europeans in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, *The Time of the Angels*, and *Nuns and Soldiers*. After the War, Murdoch accepted the Sarah Smithson Studentship in Philosophy at Newham College, Cambridge, where philosophy was still under the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In 1948, she became a fellow of St. Anne’s College, Oxford, where she taught philosophy. Later, in the year 1963, she was named an honorary fellow of St. Anne’s College when she retired from full-time teaching in order to devote more time to writing. The study of philosophy at Oxford emphasised on linguistic analysis, and one finds its influence in novels such as *The Black Prince* and *A Word Child*. The protagonists of these novels are frequently engaged in discussions on the inadequacy of language in conveying truth. However, Murdoch preferred moral philosophy to linguistic analysis.

In 1956, she married John Bayley, a critic, who worked as a retired Warton Professor of English in St. Catherine’s College, Oxford. Bayley loved and supported her, from her student days, through her battle with Alzheimer’s disease and her death in 1999. Many regarded his concern for ‘Iris’ an act of heroic love which is chronicled in his book, *Elegy for Iris*. The book became a modern classic, giving the readers insights on suffering, sacrifice and love.

A prolific writer, Murdoch published twenty-six novels, some literary criticism, including the influential essay, *Against Dryness* (1961); a volume of poetry, *A Year of Birds* (1978); five plays and five books of philosophy. It is for her priceless contribution to the field of Literature that Murdoch was awarded innumerable awards and honours. She received the Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince*, the
Whitbread Literary Award for Fiction for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and the Booker McConnell Prize for *The Sea, The Sea*. She was named Dame of the Order of the British Empire in 1987. She was also made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature in 1987, and was awarded the National Arts Club’s (New York) Medal of Honour for Literature in 1990. In a ranking listed by *The Times* in 2008, Iris Murdoch was placed twelfth among the fifty best post-war British Writers.

**As an Author:**

Iris Murdoch’s writing conforms to the English realist tradition. Hence, her novels are housed with the upper-middle-class intellectuals and artists. She also adopts the incongruous form of the nineteenth-century realistic novel. She admires the great nineteenth-century Russian and British masters of fiction. Many critics have compared her novels to Dostoevsky and George Eliot. The struggle between good and evil, a recurring theme in her novels, is, she admits, the result of the inspiration she drew from Dostoevsky. Also, her later works with a variety of detail and veracity in character exhibit the grand vision of Tolstoy. Like Jane Austen, she extorts maximum drama from a strictly limited subject-matter. Thus, her novels assert her own direct continuity with the major nineteenth-century novelists. However, to consider her a pure traditionalist would limit her potential as a writer. With her characters caught up in the absurdities of the modern age and employed at the same time in the pursuit of truth and love, her work is undoubtedly, a realistic portrayal of the life of the modern man. Her Shakespearian facility for intricate double plots, her dexterous handling and lucid portrayal of complex and realistic characters and her insights on the themes of love, beauty and truth are highly commendable.
In one of her interviews, Murdoch states that she writes two kinds of novel, ‘open’ and ‘closed’. She defines them thus:

The open novel contains a lot of characters who rush about independently, each one eccentric and self-centred; the plot to some extent situates them in a pattern but does not integrate them into a single system. The closed novel has fewer characters and tends to draw them, as it were, toward a single point. *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter* were I think, [‘closed’], *The Sandcastle* and *The Bell* [were ‘open’]. The advantage of the open novel is that it is bright and airy and the characters move about freely; it is more like life as it is normally lived. Its disadvantage is that it may become loose in texture and it is more difficult to make the structure evident. A closed novel is more intensely integrated but may be more claustrophobic in atmosphere and the characters may lose their sense of freedom. Ideally, and if one were a great writer, one could, I think, combine both these things in a single work and not have to oscillate between them. (qtd. in Reynolds, Jonathan Noakes 14-15)

Starting her career as a novelist with *Under the Net*, Murdoch has drawn considerable critical acclaim for her art of characterisation and spontaneous flow of ideas. However, the novel was criticised of intense existential undertones which obscure the author’s preoccupation with the concepts of pursuit and purpose. Nevertheless, Murdoch has gradually evolved into a Platonist novelist, perpetually in pursuit of the Good. From her early quasi-allegorical works, she has moved to creating more complex novels highly textured by allusions, iconography, comic irony, and expansive casts of characters who despite possessing the potential for sadomasochism, shift the readers’ attention from illusion to reality. The art of characterisation occupies a significant place in Murdoch’s aesthetics. She once remarked that the greatest problem confronting the modern novelist was the creation of characters. In an interview with W.K. Rose, she expressed her desire to create real, free characters. Nonetheless, she is accused of creating stereotypical characters that are easily identifiable in the ‘Murdochian’ world. For e.g., her self-indulgent and erotomaniac protagonists obsessed by the past, unhappy older women and compulsive
young women. Though she does not excel at fresh invention of characters, she certainly succeeds in making them real and convincing.

Though an outstanding philosopher, Murdoch does not allow her purely philosophical ideas to dominate her novels. She believes that literature should reflect reality and hence despises the idea of using it as a means of persuasion. In fact, in \textit{Sartré: Romantic Rationalist}, her first published work, where she discusses his aesthetics, she remarks that Sartré despite being a brilliant thinker failed as a novelist because he used novel as a device to transmit his political message. Both Sartré and Murdoch connect art with morality. But, while he regards transmitting the ideological commitment as a moral act, she considers a just portrayal of reality a virtuous act.

Murdoch’s conception of life as strange and symbolic, disapproves of art as rendering pattern. A careful study of the novels reveals her symbolic representation of her characters. She frequently uses backgrounds to design and introduce a character. Since she believes that body is the background to a character’s mind, her descriptions of characters are vivid and detailed. Hence, often furniture in a room and even the scenery beyond its windows offer insights into the psyche of a character. When Bellamy visits Peter Mir’s house in \textit{The Green Knight}, it is described as eerie and uninhabited, which helps the readers comprehend the mysterious nature of Mir. Murdoch also considers the accuracy of setting very important. Thus, by sketching the visual world with minute details of colours and landscapes, she subtly hints at the mental landscapes and sometimes even foreshadows the events in the novels.

At times, the background in Murdoch’s novels also plays the role of a constant presence and witness and is thus personified, for e.g., in Peter Saward’s room, in \textit{The Flight from the Enchanter}, on one silent occasion it was “as if all the books were
breathing quietly” (312). Besides this anthropomorphic treatment, she uses various symbols, myths and images to re-instate a realistic portrayal of the concrete through the abstract. For example, she uses the image of a bell which awakens to reality the characters in *The Bell* resulting in a massive change in their closed pseudo-religious lives. Sometimes the designation ‘golden’ is rendered to a character which enters the world of illusion. So, in *Under the Net*, Jake crowns Anna princess amidst the gold dust. Murdoch in *The Black Prince* and several other novels exploits the myth of Apollo and Marsyas as an obsessive symbol for the sadomasochistic pattern.

The essential design of Murdoch’s novels is both tragic and comic. The serious obsessions of the characters are inextricably bound with the comic situations they encounter. Thus, the novels are titled as ‘dark comedies’ and tragic comedies. In fact, Murdoch herself expresses that truthful description of life would be funny: “I think all novels are comic forms – yes, all novels . . . . Somehow any prolonged texture of a story has places for wit and places where the thing is absurd” (qtd. in Bove 193). One might also regard her plots intensely grotesque. But Murdoch calls the projection of the bizarre an essential ingredient of realism. It is for this reason that her gallery of characters includes both the professionals as well as a plethora of gypsies, refugees, magicians, mystics, etc. Her protagonists, in particular, are men of great ambitions and weak will. However through her patient and loving presentation of her characters, Murdoch discourages condescension for even her most self-centred or evil power figures and instead draws towards them the sympathy of the reader. Simultaneously, she also portrays the characters and their lives from a vantage point that urges the readers to look at life and the characters more objectively. Peter J Conradi, thus, rightly remarks, “. . . . Her success depends on the warmth of her identification as much as on the rigour of her simultaneous detachment” (Conradi 36).
Sometimes, Murdoch’s characters ensnared in bizarre fixes question the reality of man’s essential nature. When questioned, Murdoch says that “real people are far more eccentric than anybody portrayed in novels,” that people are indeed “terribly odd” (Bellamy 137).

So, to portray ‘the real’, Murdoch, like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, adopts realism that is more phantasmagorical than naturalistic, though unlike him, she fails to sustain the mode. She is, nevertheless, both a fantasist and a realist, though, her recurrent deviations and abrupt modulations between the two visions are less controlled.

Many of her novels address the question of virtue or ‘goodness’. Murdoch conceives of goodness as not being essentially concerned with choice, rules or reasons, instead, “. . . It is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist” (qtd. in Reynolds, Jonathan Noakes 15). When Linda Wertheimer asked Iris Murdoch about the message in the title of her latest work, *The Message to the Planet*, Murdoch replied: “ ‘The message is – everything is contingent. There are no deep foundations. Our life rests on chaos and rubble, and all we can try to do is be good’ ” (qtd. in Bove 194). Murdoch’s message has remained unchanging throughout her writing career.

Love is another key subject in her novels. Murdoch portrays love with both its beauty and terrors. She defines love as the essence of all:

Art and morality are, with certain provisos . . . one. Their essence is the same.
The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals.
Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (qtd. in Reynolds, Jonathan Noakes 15-16)
Her novels prove that even an intense erotic love turns enlightening if it achieves ‘unselfing’. For her brilliant treatment of eros, Bloom ranks her below Freud and Proust, and calls her a major student of eros. She resembles the American novelist, Saul Bellow, in the portrayal of Eros, jealousy and self-hatred. Thus, the key themes she deals with are love, virtue and truth. Devoid of some of these essential values her characters suffer from the loss of common purposes.

Some critics consider Murdoch’s anachronistic style, outmoded narrative devices and inconsistency of stance as her obvious flaws. One might even feel that at places the long passages on varied issues reveal the temptation of the author to tell us rather than show us. Sometimes her incongruous characters and inconclusive endings might even obscure readers’ comprehension of the novel. But it is to be noted that Murdoch does this for a reason – that ‘ambiguity’ characterises modern age and that despite her flaws, her novels, nonetheless, rush by us as successful entertainers and brilliant reflections of the post-modern era.

When questioned in an interview about the task of literature, Murdoch replied:

Through literature we can rediscover a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can help us to recover from the ailments of Romanticism. If it can be said to have a task, now, that surely is its task. But if it is to perform it, prose must recover its former glory, eloquence and discourse must return. I would connect eloquence with the attempt to speak the truth.

There is a sort of pedagogue in my novels. I think a novelist must be truthful. Bad novels project various personal daydreams. . . . (qtd. in Reynolds, Jonathan Noakes 16)

Thus, Murdoch believes that an artist who presents a just and accurate vision of the world is an instrument of truth.
As a Woman Writer

Of late, a few critics have begun to look at Murdoch’s novels purely from a feminist point of view. Whether her novels allow any such exclusive attention is questionable. This is because, though, Murdoch’s novels portray in new and disturbing ways her feminist tendencies, she asserts otherwise. Her novels, unlike that of Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble are not concerned with the exploration of what Elaine Showalter has called the ‘wild zone’ of female experience – the area where the experience of men and women overlap. On the contrary, the masculine perspective is extremely evident in her novels. She is a female writer who liked wearing male masks. For e.g., some of her most unique and successful novels like *The Black Prince, A Word Child, A Severed Head*, etc., have male-narrators, for which she was both appreciated and criticised. In defence, she states that she refuses to ‘write as a woman,’ because she wants to present ‘the human case.’ She further argues that she does not recognise gender distinctions because she believes that people are “‘at a higher level’, androgynous” (qtd. in Tucker 188).

Despite her explicit rejection of a female point of view, she makes a convincing portrayal of various kinds of women (older, young, sensuous, passionate, enchanting, mysterious, unfulfilled, etc.) and at the same time achieves a wonderful balance among them. Mischa Fox, one of the enchanters in Murdoch’s novels, enlists and defines these different kinds of women:

‘Young girls are full of dreams. That is what makes them so touching and so dangerous. Every young girl dreams of dominating the forces of evil. She thinks that she has that virtue in her that can conquer anything . . . .’

. . . .

‘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. . . .’
Every woman believes so simply in the heart. A woman’s love is not worth anything until it has been cleaned of all romanticism. . . . If she can survive the destruction of the heart and still have the strength to love.’ (Murdoch, The Flight from the Enchanter 142)

Though her narratives employ a male point of view, her characters and situations are saturated with a compassionate and sympathetic feminine touch. Her trust in the human cause and her acceptance of all kinds of people, depicted in her novels, is particularly feminine. Moreover, women are central to most of her novels, though not evident. The most unassuming female characters in some of her novels are, in one sense, the back bone of the tragedy. Ann in An Unofficial Rose unconsciously brings both despair and deliverance to others. It is Dora Greenfield, the apparently weak woman in The Bell who, towards the end, finds the bell which is the symbol of redemption. Sometimes, Murdoch’s more complex novels, especially the later ones, have women characters that are a combination of strangeness and reality, patience and impulse, love and vengeance and so on. Thus, one can deduce that most of her women characters have their identities mysteriously concealed like the masked dancers in Anna Quentin’s mime theatre. Hence, they disconcert and fascinate both female and male readers by continually questioning gender identity and transgressing gender boundaries.

It is this comprehensiveness of her art that defies any classification. Hilda D Spear says,

. . . . One problem is that she defies classification: she is not a Modernist; she is not a Post-Modernist; she is not, like many of her female contemporaries, a feminist writer; yet, despite the fact that she employs many Victorian devices in her novels, no serious reader of her fiction could place her among the traditionalists. She is a thinker, a novelist of ideas, a philosopher who dares to introduce philosophic discussion into her novels; at the same time she is a myth-maker, a weaver of stories, interested in patterns, interested in form,
interested above all in establishing a *raison d’être* for truth, goodness and love in a world that has dispensed with God. (121)

**As a Moral Philosopher:**

“‘Philosophy! Empty thinking by ignorant conceited men who think they can digest without eating!’” (Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood* 22)

Although Iris Murdoch has constantly argued that she is not a philosophical novelist, her moral philosophy unconsciously seeps into her art to an extent that it becomes inextricably related to her aesthetics.

When Murdoch was in Belgium after the war, she was caught up in the excitement about existentialism, and read extensively books by Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading French existentialist. During this period, she also made a close acquaintance with Raymond Queneau, a French novelist and poet, to whom she dedicated her first novel, *Under the Net*. It is during this period that her love for philosophy was rekindled which affected the direction of her career.

Her fluency in French came handy to grasp the writings of the French mystic, Simone Weil. Weil’s ideas on ethics have had a marked effect on Murdoch’s vision. A.S. Byatt says that Murdoch has made extensive use of Weil’s ideas: the idea of paying attention to others as a means of moral improvement and increased knowledge; the idea of suffering as a form of consolation, not as a means of purification.

Murdoch is highly influenced by Plato, Kant and Schopenhauer. She admires Kant because he considers duty important. She also approves of his belief that comprehension of good and evil is instinctual. Schopenhauer’s addition of eastern asceticism particularly interested her. She is also influenced by Kierkegaard and
Adorno. This proves that her subject-matter is Western metaphysics. She disapproves of the ideas of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and the Structuralists.

Her moral philosophy asserts Murdoch’s position as a Platonist. Murdoch regards Plato’s connection of the good with the real as “the centre of his thought and one of the most fruitful ideas in philosophy” (Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun 45). She, in fact, makes this idea the centre of her own moral philosophy by equating Plato’s state of illusion with egoism. She states that the traits such as obsession, prejudice, anxiety, ignorance, neurosis, etc., veil reality. So one must with an intense moral effort get rid of these illusions and move in the direction of moral perfection. It is important, however, to note that since these traits are consoling and act as a protection for the ego, individuals are reluctant to abandon them. This idea that illusion is more attractive than reality is incorporated into her moral philosophy and is evident in her novels. Defending art, in this context, Murdoch says that though art cannot tell the whole truth it can pierce the veil and direct individuals toward reality.

Murdoch conceives of truth and vision as deceptive. She further believes that truth is unachievable and that man is consigned to an illusory life and thus has only intimations of truth. Murdoch’s characters are, in novel after novel, in pursuit of this truth. She believes that it is a moral failure to not recognise the link between people and events in life. In The Philosopher’s Pupil, a character calls this failure, a massive lack of connection with the world. Murdoch’s philosophy reiterates her belief that moral advancement is possible only for those who cater to others’ needs.

She highlights the importance of literature which plays the role of a “fundamental aspect of culture” and educating us “in how to picture and understand human situations” (Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good 33). She further believes that
morality is connected with attention because one can choose only the world which one sees. Paying more attention to another individual will bring an unbiased view of the situation or the individual: “If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at” (38). She seems to support Socrates’ idea of goodness as knowledge and asserts that it can be gained by actually attending to the situation or an individual at hand. Attending to others would mean attending to their contexts. In *Sovereignty of Good* she states, “We learn through attending to contexts, . . . and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts” (31). A character in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* makes a similar remark saying, “Bereavement is a darkness impenetrable to the imagination of the unbereaved” (37).

In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch remarks that moral improvement can be gained only through inner vision. As the title suggests, she places goodness at the focus of our attention in a world that disbelieves in the existence of God. It is perhaps due to this belief that one finds her protagonists constantly in pursuit of goodness than God. However, Murdoch regrets the replacement of religion with reason in the modern world. She further laments the loss of faith and morality. Some of her characters usually suffer this loss and hence are in a perpetual search for a suitable substitute. *The Philosopher’s Pupil* and *The Time of the Angels* portray an interregnum in which the loss of faith has not been replaced by a belief capable of supporting sustained morality. Cheryl K. Bove in his book, *Understanding Iris Murdoch*, comments that the characters in *The Time of the Angels* in a war-torn London exist in a wasteland of spiritual lethargy caused by their loss of faith. Bove remarks that Carel Fisher, the aesthetic Anglican priest to a parish is the Fisher King
whose ailment can never be healed. Consequently, spiritual prosperity can never return to his parish.

The philosopher considers love, freedom, and moral improvement as the intimations of the good. Unlike Plato who disapproved of art as a ‘consolation which distorts reality’ (Murdoch, SG 86). Murdoch connects great art with the good. This is because great art portrays reality which is the ‘proper object of love’ (67). Hence, Murdoch calls for “unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention” (64) both on part of the artist and the audience in order to perceive reality. Self-centredness, according to Murdoch is a vice that veils reality. An egomaniac who limits love to himself develops a blurred vision of the world which obstructs him from viewing the world as it really is. The few places where Murdoch believes one can find virtue are “great art . . . [and] humble people who serve others” (97). This is because great art can give intimations of the real and a humble man, “because he sees himself as nothing, can see others as they are” (101).

Murdoch believes that ego must be defeated to achieve spiritual amelioration. Her interest in the workings of the ego has, thus, both a psychological and a spiritual bent. Though, she asserts that she is not a Freudian, she supports Freudian explanation of the psyche as egoistic and calls him a ‘great and wonderful discoverer.’ She appreciates his doctrine of anamnesis and his ideas concerning ego and id – “the unconscious mind, the deep, dark part of the soul which [in] Freud’s view can be good and can be bad, from which ambiguous powers emerge” (qtd. in Dooley 146). Some of his ideas surface in her depiction of her characters’ dreams, oedipal struggles, and obsessional neuroses. Nevertheless, she questions any restricted ‘scientific’ view about the structure of the soul. Murdoch strongly believes that one must constantly decline the attractions of egoism in order to gain some insights of
truth. In fact, most of her novels portray the ruined lives of the characters who are self-centred. And, the resurrection of these powerful negative characters by the unimpressive humble characters is the recurrent motif all through her novels. ‘Unselfing’, as Murdoch puts it, is the only way to defeat the ego. And, she trusts that proximity of death is one of the means of ‘unselfing.’ Murdoch further believes that death centres life and that it means the end of illusion and images like shadows, stories, etc. Moreover, she is convinced that death takes one near to truth. In her novels, the characters with near-death experiences are more near to truth.

Freud and Plato converge significantly in Murdoch’s thinking in their understanding of Eros as a fundamental force. Eros, “connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality” (qtd. in Leeson 115), “for while passion can bind, it can also liberate and lead, and can ultimately be purified” (118-119). Falling in love is for Murdoch “a way in which the dreaming ego is shocked into the awareness of an Other” (qtd. in Leeson 119). Her later works like, The Philosopher’s Pupil, The Good Apprentice, The Book and the Brotherhood, and The Message to the Planet, testify her growing ability to combine the mythic and psychological. Indeed, what marks Murdoch’s realism as dramatically different from that of the nineteenth-century writers, is her understanding of passion, both sexual and religious.

Murdoch’s religious beliefs are both sacred and secular, says Tucker. Murdoch believes in a higher spirit which is not necessarily God. She disbelieves in an afterlife and God’s intervention in one’s life. She persuades individuals to lead a moral life not for any external reason such as God or punishment or reward accorded after death. In Murdoch’s Acastos, Plato, who is a character in the play, says that the real basis of morality is religion which he defines as “the love and worship of the good” (109).
Murdoch is interested in Christ both as a human and a symbol. Based on this image of Christ she portrays often non-assertive and sacrificing individuals like Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. She also endorses Buddhism saying it facilitates a change of consciousness. However, later in her life, what she envisioned as acceptable was some kind of Christian Buddhism. Much later, she adopted a combination of Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist ideals. An evolvement in her concept of God is evident in the religious figures of her later novels who accept a universal form of various doctrines.

Her philosophy, in a nut shell, brings awareness to the readers about the far-reaching, damaging effects of egoism. By providing the real picture of people and the world, her moral vision coaxes the readers to attend to others, to really see them as distinct and separate individuals with rights of their own, directing them to moral perfection. Commenting on Murdoch’s calibre as an author, Conradi in his book, *The Saint and the Artist*, says,

She was praised for her unerring perception of our age’s cultural patterns, for having charted the intellectual atmosphere in which many of her characters have their beings, and for having mapped her own pilgrimage. She fought both against reduction of art to the political and equally, against any severance of its connexion to the world we share. (Conradi 362)