CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: MURDOCH IN ENGLISH FICTION

We live in an age where fiction has grown more provisional, more anxious, more self-questioning. There has been a marked shift in the style of the novel. I shall attempt an analysis of Murdoch's position in English fiction by tracing the intellectual ambience of that age, where she first-made her literary debut in 1954 till the present day. My analysis inculcates not only writers who were products of the 1950s and early 1960s but also critics whose literary comments have withstood the tests of time. These bear concrete relevance for the figure that Murdoch represents today. Attempts have been made to trace Murdoch's growth and development as a writer in terms of her philosophical and moral as well as ethical precepts. The emergence of women novelists have also played a pivotal role, with regards to her shift in stance while her predecessor George Eliot's bearings remain consistent. Her moral commitment unto herself and to the literary world occupy much of the space within which she operates, and this has been dealt with in detail.

The writers who emerged after 1945 are very much 'our novelists where development is related to ours'. After 1945 the novel showed every sign of reasserting its realistic potential, its moral and social
concern, its sense of life as progress. Formal and epistemological questions about the novel began to reassert themselves.

Analyzing *The Situation of the Novel* Bergonzi detected that ‘the English novel is no longer novel’\(^1\) and affords predictable pleasures. It also observes that English novels seem to have retained the liberal ideology longest and had avoided the literature of extremity practised elsewhere. There is an element of justice as well as a considerable falsification in this emphasis. In the 1950s the English critics classified writers as varied as Kingsley Amis, John Wain, David Storey and Iris Murdoch as ‘Angry Young Men’- novelists of social realism. This is largely untrue. In contemporary English fiction there exists the persistence of the liberal novel, an attempt to sustain the idea or character and to redeem elements of realism and this has been done in the context of a climate of anxious experiment. A deep curiosity has grown up in English fiction, among some of the best practitioners, about the fictional constituents of the novel. Among them are Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and John Fowles.

By the 1960s much of the realistic emphasis of the 1950s was beginning to fade in the English novel. Angus Wilson’s novels probed the ways of pastiche and parody, Murdoch’s became a mythic enquiry

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into the status of character, Muriel Spark's work turned into an "economic, clean analysis of the relationship of novelist to agent while Fowles examined the magicality of invention".\(^2\) A sense of inevitable pressures have promoted a strong experimental disposition. This is visible in Murdoch's essay 'Against Dryness' (1961) which defends a respectful but modern contingency against the 'dry' consolations of form on an over indulged absurdism.\(^3\) The essay also emphasizes, from a post existential position, that we are not isolated free choosers, that we live in a universe itself contingent and therefore brute and nameless, from which we urge order only through comprehension and love and to these the novelist attends.

Throughout the sixties, whilst intellectuals "bemoaned the failures of rational planning and counter culturalists sought a new heaven on earth through a liberation of the instincts",\(^4\) many writers were increasingly preoccupied with the interrelationship between the human propensity for violence on the one hand, and on the other hand, the yearning for transcendent significance.


\(^3\) Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness'. (Encounter: Jan.61).

Traditionally spiritual nourishment had been provided by religion. By the end of the 60s the erosion of social deference toward authority, the privatization of values and the various intellectual relativism of the period suggest some reasons why orthodox religions seemed to younger writers and intellectuals, no longer viable as a source of absolute value and spiritual sustenance. Evelyn Waugh had lamented the loss in *Unconditional Surrender* (1961). Yet, even as fewer writers explicitly proclaimed themselves to be Christian, many more voiced a need to address the form that spirit should take in a society which had largely abandoned the idea of a transcendent supernatural authority.⁵

One notable event of the post war period has been the increasing attention given to the novel. The postwar writers were undoubtedly influenced by a changed social climate, which bred a new aesthetic climate, with the post war emergence of a novelist like Angus Wilson and the appearance of Orwell’s late novels, English fiction began to find a voice that expressed its sense of liberal ambiguity and its consciousness of the social and moral change the postwar world had brought. The moral urgencies of post war English culture seemed to generate a new use and value for the novel. Fiction also became the voice for times when new social groups and classes were seeking articulacy - with writers such as

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Amis, Storey, Sillitoe. However, there also existed writers of a different temper, bringing a more fabulous and speculative mode into postwar English fiction, with adherents such as Spark, Golding, Murdoch, Lessing and Burgess. In many cases their best work was to come after the 1950s and some of it has been their most recent. It is a writing increasingly self aware, much concerned with the nature of fictions and the freedom of the imagination.

During this period a number of important writers felt compelled to supply the spiritual absences in a democratically conceived but largely materialist welfare ethos. What remained consistent across the entire period; the sixties to the nineties – was a fairly widespread intellectual one from belief in a transcendent deity. However, though it was not an orthodoxily religious age, there is much evidence, literary at least of a constant yearning for the spirit.\textsuperscript{6} The Anglican Church made a number of attempts to read the sign of the times, and probably the most controversial document of the time was \textit{Honest to God} (1963) by John A.T. Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, which seemed intent on relocating the sacred in the sphere of personal relations. Most writers were concerned about exploring the gap between the increasing weight of expectation built onto this interpersonal sphere and the irrecoverable loss of those traditional

\textsuperscript{6} These views have been expressed by Malcolm Bradbury in his works \textit{The Novel Today} and \textit{The Modern British Novel}.
obligations which in the past had ensured some measure of stability and predictability in such human relations. Characters in novels and plays by Pinter, Storey, Murdoch and Fowles, might be depicted as heroic in their struggle to renegotiate familial expectations, marital ties or social duties, but such freedom also raised new and often threatening questions about personal responsibility and existential meaning.

The writers were drawn towards what they abhor. Many even avowedly Christian writers revealed a fascination with what was found to be deplorable- fantasy, power, violence, trickster figures, mythmakers, as with discovering remedies for its control, transcendence or containment. The false gods and violence of the demonized, sacred in writers such as Murdoch, Hughes, Golding were often presented as compellingly glamorous compared to the mundane good of everyday liberal moralities. These writers reveal how in the absence of the sacred, the inverse realm of the profane may seem to supply what it lost. Waugh asserts that as religion once organised "the realm of the sacred so psychoanalysis has been brought in to domesticate that of the profane. But as sin is replaced with medicalized sickness or pathology, the issue of personal responsibility and the possibility of a viable ethics becomes problematic".7 Murdoch is the amongst those writers who wished to

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retrieve the sacred or to express the profane, and often attempted to reconcile them with a fermented humanism.

An important focus with regards to Iris Murdoch’s place in English fiction would be to emphasize upon the achievement of women writers of the British novel. Such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys to name but a few. During the period of the 1960s and especially from the 70s onwards the women novelists have achieved much wider recognition both critically and popularly than at any other time in the history of British fiction. The 60s and the 70s have seen enormous change in the ways in which some women, especially the educated ones have the opportunity to live their lives. The portrayal of the female in the novels of women has quite been the central focal point of critical discussion. However as T.F. Staley points out “another important development in the advancement of women’s fiction, has been the depth of understanding and wider range of sensibility women novelists have shown in the creation of male characters and their willingness to deal with the consciousness of the male directly”. These novelists write out of a tradition inspired by George Eliot’s portrayal of Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. The male, especially in the contemporary world is now an integral part of the

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woman novelist's domain. She is no longer restricted to the "deepest probing of the feminine consciousness, only to leave the male nature to the surface reality of dialogue and plot or have male motives and passion filtered through the consciousness of a woman character".\textsuperscript{10} This emergence is nowhere better revealed than in the work of Iris Murdoch, who also brings an intellectual quality to her work, that has few parallels in the contemporary novel.

Each novelist represents a vitally different attitude to the potential of fiction. Murdoch is a major moral thinker, using as Olga Kenyon suggests, the novel in two main ways initiated by eighteenth century women: "as a realistic study of human beings and as artfully contrived fabulation".\textsuperscript{11} Antonia Byatt combines nineteenth century realism and the twentieth century question of language to create novels of remarkable intelligence, while, Fay Weldon innovates with mock conventional attitudes to femininity and suggests ways of escape. The ideological differences between these writers is vast and fascinating. Iris Murdoch accepts patriarchy in that, she does not feel excluded from the discourse of philosophy. Antonia Byatt like George Eliot, represents men with almost as much skill as she does women. Margaret Drabble continues to vindicate the realist novel, based on the assumption that it reflects the

reality of experience, “As it is perceived by one individual who expresses it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true.” Fay Weldon refuses conventional stereotypes for women by making childbearing and sexuality as a means for combating patriarchy.

These novelists represent different attitudes to the novel and to the world. They mirror, thus, the novel’s development. Iris Murdoch wishes to revive the richness of nineteenth century prose, as used by Dickens and Dostoyevsky. She includes women’s concerns, from spiritual longings to gossip about motivation but her ideological position remains that language can and should be divorced from gender identification. She has never wanted to be called a ‘woman writer’, preferring to be accepted as a writer in a man’s world. She claims that the novel is about facing up to the truth and living with a more realistic view of oneself and other people. Antonia Byatt intervenes the discourse of science and structuralism with discourse of feeling. She is interested in an analysis of the male and female sexuality. Like Coleridge and Woolf, Murdoch provided theoretical support for the use of language in ‘Against Dryness’ (1961) where she claims that a novelist representing “real individuals struggling in society can think in degrees of freedom.” Some liberal

13 Ibid.,p.16
14 Iris Murdoch, ‘Against Dryness’ (Encounter:Jan.1961)
humanists have attempted to formulate a theory of this kind of a reading that centres upon fictional explorations of concepts of self. Iris Murdoch continues to be one of the most important figures here, being represented both as a novelist and as a philosopher. In her polemical article ‘Against Dryness’ she calls upon philosophical and literary liberalism to discharge its obligations in formulating more complex image of the self and its linguistic and social entanglements. Like Simone Weil, Murdoch believes that we need a new vocabulary of attention to persons that will reflect a sense of moral difficulty in our ethical and social lives. For her, this entails conceding a marked degree of contingency and heterogeneity in human affairs, she does not believe that Marxist or other systematics can explain all social or psychological phenomena and she insists that individual persons must remain opaque to our understanding.

Perhaps another realm towards Murdoch’s fiction would be her preoccupation with characterising the inner world of the moral agent. Her contention appears to be that the literature of personality and especially novels can at least partially resolute tension because then, “the self is presented both as a challenge to philosophical elucidation and as a kind of ethical example reminding the reader of the necessary and proper limits of our understanding of others”. The prominence she gives to

16 Ibid.
morality is rare in the twentieth century, while her interest in virtue is unusual in moral philosophy today. She analyses our longing for the good through flawed characters. She depicts people misusing or neglecting institutionalised religions, but longing for a more spiritual life. She analyses evil as intelligently as she does spirituality. She points out how evil is produced by obsessive faith, or fantasies, lack of self knowledge or misplaced good intentions. Evil is also often connected with magic, and magic widens the theme by connecting it with the irrational.

Murdoch is unusual among modern novelists in appreciating our longing for the good through convincingly moving characters. She claims that the mind should be and often is directed towards concepts of the Good, of God and of Death. She formulated many of her ethical ideas in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). She subsequently developed these themes in her Gifford Lectures (1982) entitled 'Metaphysics as a guide to morals'. The novel of social quest becomes enlarged into a novel of spiritual quest in which the protagonist undertakes a journey whose purpose is to attain new spiritual knowledge. With regard to the subject of feminine spirituality women have always shown as great a spirituality as men in history. Murdoch admires the modern mystic Simone Weil, who shared intensity in the suffering of the hungry. She admires Dame
Julian of Norwich – and her quotation ‘all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well’\textsuperscript{17} is quoted in almost every novel of her’s.

In 1970, Murdoch collected her philosophical papers under the title \textit{The Sovereignty of Good}. Morality is pictured by many modern thinkers in terms of a personal liberation through the power of will into an area of indefinitely free choice. In Murdoch’s view, moral endeavour is best seen as “an attempt to overcome illusion and selfish fantasy in order to see and respond to the real world.”\textsuperscript{18} Murdoch is not a religious believer in any conventional sense, but she does believe in the sovereignty of good, which she spells with an initial capital letter. She states, “I think there is place... for a sort of contemplation of the Good, not just by dedicated experts but by ordinary people”\textsuperscript{19}. The good in Murdoch’s thought, does not and need not emanate from God, but it is the principle which governs the world of men and women and so is perhaps the nearest to a deity that we are likely to come- perhaps because she does not believe in the God of the faith in which she was brought up. Her background being Anglo-Irish protestant Murdoch is immune from the sort of Anglican sentimentality. Nothing is simple and straightforward in her world--least of all love.


Her attraction towards a soul picture began early. Her earliest prose publications are three reviews of books with Christian topics written during the war for the *Adelphi*. They already prefigure her developed philosophy of the 1960s which she has called not so much a philosophy as a moral psychology. While making clear that she is non-Christian, she also shows that she is prepared calmly and sympathetically to consider the claim that “Science and Philosophy may come to rest afresh upon a specifically religious exposition of the nature of reality.”

Two other passages seem relevant to her later preoccupations. The first concerns her interest in the dualism of worldliness and unworldliness and the problem of the contemplative return to the cave. This problem remains a very real one for Christianity. In the second she compares the detachment of the artist with that of the saint. The artist is not ‘apart’ as the saint is, for her. “He sees the earth freshly and strangely but he is ultimately part of it, he is inside the things he sees and speaks of as outside them. He is of their substance, he suffers with them of saints I know nothing…”

Murdoch has achieved the rare distinction of excelling both as a novelist and as a moral philosopher. In 1968, she called herself a

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21 Ibid.
Platonist. In the *Sovereignty of Good* (1970), she recounted the dilemma between the saint and the artist. The saint is unconsciously good and silent and for him it is action that counts. The artist is consciously, aesthetically creating his life. This ancient quarrel vivifies the novels themselves at the level of the moral psychology of the characters.

With regard to the aspect of good and evil in her fiction, Murdoch's figures of good, show how immensely difficult it is to be or to do good in a world increasingly made despite, or because of, increasing scientific rationalism. Suguna Ramanathan points out that her novels, in particular the latter ones “offer a precarious zig zagging between an overhanging amoral world that looms and threatens in a most disturbing way, and a path beaten out by these marginal good figures as they make their way through the jungle of self and society.”²² Goodness is not just one of her preoccupations, it is the central preoccupation, especially in her later novels. While the novels create rich and densely peopled worlds where lots of things are going on, they express freely the fun, horror, sadness, joy of life, and call attention to an unselfing process which alone has any real value. For these reasons her novels are centrally and deeply moral works. But they are not wholly moralistic for good is subjected to overwhelming attack; the damages and traumatic injuries inflicted on the idea of the good in the present time are exhibited in elaborate detail. In

Murdoch's works these figures of good are often minor figures, which, however cannot be 'ignored', they show how goodness operates in the world, and this becomes the most central idea in her works, but it is often not recognised. The marginality of these figures is crucially connected with the nature of the good. It is as if good can be itself only if it is on the periphery of the world of behaviour.

Related to her conceptualisation of good and evil is her position on religion. She de-mythologises religion to an extent. Can religion survive without a mythology? To what extent does religious myth obstruct clear comprehension of the truth it encloses? Such questions are under the surface as Murdoch moves by slow degrees from a goodness which is named God to a concept which is seamless, simple and very rare. Instead of seeing goodness as emanating from God, Murdoch's later novels, taken together, explore God as an image of good, sometimes necessarily, always to be critically reexamined for possible spurious accretions. T.R. Wright states that the hidden presence of God in an aesthetic world is the subject of the novels of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. This is not literally true of Murdoch's novels. The hidden presence of good in a world which tilts away from it is her theme. The good exists necessarily and absolutely and Murdoch implies that once, this is seen, there is no 'option'. An 'other' order of reality is posited as real. While the entire weight of the novels falls on an order indifferent if not hostile, to this
'other', it is clearly judged by the 'other', of these two orders of reality, the unseen one provides the criterion by which the material in which we live may be measured and shaped. This position is derived from Plato who had a wide influence on Murdoch – Plato's life and Christ's life form the parameters within which her picture of the good grows and evolves. Both are necessary – "the Platonic concept for realisation at the intellectual level and the Christian myth for its emotional regenerative power."23 Plato's Good undergoes, in Murdoch's hands, a distinct Christian transmutation. The selfless loving which connects us with Good is not Greek but Christian. For Murdoch, Christ by himself will not do either, because the softness of the Christian tradition comes between us and the idea which Christ embodies. The Platonic concept controls the potential for sentimentality latent in the Christian myth of regeneration through suffering.

It needs to be stated that there is a theological as well as a moral slant to Murdoch's later work, but that the theological dimension does not involve the positing of an absolute. In her rejection of an absolute creator and her refusal to abandon the notion of contingency she may be regarded from the orthodox point of view as an atheist. And arguing in the *Sovereignty of Good* (1970) she states "we are what we seem to be, transient, mortal characters, subject to necessity and chance... There is in

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my view no god in the traditional sense of the term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense.... This is her acceptance of contingency as the Ultimate. She offers no ‘docta spes’, learned hope which can give a direction to history or to the future of mankind. However she offers, something which can be offset against the cyclical nightmare of a human life. This is her concept of good – affirmed and denied before the world and between the rocks.

A discussion of Murdoch’s ethics could begin by calling it an ethics of love, this ethical code states that there is only one basic ethical imperative – to love – and that all others are derived from it. Murdoch is interested in the link between morality and religion and speaks of religion as being the love and worship of the good.

Suguna Ramanathan points out that the requirements of loving and of unselfing must be examined since they are so central to the Murdochian vision of the good. It could perhaps begin by asking oneself as to why it is necessary to love; as to why is it the only principle of righteousness in the human soul. Murdoch herself describes love as the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which lies beyond it. On the concept of love, Murdoch states that love and its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted

by excellence and made for the good. Dwelling on this further, Murdoch elucidates that the religious articulation of this would say both that “love takes the soul towards God, and that God is love.” From this one can derive the position that the fact which remains so absolutely central, is that love is what asserts the certain presence of the good and lies at the basis of the ontological affirmation. This good which, Murdoch discloses, is that which is above the good – evil opposition. Simone Weil observes that if good is the union of opposites, then evil is not the opposite of good. The good above the good – evil opposition is sovereign and inviolate. It can transform evil and is therefore much more powerful. Evil can change and becomes good but the good remains itself.

Murdoch’s thesis has a quasi-religious slant, and she inhabits a region where religion and ethics meet. Her “attitude to religious traditions and to the religious spirit have to be taken into account in any consideration of the context of the good and evil”. Close reading indicates that her novels and interviews communicate the fact that Christianity is a religion which interests her deeply. Within this framework however, it may also be emphasised as do critics that “she is not a Christian novelist like Greene or Waugh.” She is not to be identified with any one religious faith or any one religious tradition. She


cannot be called a Christian because she does not believe in aspects such as the resurrection and the atonement. However, she penetrates to the very heart of Christianity and reinterprets it to the contemporary world in terms which it will find acceptable. Her reinterpretation of Christianity is related to the "current hermeneutical process which constantly revises given texts and engages in reenacting the past, not for the sake of knowing the past as past, but for a clearer knowledge of oneself in the present." It is essential to decipher Murdoch’s position on religion. Ample interviews and narrative in fiction emphasize her statement on the fact that religion needs both myth and demystification of myth, if it is to involve the believer in a total participation. Her treatment of Christ, which will be duly illustrated in the subsequent chapters, illustrates the truth of this vividity.

The dominant backdrop is Christianity. In the work of a Western writer, writing about the Western world, allusions to the life of Christ carry denser and richer implications. Often acknowledged as a novelist of faith, because she knows what the human being is in this darkness – selfish, deluded, subject to chance. At the same level she knows what he is not, and what he is capable of being. And in a gesture, rare in today's world the Murdochian vision is one of a hope in the darkness, and the attentive gaze turned on the world is an act of faith.

Murdoch has often been put on par with George Eliot, an intellectual turned novelist. An analysis, therefore, of Murdoch and her place in English fiction would be incomplete without delving into Eliot's career and commitment as an English woman writer. Eliot was well read in philosophy, theology and science, and was lauded as Murdoch is today, as a sage articulating universal truths. I shall confine my study to the ethical and moral concerns.

Many thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century possessed a melancholy consciousness of inner confusion. The background then was in many ways similar to that of the intellectual dilemma that Murdoch comes under. Anguished belief prompted the search for prophets and it was often writers, naked with scepticism who were revered as seers. Novelists often saw themselves as prophets. In this climate of anguish and search, Eliot brought into fiction an absorbing, lifelong interest in theology, philosophy and science.

George Eliot responded to the novel, not only because of its affinities with Goethe, as expounded by Carlyle, but also because Froude was one of Rousseau's heirs. Eliot was deeply influenced by Froude, who intensified her perception of reality so that "life both outward and inward, presents itself to us in higher relief, in columns brightened and
deepened." Froude also criticised the Hebrew myth from an emotional and moral standpoint as ‘insulting to the pure majesty of God’ he argued that reality eluded the formulas of theologicians and philosophers, whom he termed as reverential sceptics.

Eliot’s education was free from religious bias. Her religious sense rested upon “a certain respect for the divine art that directs the eternal creation of things”.

She reverberates echoes of Saint Simon who stated that “man had duties to the outside world, by extending scientific knowledge, to himself by perfecting his inner life in relation to a divine ideal, and to mankind, via respect for democratic institutions”.

For George Eliot as in Murdoch, later philosophical issues had implications for human issues. Very often she read books, where the writers explored the relationship between speculative method and religion, politics and history. She also expressed a religious heterodoxy which avoided both materialistic atheism and supernaturalistic Christianity. On Christ, she stressed her praise for Him as a Jewish philosopher and equalled the sense of the poetry of existence with religion.

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p.148.
It has often been noted that her discriminating tolerance of Christianity stemmed partly from the fact that some of the writers she admired viewed Christianity as a source of democratic ideas. She argued that all disciplines were connected because all were humanistic in intent. She felt that philosophy and religion had one common aim, and that they were but different forms of answer to the same great question- that of man and his destination.

Like most serious thinkers in the first half of the nineteenth century she tried to understand and appreciate the essential elements of religion. She approved the view that Christianity was a set of symbols expressing a philosophic creed. She subsequently charged Christianity not only with being opposed to the culture of the intellect and taste, but also with passivity towards political and social abuses. The German Ludwig Feuerbach whose work ‘Das Weser des Christenthums’ (The Essence of Christianity) she translated in 1854, stated that the true essence of Christianity lies in the ‘Glorification’ of man and not God. Feuerbach was also of the opinion that faith and belief in religion implies faith and belief in man and that the hope that religion will save man is the hope that man will save man.31 Eliot herself advocated a religion of humanity and akin to Murdocl’s central precept of goodness, she had stated in 1874 –

31 These ideas have been compiled from several essays on George Eliot.
the idea of God, so far as it has been a highly spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human (an exaltation of the human)." 32

Eliot's central preoccupation was a constant exploration of those vital elements which give sanctity to human existence from a sense of absurdity and disorientation. Eliot felt that egoism, pride and moral obtuseness is the cause of suffering. Images of the 'cross', 'crown of thorns' 'toilsome journey' symbolically express the psychic phenomena of suffering. Eliot in conformity with Feuerbach's 'religion of humanity' solves it in her own unique manner through sympathy and love. This is the moral value of her art, it extends sympathy through an imaginative participation in the lives of others. She develops the idiom of individual moral analyses into a world in which morality is both individual and social. Her world represents a conflict between traditional Christianity and rationalism. As a result Eliot has immersed herself in the contemporary philosophic current of progress as she found it conducive to the demands of her personality for purposes of shaping a vision. 33

The critic, Malcolm Bradbury stated that for Murdoch "it had been absolutely clear from the start that she did not regard the novel as a form

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32 These ideas have been compiled from several essays on George Eliot.

33 Taken from general studies and essays on George Eliot.
of simple imitation."\textsuperscript{34} Robert Scholes called her novels "fabulations" and explained that "fabulation then, means a return to a more verbal kind of fiction".\textsuperscript{35} Murdoch's novels may be at a certain remove from reality, and affirm the distinctive laws of the realm of the imagination. They deal however with the problems of the real; 'the value of individual lives, the roundness of identity, the encounter with the darker illuminations of love and death'. Her novels remain complex explorations of modern experience in a world where the conventional definitions provided by religion, philosophy and art require a fresh examination. She stated that the human being is a verbal animal, a word child whose only means of understanding is through language. She stated that "the quality of a civilization depends on its ability to discern and reveal truth, and this depends on the scope and purity of its language."\textsuperscript{36} She proceeds to examine the concretions of the humanist and realist novels in a new social and artistic climate.

Murdoch has emerged as one of the most productive and influential British novelists of her generation and also as a powerfully intellectual and original theorist of fiction. She is unusual in having consistently taken a clear view of the 'form she has explored'. She has emphasized

\textsuperscript{34} Malcolm Bradbury, \textit{The Modern British Novel} (London: 1992).

\textsuperscript{35} Robert Schloes \textit{The Fabulators} (OUP:1967).

that she ‘aims’ to write as a realist in an identifiably nineteenth century tradition of English and European fiction. At the same time she is aware that it is now practically impossible for novelists to do this for good philosophical and epistemological reasons. She has also continued to indicate the difficulties and at the same time the potential of contemporary fiction, especially in the British tradition, and both her practical and theoretical views are deeply revealing about the novel today.

Murdoch’s theoretical position is a deeply examined one. It owes its development not simply to her ‘other’ career as one of Britain’s leading moral philosophers but results more from a habit of reading and thought which displays a “carefully cultivated, historically aware and genuinely international literary sensibility.” It arises from strong conceptions of the role of art in society and as an instrument of human knowledge. In 1953 she wrote ‘Sartre’, Romantic Rationalist’ and the book acknowledges Sartre’s deepened portrait of consciousness, the parallelism between existentialist and British philosophy and also the importance of the novel as a mode of human enquiry. Sartre’s influence on Murdoch is complex. It is primarily philosophical and political, though she has expressed great admiration for the more literary aspects of

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his writing. Even so his novels have not influenced her fiction as widely as it is sometimes thought. Existentialist readings have been offered of several of her books and Sartre’s intention of being a philosophical novelist has also been attributed to Murdoch. However, what is perhaps more significant is that in the disturbing intellectual years at the end of the war, Murdoch felt the influence of ideas which essentially changed the “prevailing portraits of consciousness, challenged our views of human nature and human freedom, altered the portrait of the relations of individual to society and ‘self’ to ‘other’ and questioned the nature of language and communication.”39 Murdoch’s subsequent arguments about realism, literature and art undoubtedly have their origins in many of these issues, but the reinterpretation is distinctive, and in fact there exists an increasing detachment from Sartre. Two other writers often regarded to be influential on her literary development during the 1940s and 1950s are Samuel Beckett and Raymond Queneau. Beckett shows his influence in Under the Net (1954) but it is to Raymond Queneau that the book is dedicated.

Her work has achieved ever increasing recognition. From the 1950s to the present day her productive flow of novels has held continuous public attention. In the 1960s the very frequency of her novels seemed to earn her some critical hostility. The later 60s saw a

change of direction: the length of her novels increased and their tone altered, though the rate of production did not slow down. The 1970s began to see public recognition of her achievements. She was elected to the Irish Academy in 1970 and became an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975. In 1977 she was made Honorary Fellow of her old college, Somer Ville. Her novels won honours: The Black Prince was awarded the James Tait Black memorial prize in 1973, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine won the Whitbread Literary Award in 1974. The Sea, The Sea was awarded the Booker Mc Connell Prize, Britain's most prestigious literary award. By 1961, at the height of the cold war, she was one of the few contemporary British novelists being widely read in the Soviet Union. Murdochland is now an internationally known landscape and the direction of her fiction represents a significant tendency of the contemporary British novelist.

It is apparent from the reviews her work receives that its substance and spirit still remain elusive. Both the interest and the dissent of good and evil seem to be some of the more significant driving forces of Murdoch's fiction. She has a very clear sense of restraint about the relationship between politically committed and creative fictional writing. This evidently has much to do with her sense of the novel's specificity and its value as a distinctive form of understanding. She considers that there is a good deal of powerful, if subdued political comment in all her
novels— a firm believer in the power of the political pamphlet, she has written on issues such as 'homosexuality, Vietnam (condemning American intervention) nuclear weapons and school education (opposing indiscriminate comprehensivization of schools in Britain). These topics arose in her novels, and in their presentation we may sense a Sartrean existentialist concern for advocating freedom of human action, a freedom which is located firmly in the context of those complexities that "inevitably arise when the individual's predicament within society is considered."

Murdoch's understanding of social realism requires that in fiction an individual be presented with the utmost specificity against the background of a real and dynamic picture of human society. According to Murdoch, the novel requires a steady and opaque framework. The amount of specificity will be a function of the writers ability to create character. As she elucidates in her essay 'Against Dryness' (1961) She thinks that the novel must create essential images of humanity and must therefore be 'a fit house for free characters to live in'. This involves an essential celebration of the creative imagination, as a moral, ethical and apprehensive power, responding to contradiction and otherness. Murdoch

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41 Ibid.
42 Iris Murdoch 'Against Dryneses' (Encounter: 1961).
sees her works in terms of its implications for the novelists essential task, which is that of 'creating character by revealing secret obsessions which real people do give away'. It is this understanding that accounts for her complex conception of realism.

For a critical scrutiny of Murdoch’s work one must take into account the statement she made in 1978 – “The novel itself, of course, the whole world of the novel is the expression of a world outlook... Any novelist produces a moral world and there's a kind of world outlook which can be deduced from each of the novels”.43 Elizabeth Dipple’s work scrutinises the fact that ultimate reality, “even the cosmos itself, lies behind the drifting and often frenetic bourgeois surface is the vast scent of Murdoch’s best fiction”.44 No contemporary writer struggles more ironically and ferociously against the impossibility of art than Iris Murdoch. In her critical and philosophical essays and in interviews, she argues the case for all art, not just the novel, even as she points out the near hopelessness of twentieth century theories of fiction, and the inability of the contemporary writer to achieve the excellence which characterized his great, especially nineteenth century predecessors. Dipple analyses that Murdoch’s fervent and prolific practise, fights in

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open warfare against theories and preoccupation of a milieu which encourages self concentration from both writer and reader.

Murdoch palpably believes in texts and a novelistic tradition, and sees the form as she does all art – as having an important function within human experience and knowledge. Determined to separate herself from a limited didacticism, Murdoch illustrates a strong sense of the powerful use of fiction. Much has been written about the contemporary novel where experimentalism is limited by strong realism and good story telling and in which pure experimentalism is shunned. Murdoch makes it clear that her "realism reflects a conviction about the uses of art, and in opposing it to her necessary 'magical' materials – both technical and ideological" -  

she forges a distinctive product which tries to steer clear of the mediocre art produced. Each novel presents a new milieu with new problems in depicting progress towards human consciousness and change. Murdoch never presents the ideal end but concentrates on a real and stringent depiction of the errors and resultant causality. She makes it clear that art itself has a moral base and its real function is truth-telling. Intrinsic to her study of the particular is the contrasting temptation so many of her characters have towards the kind of knowledge that demands theories to explain it. In her work The Fire and The Sun, Murdoch points

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out that the main problems with religion is that it materializes God and, all her characters long for such materialization of the ideas that govern their own lives.

Murdoch’s characters are not allowed “transcendence and their seeking of an ideal end is always brutally smashed.”46 They do not know about virtue or holiness and the best way of describing this is through the Platonic idea of the good. This religious apprehension lies at the core of Murdoch’s work. It is removed from simple realism into a more serious realism in which an external other presents the reader with an idea against which the fiction can profitably be placed.

In an earlier period of her writing, Murdoch seemed all too ready to acknowledge the split in tradition between the novels of the genres in the nineteenth century and the more flimsy productions of the twentieth century. In the last several novels, her assertion of type and seriousness have reflected an increasing alignment of her own fiction with the claims fiction made in the past. Murdoch has always argued that the artist is on his own and must work out his own way independently of his admiration of his great antecedents. She has a strong novelistic habit of infusing specific religious content into her work. She states that the basic function

of the novel is to act as an instrument of a reality felt at a complex level of human experience. Although Murdoch’s ideology has changed only slightly from time to time, her experimentation and ability to surprise underline a development of increasing seriousness. She is also capable of subtle illustrations of the mysterious qualities of human experience as she strives to unite the paradoxes of reality and realism, the peripheral but major character of the good with the failed majority of characters who populate the middle range of the ordinary world.

Murdoch conceives form and it has its direct echo in human personality and is more dependent on the nature of character and the direction of event than it had been in her early novels. Her persistent interest in the disciplines of the characters of the good continues to provide a device of unshakable authority against which the characters of the middle range can be set. The perpetual idea of a moral imperative as shown by the touchstone characters of the good serves as a reminder of what we half wish to be.

As we survey the thirty three odd years of Murdoch’s novel writing career, and the still longer period of considered yet intensely eclectic intellectual development related to it, it can only seem to us that she has

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entered obliquely and indirectly the stream of realism in which she aims to write. Murdochland has over the years, constantly moved towards new definition: drawing attention to the increasingly opaque relationship between its ritual conventions and its author's own mental landscape.