

Author and Character as Moral Pilgrim:
A Study of Iris Murdoch's A Fairly Honourable Defeat

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR AND CHARACTER AS MORAL PILGRIM:

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A FAIRLY HONOURABLE DEFEAT

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This is a study of A Fairly Honourable Defeat in the light of Iris Murdoch's philosophical views. In particular, her conception of love and the emphasis placed upon vision are central themes to be examined in the novel.

Murdoch's philosophy focuses upon vision as the most important element in morality. Clear vision is for her the essence of morality; the attainment of vision requires the elimination of the ego. Murdoch sees this same process as being crucial for the artist--an author must attempt to leave his personality behind in the creation of character so that his creations do not reflect the beliefs of the creator.

Within the novel, the characters undergo a moral evolution similar to that of the author, likened by Murdoch to a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. The fact that most of the characters fail in their attempt to transcend their egos. is indicative of the difficulty of the moral evolution called for by Murdoch.

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Introduction to Murdoch's Philosophy

Iris Murdoch is a moral philosopher as well as a novelist. It is not surprising, then, that her approach to the novel is influenced to a great degree by her philosophical stance. Her conception of love and its links with vision hold a particularly central position within her philosophy. It is this central theme that will be examined in A Fairly Honourable Defeat with a view to illuminating the author's approach to characterization within the novel. Closely interwoven with this theme is the antithetical notion of egoism or self-love, a mechanism which serves to blind one's vision. The unceasing contrast by Murdoch, both in her novel and philosophical writings, of these two opposites is at the root of her statements on contemporary life as it is, and on its potential to be something infinitely better.

A Fairly Honourable Defeat is a realistic depiction of the morally vacuous nature of contemporary society. We live, according to Murdoch, in an increasingly narcissistic society in which the trend is toward living for the moment, gratifying immediate needs and indulging, for the most part, in any form of self-attention. These pronounced tendencies contribute to our present situation of human and spiritual impoverishment. In our concern with and absorption in the self, we become

estranged from our true being. Murdoch seems determined to expose the prevailing confusion and falsehood and at the same time to search for a way out. One can compare Murdoch's impression of man in contemporary society with philosopher Simone Weil's image of the 'directionless traveller.' We will be returning to Weil's philosophy often, as we will see that Murdoch derived many of her ideas from the writings of Weil. Like Murdoch, Weil sees our present situation as resembling "that of a party of absolutely ignorant travellers who find themselves in a motor car launched at full speed and driverless across broken country."¹ For Murdoch, man can overcome this state of being and gain a sense of direction by ridding himself of what she calls, "the fat relentless ego."²

Egoism is vaguely defined by Murdoch. It is a label applied to a certain pattern of behaviour in which one always acts in such a way as to make the pursuit of one's own interests a primary and overriding concern. Although borrowed from Freudian terminology, the word is given a much less exact meaning by Murdoch. Freud saw the ego as standing behind.

¹ Simone Weil, "Sketch of Contemporary Life," in The Simone Weil Reader, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Co., 1977), p. 40. All further references to Weil's work are from this collection, hereinafter cited as S.W.R.

² Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 52; hereinafter cited as T.S.G. All further references to this work appear in the text.

the various activities of consciousness and thus what one directly perceives is interpreted as material for the ego, rather than as an object having a character in its own right.³ Murdoch refers to it as a falsifying veil which serves to conceal the external world from the viewer. She describes it as a mechanism which continually weaves a fabric of "self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams" (T.S.G., p. 59). Reluctant to face unpleasant realities the human psyche is thus tempted to "move about in a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect [it] from pain" (T.S.G., p. 79). Also referred to as selfishness, this character trait consists of an exclusive concern for one's own self, in the sense that one is willing to promote the interests or welfare of others only insofar as this is conducive to promoting one's own interests, and is willing to sacrifice the interests of others and even to harm them when this is considered instrumental to promoting or safeguarding one's own interests. Unselfishness, on the other hand, is a direct or uncalculated concern for the interests of others. Selfishness is considered by Murdoch a vice whereas unselfishness is a virtue. Indeed, she considers selfishness to be the very essence of immorality and holds unselfishness to be the principal moral virtue.

³ Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955).

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Insofar as unselfishness involves self-renunciation and self-abasement, and a direct uncalculated concern for the interests of others, it is seen as virtually impossible to achieve. Human beings are so constituted, Murdoch holds, that the pursuit of their own interests is almost always their primary aim and, in cases where this conflicts with the interests of others, it is their overriding concern (T.S.G., pp. 78-79).

The moral evolution which human beings must undergo is likened by Murdoch to a pilgrimage from appearance to reality, a process whereby our vision is altered in the direction of unselfishness toward what is external to us. To see people and objects in their true nature and in their proper relationships to each other is the task of the moral pilgrim, which must be undertaken as part of the moral life (T.S.G., p. 92).⁴ It is a long and arduous psychological trek in which the disciplined overcoming of self is of paramount importance. Murdoch's technique of using the Quest in the novel causes the total meaning of the novel to be integrated into its form. The characters in the novel, each one in his or her own particular way, are paradigms of the moral pilgrim.

⁴See also Iris Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 2.

The characteristic mark of the active moral agent is moral vision, the ability to direct his attention toward something or someone external to himself and thus away from the "proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and image" (T.S.G., p. 67), which characterizes the ego. The concept of "attention" is borrowed from Simone Weil and connotes a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (T.S.G., p. 34). It is a "refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one" (T.S.G., p. 38).

Simone Weil sees it as consisting of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object:

It means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thought; as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.

Such perception is the result of a "moral discipline" (T.S.G., p. 38). One must come to exercise some control over the direction and focus of one's vision; "clear vision is the

⁵Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God," SSW:RR, p. 49.

result of moral effort" (T.S.G., p. 37). It is a moral labour to realize the independence of things outside of ourselves. Our narcissism is endless and only by various methods of dissociation that disrupt ordinary perception can we get beyond the self to a sense of the other.

The illusion of perspective has placed man at the centre of space in a way that each person imagines that he is situated at the centre of the world, and as such we live an unreal existence. To give up our imaginary position as the centre, to renounce it, is to awaken to what is real. This involves a transformation that will fundamentally affect our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions. In so doing this we will see the same colours, and hear the same sounds, but not in the same way. Things are perceived in such a condition without emotion or attachment, without hate or desire; they are seen just as they are.

Indeed, obedience to reality is for Murdoch an exercise of love. Love is defined by Murdoch as "a knowledge of the individual" (T.S.G., p. 28), a "non-violent apprehension of differences,"⁶ an attachment to something or someone other than oneself, which one's consciousness cannot distort or deny. It is precisely through one's "capacity to love, that is to see, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists" (T.S.G., p. 66). The love which is an essential

⁶Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," Chicago Review, 13 (Aut. 1959), 54.

ingredient in the moral life is to be distinguished from the everyday notion of romantic love. Human love, she notes, is normally "too profoundly possessive and also too 'mechanical' to be a place of vision" (T.S.G., p. 75).. Certainly it is depicted in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* as a tremendously self-centred experience for the most part. The dominance of the theme of love in the novel is indicative of its importance to the moral vision. True, unselfish love, she suggests, "is not perhaps thoroughly natural to human beings."⁷ The ideal love called for by Murdoch is similar in nature to the Christian ethic:

Love is patient and kind; Love is not jealous and boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Not surprisingly, it is the humble man in whom love best manifests itself. Humility, for Murdoch, "is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice, it is a selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues" (T.S.G., p. 95).

⁷Murdoch, as quoted in Michael O. Bellamy, "An Interview with Iris Murdoch," Contemporary Literature, 18 (1977), 138.

⁸The New Testament, Revised Standard Edition, Catholic Edition (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965), 1 Cor. 13, 4-8. All further references are to this edition.

The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, is able to see other things as they are. Although he is not by definition the good man, he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good. The perception of what is real is thus sustained and fulfilled by love. Philosophical knowledge is loving knowledge and to love is to know.

It is in Murdoch's conception of the Good that her ideas are brought to a focus. She does not believe in the traditional notion of God. As she notes, "there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and change" (T.S.G., p. 79). There is however a transcendent perfection although perhaps it is rarely exemplified in the world. It is not visible; it is, however, the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous coexists with a vision relatively uncluttered by the distorting self (T.S.G., p. 70). Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, "to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness" (T.S.G., p. 93). Good partakes of the infinite, elusive character of reality. Again we see the importance of vision in the moral life. Entry into the good life involves being able to see reality in its infinite variety. It is through love that one attains an increasing awareness of the Good; by attending to the Good "purely without self" one gains

"an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world" (T.S.G., p. 70). Simone Weil parallels this thought when she says:

To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centres and that the true centre is outside the world, [this is an act of consent to reality, and] such consent is love.

Murdoch often speaks of the limits of man's knowledge and cognitive faculty although never denying the possibility of transcending. The sought-for illumination occurs in the thinking itself, but in a thinking that differs from the usual intellectual sort. It occurs in a transcending of everything which thought apprehends in clear determinateness. Such thinking strives toward the point where suddenly, in a single moment, the good itself, that which surpasses comprehension and can never be captured, is present to the insight. But is this sudden, momentary illumination ever attained? Murdoch seems to have created an extreme tension in the reader, as though it can never be fully realized. It is perhaps the Garden scene in A Fairly Honourable Defeat where the perceiver of beauty undergoes a sort of mystical transformation that this type of awareness comes closest to being achieved.¹⁰

⁹Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," S.W.R., p. 471.

¹⁰This scene is discussed more fully below.

Integral to her moral philosophy is her concept of freedom. Murdoch attempts to show in her philosophical writings that contemporary moral philosophers have erred in holding that moral differences are differences of choice rather than of vision, and in making goodness a function of the will rather than an object of insight or knowledge (T.S.G., pp. 35, 41-42). In seeking to restore vision as morally central she ascribes a different and lesser place to human freedom. She expressly agrees with Simone Weil that "will is obedience, not resolution" (T.S.G., p. 40). The obedience, moreover, is obedience to reality. In its popular sense freedom is a name assigned to "the self-assertive movements of deluded selfish will which because of our ignorance we take to be something autonomous" (T.S.G., p. 100). Freedom in its proper meaning entails a liberation from fantasy and the resulting experience of accurate vision. A proper discernment and exploration of all the circumstances of a situation yields but one choice and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at:

The idea of a patient, loving regard directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement, but as something very much more like obedience.

(T.S.G., p. 40)

Thus we see the nexus in which love, freedom, vision and the Good come together in Murdoch's thought. In subsequent

chapters we will explore the relationship of these ideas to Murdoch's literary style, and in particular her approach to characterization.

Philosophical Context of Murdoch's Thought

Much of Murdoch's thought is rooted in Eastern and Western philosophy and has striking parallels with traditional mystical theology as well. To set the ideas of Murdoch into perspective, then, some review of their sources and influences is required, although this examination will necessarily be sketchy.

Plato is a dominant Western influence on Murdoch's thought. Her notion of the Good and her equation of love with wisdom have their origin in Plato. For Plato, the sun symbolizes the transcendent reality he termed 'The Good.'¹¹ The sun is as necessary to vision as the Good is to the realm of thought. We do not look upon the sun directly but rather we see everything in its light. If the mind is directed toward that which is illuminated by the light of the good, it knows or is in possession of truth. Just as vision is dependent upon sunlight but is not the sun itself, so too knowledge is related to the good but is not the good itself. It is certain that just as without light the eye is without sight, so too without an orientation of one's being toward the good, the mind is devoid of all true knowledge.

The equation of love with wisdom is made by Plato by ascribing to Eros the twin symbols of the ascent to the eternal and the light that shows the way. In The Symposium,

¹¹Plato, The Republic, trans. B. Jowett (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 248-50.

the participants are unable to define love exactly and thus it is touched on only in myth.¹² Love appears in many figures, but all are directed toward the One, the true absolute love that bears men upward. In Plato's discussion of love, sexuality is seen as having diverse effects. Its enchantment is the origin of the ascent because the sight of beauty inspires a recollection of the eternal; but when sexuality becomes an end in itself it is debased, and serves only to obscure one's insight.¹³

Murdoch differs from Plato in that she does not require that the physical self be discarded, thereby liberating our spiritual selves, but rather that the spiritual portion, the mind or psyche, be cleared of that which obstructs our vision. Sensuous beauty as such need not be left behind in the process of our ascent as it serves the very important function of being a continual source of inspiration (T.S.G., p. 90). While Murdoch maintains the existence of Good, she emphasizes that we must direct our concentration not upon it, but instead upon the minute and particular details of this world which will in turn result in a temporary revelation to the perceiver of the transcendent.

Murdoch is in agreement with the Platonic notion that

¹²Plato, The Symposium, trans. W. Hamilton (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965).

¹³Ibid., pp. 92-95.

philosophical thinking is upward-tending in its orientation, and yet this ascending movement is not without its setbacks. A Fairly Honourable Defeat testifies to the fact that people vacillate and have moments when they fail, and fall, and begin anew this movement of love. In a myth in the Symposium Love is fittingly depicted as the son of contrivance and poverty: "on one and the same day he will live and flourish when he is in plenty, and also meet his death, and come to life again through the vigor he inherits from his father; but what he wins he always loses . . ."¹⁴ Another myth to be found in Phaedrus further portrays the difficulty of achieving the plane of transcendence. The soul here is seen as the chariot of reason, drawn by two winged horses, one disciplined and obedient, tending upward, the other oriented toward the pursuit of its own sensuous desires, unruly, and tending downward.¹⁵

Perhaps Plato's myth of the cave is the most extraordinary metaphor for the ways of human life and for transcendence as the essence of human existence.¹⁶ Murdoch refers to it often in her philosophical writings as a paradigm, illustrating the human condition and the knowledge that is possible in it.

¹⁴Plato, Symposium, p. 82

¹⁵Plato, Phaedrus, trans. R. Hackforth (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1952), pp. 69-70.

¹⁶Plato, The Republic, pp. 253-58.

The myth begins with men living inside a cave, their bodies chained so they cannot move. They can see only what is in front of them. Behind them a fire is burning and between the fire and the prisoners men pass carrying various objects. Of these objects the prisoners see only the shadows cast by the fire on the wall opposite from them. They perceive the shadows of the objects as the objects themselves. The prisoners are subsequently unchained and when one of them is compelled to turn and look upon the fire his eyes are blinded. Believing the shadows to be more true than what is shown to him now, he prefers instead to take refuge in the knowledge of the shadows to which he is accustomed. He is dragged up the slope leading to the entrance of the cave and emerges into the sunlight. Here he feels only pain and is dazzled by the brilliance of the light. Gradually becoming accustomed to the light, he eventually sees not mere reflections but all things in their full reality. He proceeds to reason that it is the sun which is the source of all things seen and in turn realizes the false notions that had formerly governed his reason. He then returns to the cave to liberate the others from their delusion but fails to do so, the others preferring to remain in a state familiar to them.

Certain ideas and images from this myth may be found in A Fairly Honourable Defeat: the image of man as one who dwells in darkness, light as a metaphor of moral and spiritual

perfection, and the sun as the Good and the end of human existence. Of further significance is the theme of 'conversion,' where the prisoner turns from his former position in the cave and takes the arduous path to the sun. The path for both Plato and Murdoch involves moving from the world of appearance out into the external world. Murdoch makes clear however that one does not transcend the world in order to abandon it; for her the movement toward light does not lead to a solitary ecstasy.

A more contemporary influence on Murdoch and perhaps of equal impact is Simone Weil, a Jewish philosopher-mystic whom Murdoch cites as the source of many of her ideas on contemporary life and the need to overcome the self. It is Weil's concepts of affliction and decreation in particular, which have strongly influenced Murdoch and which will be examined here.

Both Murdoch and Weil appreciate that suffering or affliction has an educational value. Weil has stated that as long as the play of circumstances around us "leaves our being almost intact, or only half impaired, we more or less believe that the world is created and controlled by ourselves." It is affliction that reveals, suddenly and to our very great surprise, that we are totally mistaken."¹⁷ Murdoch notes that people are unable to acknowledge the reality of afflic-

¹⁷Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., p. 462.

tion. It is readily falsified in some way so as to make it bearable. Directed by sado-masochistic impulses, a further tool of the ingenious self, our attention can be drawn back into the self, while at the same time we are deluded into thinking that the experience is somehow 'good!' (T.S.G., p. 68).

Weil states that to acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself,

I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort. To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being. It is the state of extreme and total humiliation which is also the condition for passing over to the truth.¹⁸

The knowledge of affliction is the key to Weil's religious meditations. In his acceptance of affliction, man accepts the decreative process and thereby becomes aware that he is totally mistaken in the arrogant presumption "that the world is created and controlled by ourselves."¹⁹ Affliction, she believes, is necessary so that the human creature

¹⁸Weil, "Human Personality," S.W.R., p. 332.

¹⁹Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., p. 462.

may uncreate itself. Along with beauty it is the only thing, piercing and devastating enough to penetrate the soul. "There is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical."²⁰

It would be an error to reproach Weil or Murdoch for having a morbid preoccupation with affliction. They are not interested in it as a sensation: "Affliction is not a psychological state; it is a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances."²¹ Weil's concept of 'decreation' indicates a progress in man's self-knowledge of his nothingness. In the act of accepting suffering, man begins to climb the ladder of transcendence. Her doctrine of decreation is one in which man renounces and purifies the self. Decreation is a spiritual act devastating the 'I' in one; it is a stripping away and renunciation of the ego resulting in an ultimate transfiguration. She defines decreation as making "something created pass into the uncreated."²² As she writes, "affliction when it is consented to and accepted and loved, is truly a baptism. [It is] a more or less attenuated equivalent of death."²³

²⁰Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., pp. 440-41.

²¹Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., p. 462.

²²Weil, "Decreation," S.W.R., p. 350.

²³Panichas, S.W.R., p. 401.

An integral part of the decreative process is the removal of oneself from the mainstream of society. What is sacred in a human being is the impersonal in him and, according to Weil, "this is never achieved by a man who thinks of himself as a member of a collectivity . . . a collectivity must dissolve into separate persons before the impersonal can be reached."²⁴ For Weil, "the collective is the object of all idolatry, that is what chains us to the earth," and if society is the cave, "the way out is solitude."²⁵ Excellence then seems to be in proportion to obscurity; the one who is best is the one who is least observed or distinguished.

As with affliction it is equally difficult for one to comprehend the ideas of Evil and Death. Murdoch notes this when she says that "our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic, and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work."²⁶ In The Fire and the Sun Murdoch defines evil as the degeneration of that which was originally good into egoism.²⁷ In this sense she is closer to the Christian notion of Evil than to

²⁴Weil, "Human Personality," S.W.R., p. 319.

²⁵Weil, "The Great Beast," S.W.R., p. 392.

²⁶Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," Encounter, 16 (January, 1961), 20.

²⁷Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, pp. 78-80, 82-83.

the concept of evil held by Weil. Weil describes creation as "good broken up into pieces and scattered throughout evil."²⁸ In this sense her view of Evil is essentially Manichean in nature, in that Evil is depicted as an ultimate constituent of the universe, co-ordinate with Good. Christian thought, however, maintains that evil represents the going-wrong of something that in itself is good. The universe is good, which is to say that matter is not in itself evil. Everything that has being is good in its own way and degree, except insofar as it may have become spoiled or corrupted.

Christianity has never maintained that God's purpose in the creation of the world was to construct a paradise whose inhabitants would experience continual happiness, at least not after man's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The world is seen instead as a place in which free beings dealing with the burdens and challenges of their existence may attain eternal life. Although not believing in any sort of afterlife, Murdoch concurs with this notion of the world as a means to something higher. The death of Christ, the supreme evil turned to supreme good, is the paradigm for the distinctively Christian reaction to evil. Viewed from this standpoint, evils do not cease to be evils, and certainly, in view of Christ's healing work, they cannot be said to have been sent by God. Yet the Christian attitude toward

²⁸Weil, "Evil," S.W.R., p. 381.

tragedy seems to be that it may serve as a means whereby one is brought closer to God. As the greatest of all evils, the crucifixion of Christ, was made the occasion of man's redemption, so good can be won from other evils. The Christian response to calamity is to accept the adversities, pains, and afflictions which life brings, in order that they may be turned into a positive spiritual force.

It is in this culminating notion that the thoughts of Murdoch and Weil also display an affinity. Perhaps it is best expressed by Weil when she observes that "the world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through."²⁹ She says that the essence of created things is to be intermediaries or bridges between the temporal and the spiritual worlds, between man and God. An image of this eternalizing process is that of two prisoners with adjoining cells who communicate with each other by knocking on the wall between them. The wall is the object separating them but it is also their means of communication. "It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.... This world, the realm of necessity, offers us absolutely nothing except means."³⁰ Things exist so that we may pass along them, and by passing along them we go toward the transcendent. Plato likewise can be seen to embrace this attitude

²⁹Weil, "Metaxu," S.W.R., p. 363.

³⁰Weil, "Metaxu," S.W.R., pp. 363-64.

in his conception of love, although he concentrates almost exclusively on the idea of love as opposed to actual love between individuals.³¹

The destruction of the self called for by Murdoch and Weil requires a kind of discipline similar in nature to the Zen meditation technique, and achieves essentially the same result, the renunciation of the ego in order to identify with the universe outside time and space.³² The technique is aimed at the repudiation of the subject-object relationship, whereby the mind is identified with that which is perceived. Enlightenment is an experience of absolute unity; it is beyond subject and object; the empirical ego is so submerged that there is no longer "I" but pure existence.

In Four Quartets, Eliot speaks of "music heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music/while the music lasts."³³ The moment is so intense and the music heard so deeply that there is no longer a person listening and music being listened to; there is no "I" opposed to music; there is simply music without subject and object, for both are submerged in one. In his play The Cocktail Party, Eliot

³¹ Plato, The Symposium, passim.

³² Thomas Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), n.p.

³³ T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1943), Part V, p. 27.

has Celia Copleston exclaim, "But what or whom I loved, or what in me was loving, I do not know."³⁴ Here she has clearly lost her ego to such an extent that something within her is loving something else, but both the subject and the object of the love are indefinable.

This loss of the empirical ego and the resulting loss of the distance between the observer and the object observed is similarly echoed in Christian thought when St. Paul says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Letter of Paul to the Galatians 2, 20), which would indicate that Paul has lost his own ego in the contemplation of Christ. In order that Christ may come to fullness within the Christian something must die, for "he that would save his life must lose it" (Matt. 16, 25). This notion of death to the self is very near to the Zen doctrine of the obliteration of the ego. The destruction of the self in Christianity is the necessary preparation to the finding of a real self in Christ.

In the Gospel Christ asks of his followers that they detach themselves from the world (Matt. 16, 24). To be a disciple of Jesus, one must sell what one has and give it to the poor (Matt. 19, 21); one must renounce everything that one possesses. The logic of this notion is completely opposite to the logic of the world, in which the most excellent man is

³⁴T. S. Eliot, The Cocktail Party (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), Act II, p. 123.

the one who is socially eminent above the rest, and strongly parallels Weil's belief that one's excellence is in proportion to one's social obscurity.

Murdoch incorporates this belief into her novel, as there are many scenes within A Fairly Honourable Defeat where the reader perceives that society has a negative spiritual effect on the individual character. It blinds the individual, who is content to play a role and bask comfortably in the light of social approval. It is not surprising that the characters who are clearly recognized in the novel by their peers as social misfits, namely Tallis, Simon, and Axel, who thus exist on the perimeter of the social circle, come closest to spiritual insight.

The Pilgrimage in the early church was often motivated by a "contempt for society."³⁵ The followers of St. Jerome, for example, "saw in their pilgrimage an act of self denial, of voluntary exile whose object was to take them away from . . . the damnation to which the rest of world was destined."³⁶ The pilgrimage is a means of moral development, involving a process of self-exile, of social and physical isolation. These meanings are evoked by Murdoch when she refers to those who attempt to see beyond themselves as "moral pilgrims"

³⁵Jonathan Sumption, Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 94.

³⁶Ibid., p. 94.

(T.S.G., p. 92).

The concept of the moral pilgrimage which Murdoch sees as being applicable to both character and author has as its source the scheme of the ascent described by Plato in his myth of the cave. There is also a very strong parallel between this essential feature in Murdoch's thought and the Christian mystical tradition, so much so that the essence of Murdoch's thought can be said to be a synthesizing and contemporizing of the mystical quest for union with God.

Although an analysis of Christian mystical theology is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note some of the parallels that can be drawn between the characteristics of the mystical experience and the sought-for end in Murdoch's moral pilgrimage. Of prime importance is the fact that the mystic apprehends reality through a sort of spiritual intuition.³⁷ Murdoch's novels clearly show her belief that wisdom and truth cannot be acquired by interrogation or debate. In A Fairly Honourable Defeat academics such as Rupert are depicted flailing about in a sea of trivia, whereas Tallis seems to possess his goodness unconsciously. In fact the appeal of Tallis is his aloofness to speculation, explanation, and rhetoric. His aversion to particular forms and structures invests him with a special measure of knowledge. One

³⁷ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), p. 81.

of the characteristics of the mystical experience arrived at by William James's study is that the episode "defies expression, that no report of its contents can be given in words."³⁸ James attributes a noetic quality to the mystical state, noting that the insights erupt from "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."³⁹ These insights are "illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate."⁴⁰ Certainly one of the difficulties faced by Murdoch in The Sovereignty of Good is that her objective language falls short of adequately describing the experience of the Good. This inadequacy is best rationalized by seeing the task as really one of translating into words an experience of the ineffable.

The complete metamorphosis called for by Murdoch and Weil, and present in the writings of Plato, and in both Zen and Christian mysticism, is essentially a process of death and resurrection. William Inge's study of English mystics cites recognition of the principle of death as a prerequisite of spiritual life as "the strength of the best mystical teaching."⁴¹ All of the aforementioned systems of thought

³⁸ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New Hyde Park, N. Y.: University Books, 1963), p. 380.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 380.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 381.

⁴¹ William R. Inge, Studies of English Mystics (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, n.d.), p. 108.

are constructed around the same motif of death and resurrection. This motif is central to Murdoch's thinking; her philosophy seeks not to explain reality, but to promote a clear vision of it, which is contingent upon this same process of death and rebirth.

Murdoch is close to those existentialist writers who depict the world as absurd. Men live in a bubble of illusion created, and maintained by their own blurred vision and distorted self-images. It would be incorrect, however, to view Murdoch as an existentialist. In her book Sartre, Romantic Rationalist, Murdoch sees Sartre as continuing in the tradition of Descartes who was unable to trust the reality of what he perceived in the universe and who thus concluded that his own existence was the only certainty.⁴² Such an emphasis on the factors of isolation and dependence on self causes an inordinate preoccupation with the self, with the result that contact is lost with the world outside of oneself. Murdoch notes that "It is on the lonely awareness of the individual and not on the individual's integration with his society that his attention centres."⁴³

Murdoch seems to be in agreement with portions of Sartre's philosophy, but not with the fundamental idea that human life is not explicable by reference to anything higher than man.

⁴²Murdoch, Sartre, Romantic Rationalist (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967).

⁴³Ibid., p. 25.

A brief introduction to this complex topic may be found in Sartre's work, Existentialism and Humanism.⁴⁴ In it, Sartre declares that there is no God and therefore human beings are neither created nor pervaded by anyone or anything that can have a plan or idea of what they will be like before they come into existence or before they develop by their own free action. This is to say that "existence comes before essence."⁴⁵ If one thinks of God as the creator, we view him as a "supernal artisan" which is to say that, "each individual man is the realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding."⁴⁶ However, if God does not exist "there is no human nature because there is no God to have a conception of it."⁴⁷ Murdoch's concept of the Good does not contain the notion of it as the creator of life and thus she would agree with Sartre's idea that there is no plan or idea of our personality before it appears, and we make our own essence by our own free choice, although for Murdoch the emphasis is placed on vision as opposed to will as the means to fulfillment. It is in this sense that some existentialists speak of the absurdity of human existence,

⁴⁴Jean Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism, trans. Philip Mairet (London; Methuen, 1948).

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 28.

meaning that it is not explicable by reference to anything more fundamental. Here Murdoch breaks with Existentialist thought. She cannot agree with Sartre when he says with the disappearance of God "there disappears with him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven."⁴⁸

Sartre denies that there is any a priori good: "We have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse [for our actions]." ⁴⁹ We are alone and without constraint. Sartre sees man as "nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is."⁵⁰ He would disagree with Murdoch's belief that as beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of and submission to this reality. Both suggest that we are pilgrims in this world, questing for meaning and wholeness. Whereas for Sartre the quest is existential, for Murdoch it is metaphysical; her quest is for the basic moral precept in a world that is rapidly losing its belief in the value of anything beyond itself.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

Murdoch's Aesthetic

Much of what has been written by Murdoch in her philosophical essays can be summarized as an attack on the problem of the real and illusory selves. The enthronement of self, and the self-conscious attempt to make all men over in the self's image are, Murdoch believes, the root problems of human existence. Although she attempts to bring about a change in the reader in this respect, this is not achieved by the issuing of moral directives; instead, she attempts to induce transformation within her reader in two ways. The first method by which she communicates her meaning is through the use of various symbols, allusions, and structural devices, all of which will be discussed later in this paper. The second method, which will be the focus of discussion in this chapter, is her attempt to apply her moral philosophy to her characterization. Essentially Murdoch's idea of fiction, and art in general, is profoundly moral, in that she sees the depiction of realistically perceived characters and a detailed portrayal of their world as having the effect on the reader of reminding him of the variety and opacity of people and objects.

Murdoch presents us with a new way of seeing and valuing. The essence of her communication is to make the reader aware

of the necessity of changing his perceptual habits. In her article "Against Dryness," she further elaborates on this truth-telling aspect of literature:

Literature has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy. Through literature we can ~~rediscover~~ a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can arm us against consolation and fantasy and can help us recover from the ailments of Romanticism. If it can be said to have a task now, that is surely its task. But if it is to perform it, prose must recover its formal glory, eloquence and discourse must return. I would connect ^{elo-}eloquence with the attempt to speak the truth.⁵¹

Critics have often questioned whether for Murdoch the artist is a function of the philosopher, who uses the vehicle of the novel as a means of communicating the truth. As one study of Murdoch has noted, "the critical reception of [her] novels has been dominated by those who insist on reading them for their philosophical statements."⁵² Certainly she claims morality to be the supreme criterion as a judge of the truth in art, but for her the novel is not a mere literary formulation of a philosophical notion except insofar as "it shows a certain consonance with her ideas about what a novel ought to be like."⁵³ Dipple likewise comments that Murdoch's reputation as a philosophical novelist is unwarranted:

⁵¹ Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," p. 20.

⁵² Donna Gerstenberger, Iris Murdoch (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 14.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 15.

Certainly the persistence of philosophical allusion cannot justify this, and it is true indeed that Murdoch's greatest achievement as a novelist is in old purely novelistic issues like character, description, plot and technical brilliance. To the degree that there is a philosophical issue in her work, it is Platonic and moral, and functions at the same absolutely background level as her serious use of Shakespearean references or paintings. Although critics have talked a great deal about Sartre and Kant, the ultimate working out of her fictions is much more concentrated on causality and the peculiar structures of human personality.⁵⁴

Murdoch's aesthetic is a moral activity involving total attention on the part of the artist, and this has its literary embodiment in the characterization of persons and events portrayed.

It is the artist who, for Murdoch, is the paradigm of the good person, since the true artist is conscious of the necessity to be obedient to reality. This obedience involves a self-renunciation which eliminates the subjective approach to things and people, so that one no longer sees all things from the point of view of a limited individual self that is constituted as the centre of the universe. As seen earlier, there is an express similarity between this idea and T. S. Eliot's ideas on art.⁵⁵ Most notable is the statement by Eliot that the poet must undergo a process of depersonalization; "The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacri-

⁵⁴Elizabeth Dipple, Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit (London: Methuen and Co., 1982), p. 313.

⁵⁵See above, p. 22.

face, a continual extinction of personality."⁵⁶ In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot speaks of the poetic process as being impersonal, not an expression of personality but an escape from it.⁵⁷ Murdoch echoes this in her statement that virtue is the same in the artist as in the good man, in that it is a selfless attention to nature. (T.S.G., p. 41). As the analogue of the good man, the artist is "the lover who, nothing himself, lets other things be through him."⁵⁸

Murdoch shares a similarity in this respect with the Catholic monk and poet, Thomas Merton, who sees the artistic experience, at its highest, as a natural analogue of the mystical experience. Merton states that the artistic experience "produces a kind of intuitive perception of reality through a sort of affective identification with the object contemplated . . . This means simply a knowledge that comes about as it were by the identification of natures."⁵⁹ Merton has made much the same observation with regard to himself. He noted that

when we apprehend God through the reality of concepts, we see him as an object separate from our-

⁵⁶T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 17-

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 17.

⁵⁸Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," Yale Review, 49 (1959), 270.

⁵⁹Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), p. 202.

selves, as a being from whom we are alienated, even though we believe that He loves us and we love Him. In contemplation this division disappears, for contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God not as a separate object but as the Reality within our own reality . . . Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation.

Murdoch has likewise phrased this same idea of "how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention."⁶¹

Eliot parallels this thought in "Swinburne as Poet" when he states that "Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object, that the two are identified."⁶² Thus when Murdoch states that the great artist sees his creations in the light of justice and mercy, she means that the direction of attention is "outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world and the ability to so direct attention is love" (T.S.G., p. 66). Murdoch's idea that the artistic experience is a fundamentally moral experience is best expressed in The Fire and the Sun, where she likens the experience of art to a religious experience:

⁶⁰ Thomas Merton, The New Man (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962), p. 18.

⁶¹ Frank Kermode, "House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists," Partisan Review, 30 (1963), 115.

⁶² T. S. Eliot, "Swinburne as Poet," in Selected Essays, p. 327.

Good art . . . provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying. Our relation to such art though probably never entirely pure is remarkably unselfish.⁶³

Such an orientation leads the artist to a passive state. This passivity is not a state of lethargy or inaction. It is essentially an attitude of the artist toward his experience, a desire to yield to life. This active receptiveness, not unlike Weil's idea of attention or Merton's ideas concerning contemplation, is an integral part of Murdoch's aesthetic stance in her writing, and in particular her approach to characterization. Such an approach is one of

delight in their independent existence as other people, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings towards those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom.⁶⁴

This is a poetic and philosophical stance which values humility on the part of the author as a strength in the creation of characters in the novel. There is nothing original in this perspective. It has been shown to parallel the thought of Eliot and Merton, and as well it shares an affinity with

⁶³ Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, pp. 76-77.

⁶⁴ John Bayley, The Characters of Love (London: Constable and Co., 1960), p. 7.

Keats's doctrine of "negative capability," which is essentially the power of creating without having a vision of one's own.⁶⁵ Keats felt that as an artist he had arrived at a state in which he was without an identity: "a poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity—he is continually in for, and filling some other body."⁶⁶ To be receptive to reality is to feel an empathy with the natural world, a virtual reverence toward that which is sensed. Wordsworth expresses this attitude when he says that "we can feed this mind of ours in a wise passiveness."⁶⁷

Whitman states in Song of Myself:

Now I will do nothing but listen
To accrue what I hear into this song, to
let sounds contribute toward it.⁶⁸

On the other hand, an artist always shapes reality to suit his aesthetic ends. Murdoch's manipulation of realistic detail, as we will see, is designed to create the illusion of her characters' independence. Murdoch attempts to incorporate in her art this stance of openness and humility, thereby recognizing the interdependence of every aspect of the natural world and at the same time its particularness. It is thus

⁶⁵"To George and Thomas Keats," 21 Dec. 1817, Letter 9, Letters of John Keats, ed. Stanley Gardner (London: Univ. of London Press, 1965), p. 67.

⁶⁶"To Richard Woodhouse," 27 Oct. 1818, Letter 30, in Gardner, ed., p. 121.

⁶⁷William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply," ll. 23-24.

⁶⁸Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, ll. 582-83.

understandable when she condemns 'ego art' which studies the human mind as if it were cut off from the rest of experience. Great art, she notes, shares an affinity with beauty and nature in that all serve as a means to a higher reality:

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 . . . an unsentimental contemplation exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen.

(T.S.G., p. 65)

Murdoch has often expressed her admiration for the writing of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and George Eliot, for in such art one is able to learn something about "the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity that does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life" (T.S.G., p. 65).

This concern for the loss of self on the part of Murdoch has thus been seen to be an integral factor in Murdoch's approach to characterization. John Bayley has best expressed this interrelationship between the creation of fictional characters and the theme of love:

For the author to see a character with the vision of love is rare indeed; more often he is in love with his own vision, and with his characters as projections of it; and the novel, Narcissus-like, comes to love only itself. But the great conventional character can only be created by love, by our delight in the existence of another person; and conversely . . . the reality of love can only

be conveyed through the medium of such characters.⁶⁹

Good art, for Murdoch, is not a projection of the author's personal obsessions and wishes. Rather, Murdoch would agree with Simone Weil when she says that the role of the artist is to "admire the world and pierce through the film of unreality that veils it and makes of it, for nearly all men . . . a dream or stage set."⁷⁰ Murdoch loves the nineteenth-century novel precisely because it comes closest to fulfilling this objective. It contains for the most part a plurality of real characters, presented naturalistically in a large social scene:

[Their] social scene is a life-giving framework and not a set of dead conventions or stereotyped settings inhabited by stock characters. And the individuals, portrayed in the novels are free, independent of their author, and not merely puppets in the exteriorization of some closely locked psychological conflict of [the author].⁷¹

Indeed, the dominant characteristic of the nineteenth-century novelist was his essential tolerance toward his characters. Murdoch describes George Eliot, for example, as displaying "a real apprehension of persons other than [herself] as having

⁶⁹ Bayley, pp. 38-39.

⁷⁰ Weil, "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," S.W.R., p. 478.

⁷¹ Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," p. 257.

a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves."⁷²

If, as has been described, the same detached, objective attention that is called for in moral situations is required of the artist, one can thus conclude that the failure of the artist to transcend selfish considerations is a moral failure on his part. Murdoch concludes this when she states,

Anyone who has attempted to write a novel will have discovered this difficulty in the special form which it takes when one is dealing with fictitious characters. Is one going to be able to present any character other than oneself who is more than a conventional puppet? How soon one discovers that, however much one is in the ordinary sense 'interested in people,' this interest has left one far short of possessing the knowledge required to create a real character who is not oneself. It is impossible, it seems to me, not to see one's failure here as a sort of spiritual failure.⁷³

The novel should be a "house fit for free characters to live in,"⁷⁴ with the result that the characters inhabiting such a world are "the literary equivalent of the moral idea of the real impenetrable human person."⁷⁵

Murdoch has acknowledged that art can falsely represent

⁷²Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful," p. 257.

⁷³Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful," p. 269.

⁷⁴Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful," p. 271.

⁷⁵A. S. Byatt, Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 11.

truth to a large degree because of the author's temptation to impose form where it is not always appropriate. Although the question of Murdoch's use of form in A Fairly Honourable Defeat will be discussed later in this paper in relation to the ideas of McCarthy and Booth, it is appropriate at this point to outline Murdoch's ideas on this subject as they comprise a basic part of her aesthetic theory.

The idea of form in art is, for Murdoch, a delicate question. On the one hand, "it is the absolute essence of art,"⁷⁶ and yet at the same time it can be art's greatest menace. The activity of the artist allows for "a gratification of the ego, and a free omnipotent imposition of form."⁷⁷ In this sense art becomes "a form of self-indulgence," and results in the production of bad art.⁷⁸ The form or structure of a novel must not serve as a consolation to its author. This is to say that it must not "stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter."⁷⁹ To ignore this is to present a deceptive view of reality. The form imposed by the author upon his creation must not be at variance with

⁷⁶Kermode, p. 63.

⁷⁷Bellamy, p. 135.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 135.

⁷⁹Kermode, p. 63.

the contingent nature of reality. The essence of morality in art "has to do with not imposing form, except appropriately and cautiously and carefully and with attention to appropriate detail."⁸⁰ It is thus that, as discussed earlier, the greatest act for Murdoch is 'impersonal.' This is because

It shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. Of course, too, artists are pattern makers. The claims of form and the question of how much form to elicit constitutes one of the chief problems of art. But it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true that we are most highly moved and enlightened.

(T.S.G., p. 65)

Murdoch states in The Fire and the Sun that learning an art is "fundamentally . . . learning how to make a formal utterance of a perceived truth and render it splendidly worthy of a trained purified attention without falsifying it in the process."⁸¹ Form in art is properly seen by Murdoch as being "the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe" (T.S.G., p. 86). Life is random and incomplete, and it is Murdoch's concern somehow to reconcile in her novels these two features of form and formlessness, to present that which is contingent within the formal confines of the novel. To be good art, the novel must reveal the minute and random detail of the world; its transience and contingency are not

⁸⁰Bellamy, p. 35.

⁸¹Murdoch, The Fire and the Sun, pp. 83-84.

concealed.

One method used by Murdoch to capture this sense of the transience of life is to fashion within the novel a sense of incompleteness. As she notes in her article, "Salvation by Words,"

Art is not discredited if we realize that it is based on and partly consists of ordinary human jumble, incoherence, accident, sex . . . great art, especially literature . . . carries a built in self critical recognition of its incompleteness. It accepts and celebrates jumble, and the bafflement of the mind by the world. The incomplete pseudo object, the work of art, is a lucid commentary upon itself.⁸²

Art shows us that human life is chancy and incomplete, and in so doing the reader is improved morally: he is reminded of the variety and opacity of reality, a revelation that might not otherwise occur in his daily existence. The novel thus is a

place where the nature of morality can be seen. It reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance; it exhibits virtue in its true guise in the context of death and chance.

(T.S.G., p. 88)

That the reader is brought to a deeper understanding of reality

⁸²Murdoch, "Salvation by Words," The New York Review of Books, 18 (15 June 1972), p. 4.

is not however to say that Murdoch's technique is purposefully didactic. As she notes, "it is of course a fact that if art is love then art improves us morally, but this is, as it were, accidental."⁸³

Murdoch applies the term 'dryness' to the work of writers who are unable to comprehend in their work the contingency of life: "The dry writer is reductive; he substitutes complicated forms for the complexity of experience."⁸⁴ The necessary attention to reality is for the most part lacking on the part of twentieth-century novelists who seem to create works which she terms either 'crystalline' or 'journalistic':

It is either a small quasi allegorical object 'portraying the human condition and not containing 'characters' in the nineteenth century sense, or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendent of the nineteenth century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts.⁸⁵

A genre of writing which embodies this failure of vision on the part of the author is the existentialist-influenced writing best exemplified by "The Theatre of the Absurd." Martin Esslin has noted that the reality with which this sort of writing is concerned is expressed in images that

⁸³ Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," p. 54.

⁸⁴ Gerstenberger, p. 17.

⁸⁵ Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," p. 18.

"are the outward projection of states of mind, fears, dreams, nightmares and conflicts within the personality of the author."⁸⁶ In so projecting its author's personal world, this type of writing lacks "objectively valid characters."⁸⁷

Esslin's rationale for the absence of the traditional concerns of the artist, the revelation of objective characters through the unfolding of a narrative plot, is that such an approach is inconsistent with a world view that reality is senseless and lacking a unifying principle. He notes,

the pattern of exposition, conflict, and final solution mirrors a view of the world in which solutions are possible, a view based on a recognizable and generally accepted pattern of an objective reality that can be apprehended so that the purpose of man's existence and the rules of conduct it entails can be deduced from it.⁸⁸

Murdoch has been frequently criticized, however, because it is felt that she fails to put into practice her aesthetic theory; her art is not 'accidental'; she is unable to reconcile form with content. Peter Kemp has spoken of Murdoch as "the severest critic of a way of writing she is herself most at home in."⁸⁹ Linda Keuhl sees Murdoch as failing to

⁸⁶ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, rev. ed. (New York: The Overlook Press, 1973), p. 364.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 354.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 365.

⁸⁹ Peter Kemp, "The Fight Against Fantasy: Iris Murdoch's The Red and the Green," Modern Fiction Studies, 15 (1969), 411.

implement within her novels her own theoretical beliefs; the characters in her novels and the situations in which they are placed appear to be contrived.⁹⁰ Murdoch is a paradox for Kuehl as she espouses a literary theory in which characters are allowed an existence independent of the author, while in practice there emerges in her novels "a pattern of predictable and predetermined types" which is symptomatic of "the author's failure to break away from the tyranny of form. Although she produces many people each is tightly controlled in a superimposed design."⁹¹ A further failing ascribed to Murdoch's writing is her "ambivalent detachment" toward her characters, which is intended to create a distance between author and character but which results in, according to Kuehl, her characters becoming "tokens of an anti-rational argument about character itself, embodiments of that which is contingent. As personifications of a theory [with] exotic detail, inexplicable motives, and weird fantasies, they are reduced to arbitrary and anomalous caricatures."⁹² In addition to being subject to predetermined roles and ambivalent detachment, Murdoch's characters have been seen as being "dehumanized by the mechanical parts they are forced to play

⁹⁰Linda Kuehl, "Iris Murdoch: The Novelist as Magician, The Magician as Artist," Modern Fiction Studies, 15 (1969), 347-347-60.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 354.

⁹²Ibid., p. 356.

in the labyrinths of intrigue."⁹³

Gerstenberger sees Murdoch's problem as being "unable to create a fictional world to embody contingency."⁹⁴

Murdoch's criticism of Sartre is thus seen by these critics as equally applicable to herself, when she says, "we know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction."⁹⁵

It must be admitted that Murdoch's use of form, and myth in particular, definitely undercuts her stated ideas about the uniqueness of the individual person and the novelist's need to permit the character to be a free and separate being. In A Fairly Honourable Defeat, as will be discussed later, there is an underlying allegorical structure in which Christ and Satan vie for supremacy over the human soul. As well, the whole idea of the character as moral pilgrim and the presence of Murdoch's idea of the Good constitute a standard against which the characters are measured by the reader. Dipple notes that "the degree of control such a powerful idea must have is troubling to Murdoch's overriding realist theory of fiction as 'accidental' and autonomous, since any strong

⁹³Ibid., p. 357.

⁹⁴Gerstenberger, p. 20.

⁹⁵Murdoch, Sartre, Romantic Rationalist, p. 76.

and permanent anterior idea leads to the conditions of allegory."⁹⁶

The artist is in a position of power vis-à-vis his characters, and it is the abuse of this power that is the central problem for Murdoch in the creation of the novel. Murdoch's approach to this problem is to attempt to manifest a sense of compassion toward her characters. It is thus that she describes art as "a kind of goodness by proxy. Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in human beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism; it is essentially both pity and justice" (T.S.G., p. 87). One critic perceives in Murdoch's approach to characterization precisely this quality of compassion, "a compassion that transcends irony . . . an insight into ordinary suffering that is not knowingness but love."⁹⁷

Murdoch sets out in the novel to tell a complete story, to give her valuation of the real, to give us truth. This is not, however, to say that she sets out to present nature and people with photographic exactitude, in a style marked by a clinical adherence to facts. In depicting the whole truth, her vision includes the existence of metaphysical values. Dipple notes that where Murdoch departs from the

⁹⁶Dipple, p. 47.

⁹⁷Jennifer Gribble, "The Art of Iris Murdoch," Quadrant, 23, No. 142 (1979), pp. 37-38.

realist tradition is in this espousal of a transcendent reality.⁹⁸ In the novel as such, much of the tension and drama comes from the inner struggle between man's higher and lower natures, his moral and spiritual aspirations, and their relation to the idea.

The influence of Simone Weil in this respect is quite obvious. Weil states that literary creativity cannot be absolved from moral and spiritual responsibility: "Writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to express the human condition. And nothing concerns human life so essentially, for every man at every moment, as good and evil. When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil, it betrays its function and forfeits all claim to excellence."⁹⁹

Although certainly Murdoch attempts to be a morally responsible writer, this is not to say that her characters are in fact mouthpieces for the discussion of philosophical problems. Admittedly there is the intrusion of philosophical allusion and allegory into the novel but, as Dipple notes, the ultimate working out of her novels is much more concentrated on causality and the peculiar structures of human personality.¹⁰⁰ In this sense the main convergence of her

⁹⁸Dipple, p. 33.

⁹⁹Weil, "The Responsibility of Writers," S.W.R., p. 289.

¹⁰⁰Dipple, p. 313.

philosophical thought with her literary practice is in her attempt to respect the individuality of her characters.

The characters in A Fairly Honourable Defeat are characterized as living realities by the way in which they speak, their conduct, their reactions and responses, and if there is an idea to be gleaned from the novel in this study it is that other people exist. Although not entirely successful, Murdoch attempts to fashion her characters as 'accidental men' faced with a random existence and involved in various combinations and misunderstandings. At work is an artist struggling within herself for the freedom which is necessary if she is to see her subject in the light of justice and realism. Within the novel are "real various individuals struggling in society,"¹⁰¹ characters who are themselves struggling to overcome fantasy. It is a pilgrimage on two levels, the end of which is a newfound ability to perceive the opacity of persons and which carries in its wake a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life.

¹⁰¹ Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch," p. 18.

An Analysis of A Fairly Honourable Defeat:

1. Genre

By way of a preface to the study of the novel itself we shall consider A Fairly Honourable Defeat in relation to the critical categories of moral fiction and the "novel of ideas." Mary McCarthy, in her work, Ideas and the Novel, describes the modernist view of the novel as "a fine art and the novelist is an intelligence superior to mere intellect."¹⁰² The purpose of the modern novelist is to "free himself from the workload of commentary and simply, awesomely, to show his creation is beyond paraphrase or reduction."¹⁰³ The Jamesian novel is seen by McCarthy as the archetype of the 'pure novel' wherein is purged "to the limit of possibility, the gross traditional elements of suspense, physical action, inventory, description of places and persons, apostrophe and moral teaching."¹⁰⁴ It is the nineteenth-century novel which Murdoch admires, that is seen by McCarthy as "so evidently an idea carrier."¹⁰⁵

The Novel of ideas is not necessarily one wherein the

¹⁰² Mary McCarthy, Ideas and the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovitch, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

characters come together to discuss ideas. Novels of ideas do, however, share certain characteristics which McCarthy lists. The first is that the characters are usually isolated from society. Secondly, the novel does not provide for any resolution; nothing decisive occurs in it and events that do occur in it are simply incidents.¹⁰⁶ McCarthy notes that those situations that do come to a resolution "may have the air of a panel discussion with points of view put forward by several characters," and with one view predominating.¹⁰⁷ A fourth factor is that reasoning occupies a large part of the narrative, exerting a leverage that seems to compel the reader's agreement.¹⁰⁸ A fifth characteristic is that the reader learns to recognize which of the characters will be a stand-in for the author, with the necessary authority to comment on passing events. Those characters wronged by humanity "are spoken for by an advocate, which is the author speaking in his own voice."¹⁰⁹ Essentially the characters function as instruments because each has merged with an idea. Necessarily as incarnate ideas they lose their independence and individuality.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

Given McCarthy's criteria and our prior discussion of Murdoch's aesthetic ideas, especially her approach to characterization, Murdoch would certainly not classify herself as a writer of this type of fiction. As has been noted, however, some critics have identified Murdoch with it, recognizing a serious gap between her theory and its application. Such a gap exists, although its extent is considerably smaller than that stated by Kuehl. Murdoch's characters maintain a greater individuality than such critics imply, and which is found in the type of writing discussed by McCarthy.

From the perspective of this writer, Murdoch possesses almost Chaucerian vision in that her novel opens a window on the world and shows people as they are, exposing in dramatic monologues and recorded dialogues the faults and foibles of numerous, different characters. Far from being incarnate ideas, the characters in her novel are alive as she unfolds, through each character's self-revelation, their beliefs, ambitions, loves, and failures. Yet in her tale she must convey an ordered awareness of the meaning of her experience, and this is where ideas, myth, and allegory come into play.

Wayne Booth recognizes that every personal touch by an author, every use of allusion, metaphor, myth, or symbol, implicitly evaluates.¹¹⁰ He states that "we must never forget

¹¹⁰ Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 19.

that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear."¹¹¹ No author can ever attain complete objectivity, for there is "always some deeper value in relation to which neutrality is taken to be good."¹¹² Certainly, as has been noted, Murdoch makes an inseparable connection between art and morality. Her artistic vision consists in part of a judgement on what she sees, and the reader is asked to share that judgement as part of the vision. Murdoch would agree with Booth that a novel is something communicable, and as such, "the means of communication are not shameful intrusions unless they are made with shameful ineptitude."¹¹³

Although not a writer of novels of ideas, then, Murdoch falls squarely within the category of a writer of moral fiction as defined by John Gardner.¹¹⁴ Gardner adheres to the traditional view that true art is moral; it seeks to improve life. Art is both serious and beneficial, rediscovering what is necessary to humanness.¹¹⁵ Both Gardner and Murdoch share the essential thesis that "art is moral in its process

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 68.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 397.

¹¹⁴ John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

of creation and moral in what it says."¹¹⁶ Gardner strongly parallels the thought of Murdoch when he states that "Art is the means by which an artist comes to see; it is his peculiar, highly sophisticated and extremely demanding technique of discovery."¹¹⁷ It is thus not didactic as such, for as Gardner notes, "didacticism simplifies morality and thus misses it."¹¹⁸ Gardner believes that the subversion of art to the purposes of propoganda leads inevitably to an overemphasis on texture or a manipulative structure. He sees structure as "the evolving sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion; that is, toward some meticulously qualified belief."¹¹⁹

According to Gardner the writer of moral fiction must exhibit love and compassion toward his characters. He notes that "without compassion, without a real and deep love for his subjects, no artist can summon the will to make true art."¹²⁰ Gardner contrasts this stance to the one taken by novelists whose message is only loosely related to the characters; they exist for the sake of the predetermined message,

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

not as subjects for the artist's open-minded exploration of what he can honestly say.¹²¹ Furthermore, Gardner states that "true art treats ideals, affirming and clarifying the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Ideas are art's end, the rest is methodology."¹²² As we have seen, these views closely parallel the ones held by Murdoch concerning Art; her compassion toward her characters and respect for their individuality and independence place her squarely within the tradition of moral fiction writing as outlined by Gardner.

¹²¹Ibid., p. 85.

¹²²Ibid., p. 133.

2. Structure

The novel illustrates Murdoch's interest in human behaviour, since it presents us with moral problems, not with problems that can be solved in an obviously heroic or ignoble way, but with problems of daily life and personal relations. The characters in A Fairly Honourable Defeat are free individuals caught up in a world of incessant change. All of her characters are unique moral agents, deciding their own actions and working out their own destiny. Their acts and responses point to the fact that people can tolerate very little reality. We cling therefore to fixed images of ourselves, of our past, of others, and embrace routines, conventions, and cliches. The novel dramatizes the abyss between our self-enclosed vision and the immense network of relationships in which we are immersed. Indeed, the structure of the novel with its use of dialogue gives immediacy to Murdoch's presentation of moral irresponsibility at the core of the main protagonists.

Motivated essentially by self-interest, the characters thrive on their own self-images, primarily because their ideas and relations with one another have not been tested in any way or subjected to any critical doubt. The structure of the novel depends on the portrayal of a series of conflicts between characters that provide the opportunity for them to transcend their immediate selves. The novel

thus points to the fact that life experiences must involve conflicts in order to attain a higher perception and to develop true self-awareness. It seems that until we have begun to fail we have no way of working at our success.

The relationships in the novel are such that rarely is a character permitted to be isolated, and the novel become a monologue. To become himself the character needs someone other than himself, and to place his trust in another is man's first act of selfhood. When thought ceases to be accompanied by communication, the resulting verbiage becomes mere pedantic phrases. It is thus not an accident that a large portion of the novel is in dialogue form. If the style of the dialogues often seems to be flat and trite, this is not to be seen as a lack of skill on Murdoch's part. Rather it provides evidence that the characters are puppets of their own internal drives. If they appear not to be fully realized people, this is a result of their own choice to remain enslaved to their egos. Thus, although appearing as puppets, they remain free moral agents. Peter Wolfe makes the observation that Murdoch's fictional method is dramatic rather than reflective, in keeping with her belief that "progress in human knowledge . . . requires emotional involvement and a surrender of personal order. Apprehension of the other is not merely a relation of the minds. It is

an intense encounter with life's contingency."¹²³

The novel uses a structural scheme involving a series of polarities symbolic of self-involvement and self-transcendence. There are thus twin poles of significance upon which the novel rests. There is on one side the colour and splendour of Rupert's world with its vanity, absurdity, and illusion. Opposite this is the drab world of Tallis, undorned by any self-bolstering dramatics. These characters will be discussed in further detail later, as our interest here is in their role in the novel's overall structure. This structural polarity has as its parallel Simone Weil's twin concepts of gravity and grace:

Gravity is the evil which drags down the human soul; it can be both an oppressive and a repressive force. Grace is the opposing force of good which makes possible the release and ascent of the soul. Human experience is in a state of crisis¹²⁴ as these two forces remain in perpetual contention.

The decreation of the self involves the victory of grace over gravity in the individual. Simone Weil asks, "may that which is low in us go downward so that which is high can go upward. For we are the wrong side upward. We are born thus. To re-establish order is to undo the creature in us."¹²⁵

¹²³ Peter Wolfe, The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels (n.p.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1966), p. 33.

¹²⁴ Panichas, S.W.R., p. 344.

¹²⁵ Weil, "Decreation," S.W.R., p. 352.

Two striking structural schemes are closely interrelated in the novel. Both appear in this same basic form of two opposite poles: the movement up and down, and light and darkness. To a certain degree they can be detected in the use of specific images and words but they are most significant in that they situate the major characters in distinct positions along the scale stretching between the two poles. To view the characters in isolation, seen only in relation to this sliding scale is clearly inconsistent with Murdoch's conception of characters as free and independent. The symbolism is subtle enough, however, so as not to cause this effect. Both structural schemes are interconnected and have as their source Plato's myth of the cave. The movement upward is a movement toward light and vision, whereas the movement downward has the inverse effect.

The scheme of structural polarity operates in a distinct manner for each individual so that some characters gravitate toward one pole and some toward the other. None of them can be absolutely identified with one extremity of the scale and even the most systematic moves in one direction allow for some contrary indications. Since Rupert, Morgan, and Julius tend to move toward the lower pole, it may be expected that Tallis will exemplify the upward trend. But even Tallis is shown in descent and Morgan, Julius, and Rupert are occasionally shown attempting to move up, though with a lack of

success which is revealing in itself.

This structure is perhaps clearest in the scene of Morgan in Piccadilly Circus station. Obsessed by her problems with Rupert, she sights a pigeon at the bottom of the escalator. She focuses on the bird to the exclusion of the crowd of "hasty preoccupied human beings" that pass her by.¹²⁶ Her obsession with Rupert is replaced by the thought of rescuing the bird from the Underground. This attempt at rescuing the bird is one of the few occasions where Morgan ceases to be preoccupied with herself. All of her energies are directed toward something outside of her. Symbolic of this turn-around in her vision is the plan she conceives to drive the bird to the upper part of the station "where it might see the daylight . . . and fly out" (p. 291). If seen as a dove, the bird is representative of the Holy Spirit and thus the movement upward, toward the light, is imbued with a religious dimension. Morgan thus steps onto the upward-bound escalator so as to implement the plan. As previously noted, the upward movement toward the light is a direct reference to the Platonic myth of the cave and is associated with the movement away from the illusory world of self-deception and ultimately to the transcendent. Certainly it is linked to a refinement of vision. Having had to descend again into the station after

¹²⁶Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 292. All further references to this work appear in the text.

it eludes her, Morgan realizes that she has lost her handbag, and this prompts her once again to ascend to the surface. In so doing she suddenly sees Tallis. She separates him "from the hazy frieze of other forms" and for perhaps the first time sees "his face clearly, anxious, sad and beautiful-eyed" (p. 294). The illumination is lost on her, however, as she arrives at Tallis's house and treats Peter with virtual contempt. Not finding Tallis she quickly departs, her figure "merging into the darkness" (p. 297).

Tallis is described in the Underground scene as "gazing far away" and "sinking downward past her" (p. 294). The implications of this downward movement become clear when matched by Morgan's converse upward movement. In conjunction with Peter's disclosure that Tallis had told him that he would be elsewhere at that time, a new and darker dimension to Tallis is revealed. Thus any claim that Tallis is exclusively a Christ figure must be considered too simplistic.

The scene wherein Tallis is pushing his handcart home after having brought Morgan the material remnants of their former life together involves a movement in the opposite direction. Although Tallis remains deeply attached to Morgan, his love is nonetheless unpossessive. This is in contrast to Morgan's uncaring attitude toward him, and her statement to him that "I want to have everything and you as well. I want to keep you on a lead" (p. 192). On leaving Morgan's house Tallis notices the sun which is "shining down out of

a sky of unflecked light blue" (p. 192). Like Christ stumbling along the way to his crucifixion under the weight of his cross, Tallis pauses several times in the heat and under the weight of his own affliction: "Sweat was pouring down his chest. The handcart was empty, but it was uphill all the way back" (p. 192).

The scene in the Chinese restaurant is one in which the characters must descend into a basement. What one encounters after having made the descent is hatred, prejudice, and violence in its most explicit form. All of the characters are repulsed by the goings-on with the exception of Julius, who seems to come alive, his face "alight with thrilled fascinated interest . . . smiling with irrepressible delight . . . his eyes gleaming with pleasure" (p. 214). Julius is clearly identified here with the lower extremity of the scale, the realm of the Underworld.

While the lower regions open into mysterious depths and gloomy recesses, the upper region, on the contrary, is associated with clarity. The sky is blue and cloudless, creating the impression not of an opaque barrier beyond which it is difficult to see, but rather of an immense distance to be traversed with the end clearly in sight. The difficulty of making such an ascent has its coordinate in the novel with an unequal stress on the low as opposed to the high. Terms such as "abyss", "depth", "sink", "fall", and their manifold synonyms occur more frequently than the multiplicity of direct or

indirect references to the ultimate good and the upward movement.

The link between the ascending movement toward the light and the consequent clarification of vision through the annihilation of the self is connected with the Christian ideal of living one's life in Christ not only in the scene involving Tallis previously cited, but also near the end of the novel where Simon and Axel stop for the evening in the French village with the Romanesque church. They come to the church and see

The church tower reach [ing] upwards in crazed irregular lines of arcades and archlets to a slender spire of matching blue slate whose weathercock had become a blurred spear of gold. In the tympanum above the doorway a very battered Christ wearily opened long arms and huge hands, receiving, judging.
(p. 392)

The gold at the tip of the spire is symbolic both of the purity and preciousness of their vision, and of the fact that what they see, like beauty itself, cannot be possessed or appropriated, but is instead a means to a further end. It is also a metaphor, together with the upward movement, for the creative process of the artist and the work of art itself.

Coordinate with the movement up and down is the second structural scheme, the opposition between light and darkness. Murdoch's use of light and dark imagery closely parallels

the conventional Christian use of the image of light as symbolic of goodness and dark as suggestive of evil. Throughout the Scriptures light and white have been accepted as symbolic of innocence, purity, and holiness, typifying the majesty of God. Black, suggestive of the material darkness of night, is symbolic of the spiritual darkness of the soul without the illumination of God's saving grace. It is thus that the title "Prince of Darkness" is applied to Satan. Black is the colour of mourning, shame, despair, horror, and destruction. Light is connected with vision and darkness with blindness, as when Christ says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matt. 6, 22-23).

The initial discussion between Rupert and Morgan occurs in Rupert's study, with Morgan sitting beside his desk, "staring at Rupert in the half light" (p. 82). Both Morgan with her self-involved musings and Rupert with his systematic responses, are in fact putting words between themselves and reality. Rupert seems to transform reality into a conceptual unreality, with language no longer serving as a means of communication with reality. To emphasize vision, as Murdoch does, is to attempt to clear away the smoke-screen of words that one lays down between his mind and things, and to attend to the naked being of things. The absence of light in Rupert's

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study is symbolic of the blindness with which both characters proceed through time.

Darkness also permeates, both in a literal and symbolic sense, when Morgan and Julius talk for the first time after having separated in America. The "uncertain light" is described as "baffling" Morgan's eyes (p. 85). Morgan is hysterical and incoherent while Julius is cold and indifferent. For both characters the focus of their vision is identified with the object of their desires, the gratification of their own egos. Relationships between people should provide a challenge both to the egoism and the freedom of those concerned. We surmise that this challenge is not met by either character, as we see Julius disappearing at the end of their meeting, his form "absorbed into a bobbing darkness of hurrying figures" (p. 88). The uncertain light of the streetlamp under which the characters meet can be seen as an image of the complexity of human society which leaves the reader with an impression of the haze of human complication.

After deciding to go to Tallis to recover her possessions, Morgan convinces herself of the importance of not communicating with him in any meaningful way so as to keep her pride intact. She is described as "trying not to see his eyes" while at the same time saying to herself, "I must see him as a puppet. I must go through this like a machine" (p. 103). These thoughts have their parallel with "stepp[ing] inside into darkness" as she enters his house (p. 102).

Simon quite perceptively associates the deception of Axel with the feeling of "taking a first step in under a dark canopy" (p. 152). What follows as a result of deceiving Axel, when combined with Axel's self-protective and jealous nature is indeed a long period of darkness in which their relationship comes close to disintegration.

It is the garden scene with Morgan and Peter which best exemplifies the opposite end of the scale. The symbolic content of this scene will be dealt with later in this paper. It is sufficient for now to see the scene's use of light as a contrast to the earlier scenes of darkness. Against the scene of Morgan's entrance into Tallis's house mentioned above, for example, is the following depiction of Morgan's vision:

The next moment she was lying full length in the long grass and there was a great deal too much light. Light was vibrating inside her eyes and she could see nothing but dazzling and pale shadows as if the whole scene had been bleached and then half blotted out by a deluge of light . . . The blazing light was . . . tugging her out of consciousness.

(p. 165)

This scene with the light blinding Morgan has its counterpart in Plato's myth of the cave with the moment the prisoner emerges from the darkness of the cave into the sunlight. Accustomed to the darkness, his eyes cannot function in the light and a period of blindness ensues before he is capable of focusing his vision on his new environment. Morgan per-

ceives the same things upon regaining her senses,

but now it was suddenly more beautiful to her, more intensely coloured and more absolutely here, under a sky which had resumed its blue. It was as if she had passed through a screen into some more primitive and lovely world, as if she were millenia away in the past or in the future in some paradise of undimmed experience and unblurred vision.

(pp. 166-67)

The world of light is characterized by the absence of time and the ability on the part of the perceiver to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the world. By contrast, those who inhabit the realm of darkness are, as Simone Weil notes, "obliged to journey painfully through time, minute in, minute out."¹²⁷ Their movements are reflex actions, motivated by egoism and fear and blinded by vanity, and are ultimately destructive of themselves and others.

¹²⁷Quoted by Panichas, S.W.R., p. 4.

3. Characterization

Just as the structure of the novel relies upon an underlying design incorporating the use of opposites, so too the characterization in the novel achieves its greatest effect by the juxtaposing of opposites. The illumination of characters in the novel is achieved by comparison between them. This is best illustrated by the contrast between the characters of Rupert and Tallis. Murdoch starts with a world in which Rupert's values and outlook are supreme, and she ends with one in which Tallis's, by his very existence, affirms an outlook on the world which is utterly different.

The novel begins with a description of Rupert and Hilda sipping champagne in the evening sun in the garden of their home in London. It is an image of inertia, suggestive of the torpor of life in a civilization ruled by middle-class bureaucrats. Rupert is pleased with his life, having lived it according to his philosophical ideals. It is Julius who correctly surmises, however, that Rupert really does not love goodness, but instead loves "a big imposing good-Rupert image" (p. 384).

Rupert's book on moral philosophy serves not as a guide to reality, but as a filter to trap the unpleasant side of life. His papers, we are told, are set out in "neat piles"

which serve to "calm the mind" (p. 219). His system is one which enables the psyche to obscure reality and thus shield him from external discomforts. He appears to rebel against the necessary rigours of self-clarification and thus brings disaster upon himself through his inability to move beyond role-playing. By imposing his own design upon the world he thereby ignores the basic contingency of existence. With this in mind we can see the reason behind his vanity and overconfidence:

Why should he not believe that he had certain qualities of truthfulness and generosity and certain standards of decent behaviour? His life was orderly and open.

(p. 202)

This attitude of complacency is further reinforced by the blind faith of those around him. Hilda's "you are such a wise person Rupert. You have so much instinctive wisdom and goodness of heart" (p. 17), and Morgan's "you are so wise about everything" (p. 234), help to make possible such a comic response as "it's not easy to be wise in a situation like this" (p. 234).

Playing the role of wise man affords Rupert sufficient justification to impose his values upon others. Emblematic of the rot that has set in his mind is his lecture to Tallis on the idea that love involves dragging Morgan home, regardless of her own will. Unlike Tallis, Rupert fails to realize

the extent to which he would be denying the reality of Morgan as a human being. His vision is completely lacking in moral insight or the ability to "attend" to reality. The muddle which resolves itself into such lectures by Rupert is similar in nature to the one which underlies Julius's assured pronouncements, although with Rupert, concepts like love and truth are, with a horrible irony, used in the same way as Julius's negative convictions about love and human nature.

Rupert's dealings with reality, and with other people in particular, show a marked degree of ineptitude. Despite his belief in the power of love he is unable to overturn the barriers between himself and his son Peter. Instead he tries to force Peter into accepting his morality:

"You're a lot of self-centred habit ridden hedonists."

"Well maybe. But I'm inclined to think that it's decent self-centred habit ridden hedonists who keep this society going!"

"Why should society be kept going? The trouble is, you can't see our morality as a morality."

"I confess I see it as a form of lunacy!"

"Your morality is static. Ours is dynamic. What this age needs is a dynamic morality."

"Morality is static by definition. A dynamic morality is a contradiction in terms."

(p. 115)

It is ironic that Rupert realizes love to be the key to solving much of the world's misery and yet he is unable to act lovingly. In a rather damning social comment, Murdoch has him reflect that "the whole of society which kept him

so stiffly upright and so patently and preeminently successful, had deprived him gradually of the direct language of love" (pp. 121-22). Simone Weil's comment on contemporary social life is equally applicable to Rupert's character. She perceives that "never has the individual been so completely delivered up to a blind collectivity and never have men been less capable, not only of subordinating their actions to their thoughts, but even of thinking!"¹²⁸ Although he is able to conceptualize love, his constant bickering with Peter, instead of showing love, indicates Rupert to be one who is "paralysed and cold" (p. 209). His is a mind enclosed in language. I refer here to Simone Weil who has particularized this state of being:

It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulatable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So the mind moves in a closed space of partial truth, which may be larger or smaller, without ever being able so much as to glance at what is outside.¹²⁹

Proud of his book, Rupert has a captive mind, unaware of its imprisonment. In him, intelligence is not an asset. As

¹²⁸Weil, "Sketch of Contemporary Social Life," S.W.R., pp. 27-28.

¹²⁹Weil, "Human Personality," S.W.R., p. 330.

noted by Simone Weil, "The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell."¹³⁰ Such a character type is seen by John Bayley as presenting "the subtlest kind of dramatic conflict, the conflict between the indefinable interior man and the persona that is required of him by society, or imposed on him by his own will."¹³¹

Rupert's playing of a role and his adoption of rigid rules of conduct are contrasted with Tallis's unselfconscious involvement in life. Goodness, embodied in Tallis's dependence on an almost innate sense of right and wrong, not only gets better results than wrongdoing, but is also more interesting. His character and actions retain their mystery and consequently offer an unending avenue of exploration.

Tallis has his deficiencies just as all men do. His quick and violent temper is one such characteristic. In the restaurant, the blow that he administers to the youth is done "with such violence" (214). Likewise his spilling of the sherry on Rupert's carpet is a further, although suppressed, instance of violent behaviour (p. 160). One has also to look at his involvement in work to realize, as Julius does, that its purpose is to "stop [him] from thinking" (p. 358).

¹³⁰Weil, "Human Personality," S.W.R., p. 330.

¹³¹Bayley, p. 45.

His failure to tell Leonard that he is dying from cancer can be seen as a deliberate denial of the independence of the father's self.

The different reactions to Julius's intervention on the part of the various characters, the fact that some are drawn into Julius's drama and some remain aloof from it, is indicative of the recognizable independence of each of them. Tallis's not playing the game is in itself a judgement on the game, perhaps the most significant one of all. The most dramatic scenes are the ones in which the splendours and diversities of the game are contrasted with the humble, powerful character, who takes no part in it. The actions of the other characters confirm Julius's conviction that all men call their vanity love. Julius is driven by a need to make men behave as he thinks they do and Tallis, with his absolute singleness of being that cannot be categorized or transfixed with a definition, cannot be fixed within the boundaries of Julius's perception. To comprehend Tallis is to believe in the possibility of good, an idea Julius is unwilling to consider.

Though he has his visionary moments, the vitality of Tallis is based on the essential resilience of his character, his adaptability and power of survival, indeed of triumphant survival. Tallis has many failures and disappointments, but he survives and with a kind of magnanimity he adapts himself

to a vision of harmony and equilibrium when life seems to fail him.

Of the characters, Tallis is the least afraid of facing reality. Instead of letting things "drift" he confronts the situation at hand and acts accordingly. Unconcerned as to whether he will appear indiscreet, he promptly telephones Hilda when he learns of the entire affair (p. 367). We see the same almost instinctive response in the Chinese restaurant when he acts to save the Jamaican from further abuse (p. 214). Such impulsiveness on his part is to be distinguished from the similar trait in Morgan's nature in that her vision is so myopic that most of her acts are without reference to external reality. Tallis is able to appreciate others not as extensions of himself, but as unique individuals. Thus he does not act on Rupert's advice and take possession of Morgan as if she were his property. He exhibits in his relations with others a true love not marred by an overwhelming sense of self, and which is not authoritative or possessive.

Tallis's approach to social problems is a simple one. His analysis is marked by a beautiful naivete that tends to ignore the complexities of social and political structure. It is this complexity behind which Rupert hides. Tallis's knowledge is inarticulate; Dipple describes it as an

"obscure pure knowledge which cannot be fitted into words."¹³²
 Tallis is not "hopelessly theory ridden" (p. 189), and thus his response to Peter on why stealing is wrong is without Rupert's dependence on logic and Julius's synthesis of utilitarian values (p. 100). With Peter, Tallis helps to dispel the "demons" with a show of love. Unlike Rupert with his rather paltry attempt to write his son a letter, Tallis gives of himself in a way befitting his quality of spirit:

They lay down together, bumping about, adjusting arms and knees in the cramped space and then were still, Peter with his face pressed into Tallis's shoulder and Tallis looking over the light cool hair into the dimness of the room.

(p. 101)

Tallis does not place any distance between himself and his father Leonard. He projects all of his being into him and in so doing gives Leonard what his affliction has deprived him of. Deprived of all significance in the eyes of the world, it is Tallis alone who provides Leonard with some sense of self-worth. Following the thought of Simone Weil, Tallis recognizes that "the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labelled 'unfortunate', but as a man, exactly like us . . ." ¹³³ The reader in turn, by seeing the world through the eyes of Tallis

¹³²Dipple, p. 21.

¹³³Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God," S.W.R., p. 51.

and by empathizing with his character, gains some insight into a reality beyond himself. Although Leonard appears unreceptive to Tallis, Tallis nonetheless persists in attempting to love perfectly what is imperfect. Such love, for Murdoch, "goes to its object via the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just" (T.S.G., p. 103).

Hilda shares the same capacity for self-deception as does Rupert. Her idealized image of herself is matched by an exaggerated expectation of her husband. Indeed, throughout the novel the characters are stridently demanding of one another, asking that the lover, wife, husband, or child be "everything". Because no one can quite meet such demands, can live up to an idealized picture another holds of him, disillusion is a virtual certainty.

One has but to glance at the absurdly long list of fashionable societies and organizations for the promotion of various social goods to which Hilda belongs to realize their actual purpose (p. 258). Indeed, her treatment of Leonard is indicative of her desire to effect social change. Apart from donating a matchbook to his collection, she is virtually unconscious of his needs and anxieties:

"My arthritis is bad today. I have a shooting pain at the base of my spine and a peculiarly insidious ache in my thigh. I am not long for this world." "How has Peter been lately," asked Hilda . . .

(p. 54)

Moments after the end of their conversation she is described as having "forgotten Leonard's existence" (p. 54). This inability to comprehend affliction is the subject of comment by Simone Weil:

To give from habit, or in conformity with social convention, or from vanity or emotional pity; or for the sake of a good conscience--in a word, from self-regarding motives; such people are arrogant or patronizing or tactlessly sympathetic, or they let the afflicted man feel that they regard him as a specimen of a certain type of affliction. In any case their gift is an injury . . .¹³⁴

Leonard comes before Hilda as a person in desperate need of compassion and friendship. It is an opportunity for her to give of herself in a truly loving manner, and to effect true social change. Simone Weil comments that

The man who sees someone in affliction and projects into him his own being brings to birth in him through love, at least for a moment, an existence apart from his affliction. For, although affliction is the occasion of this supernatural process, it is not the cause. The cause is the identity of human beings across all the apparent distances placed between them by the hazards of fortune.¹³⁵

No such identity between Hilda and Leonard occurs in the novel and each character remains that much more spiritually impoverished as a result.

¹³⁴Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., p. 459.

¹³⁵Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," S.W.R., p. 460.

As noted previously, Morgan's character possesses the same capacity for self-deception. Blinded by selfish aims and images, she has a focus of attention that is internal. Such a perspective leads Morgan to regard humanity with contempt. She is not respectful of the individuality of others, preferring instead to view them as objects to be used and discarded. In the interests of self-preservation she feels that she must "act a part, play a scene" (p. 108). In such a metaphor the script, like life itself, becomes a mere tool or instrument for the promotion of self. In keeping "sharp and rigid her intent to survive" (p. 104), she makes no attempt to "see the unself" (p. 93), preferring instead to live a life of fantasy: "Morgan had a capacity for dealing with one thing at a time, and not worrying about, almost not seeing, other features of the situation" (p. 279). After Morgan has been "discarded" by Julius and after she, in turn, has discarded Tallis, Peter's entrance into her life comes as a relief (p. 132). Still obsessed with both Julius and Tallis, she finds that Peter serves to cushion the blow caused by such an upheaval. He is a distraction, to whom Morgan can conveniently transfer her focus, and thus not have to face the unpleasant reality of Tallis. She rather cold-heartedly describes Tallis in this sense as being like radium: "Too much exposure to him damages the tissues" (p. 109). At this point in the novel, Peter becomes for her a

breath of sunny though rather "stale" air (p. 110). His function, one can suppose, will be rather short-lived and the novelty of his presence for Morgan will be considerably lessened as the novel proceeds.

There are moments, however, as at the abandoned railway line, where the beauty of nature makes her forgetful of herself. Nature here serves to "tug her out of consciousness" (p. 165) It is in this garden scene that simple details amass an importance beyond themselves and can even themselves appear as revelations. Her observation that "she began to see more detail, more and different flowers hidden in the grassy jungle" (p. 164) implies an acute perceptiveness and a sense of wonder, a particularly childlike mode of perception on the part of the character. Morgan's vision here is altered in the direction of unselfishness, toward what is various and real. Her perception of the garden as a road, "but a road not trodden by human feet" is a comment on the pilgrimage that all must make, although few people attempt it (p. 166). This is to say that people rarely pursue the path to goodness, or if they do they are quickly side-tracked.

Morgan's vision in the garden quickly degenerates back into the realm of fantasy. In her conversation with Simon we are told, "Shall I make Peter apologize to you? I can make him to anything I want these days" (p. 174). Unaware of Morgan's true intent, Peter views their relationship as

one of true friendship. Overwhelmed by the attention given him by Morgan, he is oblivious to her patronizing manner. Simone Weil writes,

when the motive that draws us toward anybody is simply some advantage for ourselves, the conditions of friendship are not fulfilled. Friendship includes and yet transcends mere reciprocal necessity or motivation.¹³⁶

She notes that all friendship is impure if even a trace of the wish to please or the contrary desire is found in it.

Despite his shortcomings, Peter's attitude toward the world of his father is the rather admirable, "no compromise and no surrender" (p. 58). The source of this attitude, however, is not any power of vision as much as it is an immature reaction to his parents. One can sympathize with the state of his life given the environment of "superstition and self-interest" of his parents (p. 100).

Peter is so remarkably similar to Leonard that he appears to be but a younger version of Leonard. According to Leonard they both reject the universe, "only I reject it with screams of rage standing up on my two feet, while he rejects it falling over backwards onto his bed and lying there limp and stupefied" (p. 54). Leonard, however, has had considerably more time to feel the pain of his affliction

¹³⁶Weil, "Friendship," S.W.R., p. 367.

whereas Peter has yet to truly experience affliction. Leonard's vision of the future is one in which the seeds have already been planted. The globe shall be reduced to a pile of old bones, plastic bags, and a seething mass of spiders: "Spiders will survive longest. And plastic is indestructible" (p. 92). His bitterness resides in his belief that nothing can be done to avert the spiritual, and ultimately physical destruction of the individual. Leonard has succumbed to his suffering and this is what provides the basis for his bitterness and sarcasm. Certainly this is the reason underlying his hatred of life and his loss of appreciation of sensuous beauty. This is not the case for Peter, however, His is more directly a condemnation of Rupert, based on the fact that "he's simply forgotten about me" (p. 325).

Leonard's view of humanity strongly parallels the one held by Julius although Julius differs from Leonard in that he delights in human misery. His comments reveal a total absence of respect for mankind: "They are a loathsome crew and don't deserve to survive. But they are destroying themselves fast enough without my assistance" (p. 194). He does nonetheless make his token contribution to society's dissolution. He is by profession a biochemist, who was working on a "new and improved" version of anthrax, together with a more deadly form of nerve gas. Both projects he abandons, not for any moral reasons, but because he was "bored"

(p. 4). At the beginning of the novel, while Rupert and Hilda speculate as to whether it is preferable to be paralysed or "cleanly blown up," Rupert arrives, by an absurdly comical form of reasoning, at the conclusion that Julius is a man of principle (p. 4).

To the other characters, Julius is a fantasy figure and he represents in dramatic terms a kind of challenging opacity to which the other characters are drawn by their interest. Although he is not the man of principle imagined by Rupert, this is not to say that he is devoid of any standards whatsoever. He "detests the spectacle of self-deception of any kind" (p. 127). Every man, he notes, "loves himself so astronomically more than he loves his neighbour" (p. 208). The difference between Julius and Rupert in this regard is that Julius admits the truth. Rupert prefers to remain hidden behind his philosophical facade. Unlike Rupert, Julius sees the top of the moral structure as being empty. The extension of goodness beyond the human level is for him a "dream" (p. 199). Although Rupert may believe in the concepts of transcendent goodness and love, Julius correctly perceives that this "makes him blind to obvious immediate things in human life" (p. 198).

Speaking to Morgan, Julius says, "I am no actor, I have always told you the truth" (p. 127). Rather than face that truth, Morgan prefers to view Julius as an almost "mythic"

figure (p. 48). Her fault, for Julius, was her "remarkable capacity for making false images of people and then persecuting the people with the images" (p. 362). Her relationship with Tallis is based on a similar footing: "She's got a picture of what she wants me to be and I'm just not it and it simply exasperates her" (p. 359).

Julius is assigned a key position within the novel. Not only is he the mysterious figure with his blunt speech, critical observation and intervention in day-to-day affairs, he is also closely linked with the forces of evil. It is to him that Murdoch assigns the role of spectator several times during the course of the novel and he thus becomes the interpreter of the novel's dramatic situations as he places himself at a distance from events that have depended on and been influenced by him.

By observing the world and the way people interact with each other, Julius perceives that human beings never really see themselves, nor those with whom they interact: "Driven along by their own private needs they latch blindly on to each other, then pull away, then clutch again . . . Anyone will do to play the roles" (p. 208). As has been shown previously in this paper, Murdoch connects the ability to love with one's capacity to see clearly; Julius perceives the inverse of this equation in that people do not see and thus what they think to be love is merely love of self.

To remain detached from the muddle of human relationships is Julius's idea of freedom. They can, however, provide a certain amount of entertainment, and this Julius sets out to "exploit" (p. 208). Out of "curiosity" he decides to implement a plan, both for his own enjoyment and for Morgan's enlightenment (p. 365), which will exemplify the "frailty of human attachments" (p. 363). Love for Julius is not, as Murdoch sees it, "the energy and passion of the soul in its search for the Good" (T.S.G., p. 103). It is nothing more than a mixture of pity, vanity, and novelty in an emotional person (p. 365). Moved by egoism and blinded by vanity, people will act in a predictable way, like "puppets" (p. 366). Rupert is to be tested so as to exhibit "what all [his] high-minded muck would really amount to in practice" (p. 362). Likewise the relationship of Simon and Axel is to be tampered with so as to provide further evidence that "anyone's faith in anyone can be broken in no time by the simplest of devices" (p. 362).

Julius may see himself as the "great world revealer" (p. 163). But because of his callous disregard for the feelings of those he is toying with, he can hardly be classified as a moral agent. He perceives himself to be an "instrument of justice" in his attempt to expose the false morality of Rupert (p. 387). Julius, however, does not have the vision to perceive what is true; he only partially knows what is

false. As such, Julius's view of reality is itself limited and thus he equates the world of Rupert and Hilda with the debris in Tallis's kitchen, something to be "scraped over with a knife and then thoroughly washed" (p. 382). . . Such a view denies the basic humanity of people. In a moment of illumination even Morgan recognizes this fact, when she refers to him as a "beautiful but casual destructive force" (p. 241).

If he is to be considered a "great world revealer" this can certainly only be as a result of chance and accident. The role of Julius in the novel can perhaps be made clearer by examining the parallel between his character and Oberon in A Midsummer Night's Dream. (This parallel is to be discussed further later in this paper.) Both conceive of a plan involving the coupling of other characters. Puck's mistake with the magic juice has its counterpart in Julius's conceited belief in the extent of his ability to control others. In both cases everything goes wrong from the start. The result is confusion and disorder, and yet it is from this chaos that the characters emerge in the end possessing a wisdom and ability of discernment they may not otherwise have obtained.

For Julius, to be "good" in the strict sense of the word, "one would have to be God" (p. 200). He sees goodness as a value only insofar as it serves the will and desires of the individual; otherwise, it is an absurd idea and a target for his derision. Dismissing the existence of God, he notes

that what passes for human goodness is in fact "a tiny phenomenon, messy, limited, truncated and . . . dull" (p. 199). This is to be distinguished from evil, which for Julius is infinitely more interesting:

It is characteristic of this planet that the path of virtue is so unutterably depressing that it can be guaranteed to break the spirit and quench the vision of anybody who consistently attempts to tread it. Evil, on the contrary, is exciting and fascinating and alive.

(p. 199)

Simone Weil distinguishes between this conception of good and evil and authentic good and evil, thus arriving at a different conclusion:

Nothing is so beautiful and wonderful, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good. No desert is so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil. This is the truth about authentic good and evil. With fictional good and evil, it is the other way around. Fictional good is boring and flat while fictional evil is varied and intriguing, attractive, profound, and full of charm.

Such an understanding is alien to Julius. It is thus with excitement that he watches the violence at the Chinese restaurant. His face is described as being "alight with thrilled fascinated interest"; his eyes are "gleaming with pleasure" (p. 241). Julius's entrance into the world of Rupert and

¹³⁷Weil, "Morality and Literature," S.W.R., p. 290.

Hilda is presented in spatial terms as that of an ominous Satanic force, as when he "suddenly materialized in the half-light upon the stairs in Rupert's house" (p. 193).

Julius's attempt to prove that human love is of a vulgar, selfish nature, and thus not really love at all, is ultimately an attempt to disprove the existence of good, that is to say, human goodness. That he is for the most part successful points, for Murdoch, to the virtual absence of moral vision. The characters will be brought to realize, with the minimum of help by Julius, that their various relationships, thought to be secure, are lacking in substance.

Although Julius is a master of trickery and deception, his explanation for the events following his initial prank attributes more responsibility to the characters involved than they themselves are willing to admit:

Human beings set each other off so. Put three emotional fairly clever people in a fix and instead of trying quietly to communicate with each other they'll dream up some piece of communal violence . . . They will do the most dreadful things to each other rather than seem to be made a fool of or seem not to be in control of the situation.
(p. 383)

Julius notes that it is "vanity not love [that] conducts their feet. Each of them is thrilled and flattered at being an object of worship" (p. 236). Julius serves as a catalyst in a reaction which is essentially maintained by the charac-

ter's own vanity:

Since each thought that the other was bound, while they themselves were free, they could become thoroughly absorbed in the drama while feeling superior and even innocent.

(p. 365)

Hilda's long-standing marriage with Rupert is shattered by a few suggestive hints dropped by Julius, along with a recycled love letter. While frightened by the possibilities suggested by Julius regarding Rupert's unfaithfulness, she fails to confront Rupert and instead chooses to insulate herself from psychological harm. The possibilities "were so grotesque that she deliberately covered them with a haze. She knew that nothing really dreadful could happen to her" (p. 319). The implication is that had she bothered to face Rupert and communicate with him about the events which led to the breakdown, she would have understood it for the hoax that it was. Instead, "she did not want to look into his guilty eyes and see the man whom she had worshipped shorn, defeated, utterly at a loss" (p. 369). Rather than listen to Rupert's explanation in their bedroom she instead chooses to "turn back to the mirror," preferring to wallow in self-pity than to halt the destruction by a positive act (p. 378). The stark horror of her own acts and omissions is later revealed as she loses all sense of perspective.

Indeed, Hilda has never had a true perspective on life;

she turns people into objects and treasures objects in place of people. The sentimentality of keepsakes and pet names is utterly at odds with the gizzly scene at the end of the novel. Her journey from the cottage back to Rupert after having received Tallis's call is symbolic of her life's journey, "a plunging ahead into darkness" and her "stumbling along the muddy, stony track" (p. 375).

With Simon and Axel we see the same web of circumstances falling into an identical pattern. Axel has managed over the span of their relationship to intimidate Simon to the point where Simon can no longer accept his own nature. Feeling inferior to Axel, a feeling which Axel does little to dispel, Simon fears that he may at any moment be abandoned. The gift by Julius of a teddy bear to Axel on his birthday was intended by Julius to be symbolic of the maturity of the relationship between Simon and Axel (p. 273). Thus, when Julius decides to "detach him quite painlessly from Axel" (p. 209), he has merely to prey on Simon's guilt while at the same time suggesting to Axel that he is indeed guilty. For Simon the whole proceedings are "nightmarish: Everything mounted up and mounted up and it got harder and harder to tell the truth" (p. 355). They become firmly entangled in a circle of "accusation, explanation, exculpation, accusation" (p. 388). They survive, however, partly due to chance, and partly because they are willing to expose their

vulnerability to the other so as to come to terms with the reality of the situation. The result is a strengthening of their relationship in their new-found knowledge of each other:

"As for your telling me lies, why did you do so? Because you were afraid of me. That fear ought not to have existed. It's not that I've always bullied you a little . . . But I've always withheld a bit of myself. And you have felt this and it has made you frightened."

(p. 389)

As with Rupert and Morgan, Axel wants to be able to feel "that if all this came to grief there was a part of me which had never engaged in it and which was not discredited or even disappointed" (p. 390). It is for the same selfish motive, which is expressed as caution or discretion, that Axel refuses to intervene on behalf of Rupert and Hilda after discovering the full extent of Julius's prank:

"I think we'd better let that one drift," said Axel. "If there's any obvious drama we might consider dropping a word to somebody, but even then it's rather tricky. One doesn't want to be indiscreet and raise a false alarm."

(p. 356)

The novel captures here the tension between the desire to hang on to the security of the ego and the letting go which will enable the character to merge into a nature which is otherwise independent of him. No sooner do Simon and Axel

enrich their vision than they sink back into their former positions of comfortable blindness, insulated from external discomforts. Simon, however, regains this higher awareness at the end of the novel. It is a feeling for the beauty and fragility of life, a sense of life as being gratuitously given, together with its corollary, that it may equally be taken away at any moment. Simon's life is suggestive of the fact that as one moves further away from the ego, the immediacy, uncontrollability, and spontaneity of daily life will be revealed to us.

It is Tallis who in the end is a bulwark to the wave of destruction and "defeat" that rolls through the novel. He is in a way curiously like the house he lives in. Both resist any attempt on Julius's part to be swept into "cleanliness and order" (p. 382). The disorder is emblematic of the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world. Both resist the reductionist theory of Julius in which the "infinite elusive character of reality" is diminished to a predictable set of self-motivated actions and reactions (T.S.G., p. 42).

Although Julius detests Rupert's neatly ordered philosophy of life, his own experiment is itself an attempt to impose some sort of design upon the world and therefore is a journey into illusion. His belief that "human beings are essentially finders of substitutes" (p. 208), and as such "no one would really suffer" (p. 209), testifies to the nar-

row circumscribed vision with which he sees the world. It is the same dim-sightedness, disguised as clarity of vision, that prompts him to say, "Good can be seen through" (p. 199). Good, however, cannot be seen through, any more than the world can be fully apprehended. His disclosure to Tallis that "It all got rather out of hand . . . I don't know what to do next" is an admission of defeat (p. 367). The ending of the novel serves to inform us that though defeated he is by no means vanquished. Life, he pronounces to be "good" (p. 402), but it is a false good. Evidently enjoying himself in Paris, he passes the time in the hedonistic pursuit of various pleasures. Having escaped intact from muddle in London, he notes a corresponding improvement in his digestive system: "Involvement was always bad for his nerves" (p. 402). With a system of values that places self ahead of all else, one shall never understand what it means to say that something exists; one shall never know reality. Julius can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy; refusing to believe in the possibility of goodness, he shall never come to realize it.

Hilda and Morgan are living in America by the end of the novel; Morgan having invested her with the same sort of false image that once plagued Tallis and Julius. Hilda, receptive of that image, has entirely forgiven her. Tallis construes from her letters, though, that this is probably out of a desire.

to banish from her memory the past events. She speaks of Morgan in a casual way, "as if this were a dear friend with whom she had always lived and whom she took entirely for granted" (p. 399). There is little evidence to suggest any alteration in their vision as a result of past events. Hilda continues to write to Tallis, "probably out of pity" (p. 399).

The defeat suffered by Simon and Axel has served to clarify their view of each other and of the world around them. No longer focusing their vision exclusively upon themselves, their perception of their surroundings is more radiant in its abundance. This newly acquired perception has its physical counterpart in their looking up at the church tower (p. 392). Their defeat is in fact a victory; it is a defeat of self.

Rupert's death is the ugly culmination of a period of torment in which he broods drunkenly within his own solitariness. His demise is quite ironically termed "death by misadventure" (p. 383). His philosophy shown to be inadequate and his life in shambles, he could not accept a nihilistic view of existence as expressed by Julius, and instead chooses suicide. According to Tallis, Rupert was the victim of "human failure, muddle and sheer chance" (p. 399). His death affirms the fact that existence is contingent, that life is for the most part illusory, and that within people there are

"insuperable psychological barriers to goodness" (T.S.G., p. 99).

The juxtaposition of characters in the novel can thus be seen to rely upon an underlying juxtaposition between pointlessness and value. If the characters in their words and acts reveal one idea to the reader, it is that "nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous" (T.S.G., p. 87),

4. Allusion and Symbol

The characterization in the novel is enriched through the use of allusions and symbols. By drawing analogies between her characters and Biblical and mythical figures, Murdoch universalizes their experiences and establishes a broader context for her theme.

It is perhaps Murdoch's use of Biblical allusions and Christian symbols in particular that is most prevalent in the novel. Julius, for example, appears in various passages throughout the novel as a demonic character. This appears inconsistent with Murdoch's realist stance, as discussed earlier, for to see Julius as such is to view the novel as a moral fable with Julius suggestive of the character of Vice in the morality plays of the Middle Ages. Certainly a moral parable is hinted at by the suggestion of life as a pilgrimage. None of the characters, however, is purely good or evil. Julius is unique in that although he is subject to the partial viewpoints of other characters, he cannot be seen all round and summed up as such. It is possible, however, to suggest that in the most significant passages the characters become spiritual forces that meet in personal form.

Tallis is portrayed as a Christ figure in various passages, so unselfish is his attitude toward others. Even

Morgan is able to perceive this in Tallis, as when she notes that he "used to remind me of blessed are the poor in spirit" (p. 115). Michael Bellamy sees Tallis's pushing of his empty cart up the road after having unloaded Morgan's possessions as a crucifixion image.¹³⁸ In her interview with Bellamy Murdoch points to an underlying allegorical structure in the novel, with Julius as Satan and Tallis as Christ, in which they both vie for supremacy over the human soul.¹³⁹

Dipple comments on this use of allegory by noting that in the novel,

Realism struggles against allegory and mythology by using them ironically as a basic device for identifying the main characters. Thus although Julius is Satan, Tallis Christ, Leonard God the Father and Morgan the human soul, these allegorical identifications are subservient to the transmitted sense of real personality in the characters.¹⁴⁰

Murdoch's irony consists in continually undercutting the character's spiritual or mythic dimension by emphasizing his humanity. Her irony is intended to avoid a complete identification between a character and his mythic analogue. Because no analogy is complete, each character's individuality is left uncompromised by suggestions that he may, at times, sym-

¹³⁸ Bellamy, p. 136.

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 135-36.

¹⁴⁰ Dipple, p. 186.

bolize a certain archetype.

Murdoch's use of Christian symbols may appear puzzling to those who realize that she is not religious. For her, however, Christ is not used as a religious symbol but is instead viewed as a moral figure. Although not seen as God, the historical Christ is nonetheless the exemplar of the Good Man.

Christianity links ultimate meaning to a vision of a world beyond this world, to which the Old Testament image of the Garden is but an earthly analogy. The Garden scene in A Fairly Honourable Defeat is a mimesis of Eden (pp. 163-72), and, by extension, of the paradise promised in Christianity. Here the soul's labour is rewarded by the turning of time into flowers and trees. Murdoch makes the connection here between light as a physical phenomenon and the metaphysical entity symbolic of goodness. Morgan is described as "suddenly looking up" whereupon "a strange regular metallic sound was coming down out of the sky. She saw three swans flying, their whiteness kindled and almost invisible against the pale sun-brimming sky" (p. 163). The three swans are symbolic of the Trinity, and as they emerge from the light, suddenly the infinity of space and time that separates us from God disappears. Goodness can be seen close up, in the beauty of nature which is good in itself. The power of the light is such as to be dazzling to Morgan, rendering her vir-

tually unconscious, as shown in the passage already quoted. Morgan's vision here is illustrative of each character's potential to see reality in a more perfect way. By way of contrast with the earlier scenes involving Morgan this episode demonstrates that although surrounded by reality, the characters for the most part are without the power of vision to appreciate it.

Murdoch's belief is that the quest one must undertake is away from the self, and as such is in contrast to Freud, who seeks a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind through analysis of the self. For Murdoch, the unconscious is identified with ignorance. Self-examination is an encounter with the abyss of inwardness and can lead to nothing constructive. Murdoch maintains an aloofness with the inner life and passes over anything that may be disturbing; she does not seek to penetrate self-delusions or dispel the interior terrors that can afflict one. This is not to say, however, that she denies their existence. Indeed, as Dipple notes, Freud is used by Murdoch in support of her thesis that human beings are not free.¹⁴¹ At the same time, however, such illusions serve to illuminate the shortsightedness of Freudian psychology. Murdoch's allusion to Freudian psychoanalysis occurs most notably in the two dreams experienced by Simon. Simon's dreams certainly add a new and different dimension to his personality, and yet at the end

¹⁴¹Dipple, p. 94.

of the novel this dimension is virtually forgotten as the reader perceives a character made whole by love.

Freud regards dreams as visual images whose function is to reduce tension by reviving memories of past events and objects that are in some way gratifying to the dreamer.¹⁴² The formation of such an image is called a wish fulfillment. As wish fulfillments, dreams are filled with disguised or symbolic representations of repressed desires. When the disguise becomes too transparent, as at the end of Simon's first dream, the dreamer wakes up. The resulting anxiety experienced by Simon is caused by the emergence of such repressed desires.

A Freudian interpretation of Simon's first dream (p. 148) might see this as an instance of Simon's Oedipus Complex made manifest, a state of affairs in which the boy craves exclusive sexual possession of the mother and feels antagonistic toward the father. In the dream his mother leads him to his father's grave. Compelled to dig away the ash from the body, he uncovers its face, which is that of Rupert. His mother is described as wearing "steel-rimmed spectacles" (p. 148), which thus identifies or connects the mother figure with Morgan, who likewise wears such spectacles.

Simon's second dream involves being lifted up by the

¹⁴² See above, note 3.

waist by his father, or Rupert, and later by Julius, and the consequent feeling of anxiety and shame. The dream derives from an occurrence in Simon's youth when he was lifted by an older student so as to enable him to retrieve a letter from his mother. Freud might view such a dream as an instance of Simon's castration complex. The development of the Oedipus Complex creates this new anxiety for the boy. If he persists in feeling sexually attracted to the mother he runs the risk of being physically harmed by the father. The specific fear which the boy harbours is that his father will remove the offending sex organ of the boy.

Freud would see these infantile characteristics, which were once dominant, as now belonging to Simon's unconscious. These peculiar mental mechanisms, although unconscious, correspond or somehow affect the kind of thoughts we have in waking life. Simon's interactions with Morgan, Rupert, and Julius are certainly affected by unconscious motives, but by no means are they dominant. Simon's character is richer and more flexible than what a psychoanalytic interpretation would reveal. The psychoanalytic approach to human motivation, with its mechanistic explanations, rejects the idealistic belief in the eternal character of spiritual values.

Freud's analysis of homosexuality is typical of his deterministic approach to human behaviour.¹⁴³ Freud accounted

¹⁴³ Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, p. 369.

for the formation of the ego by the mechanism of identification, which is defined as the incorporation of the qualities of an external object, usually those of another person, into one's personality. One such type of identification is called narcissistic identification, which is seen by Freud as involving self-love, the name being derived from the myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image which he saw reflected in a pool of water. If the factor of narcissism is very strong, a person may derive satisfaction only from choosing a love object who resembles himself. This is one reason Freud believes a person may choose homosexuality in preference to heterosexuality.

A strictly psychoanalytic approach to character would necessarily view Simon and Axel as the most self-absorbed of characters, the ones who are least capable of loving someone apart from their individual selves. The novel demonstrates the fallacy of such thinking as it is Simon and Axel who attain the vision of love at the end of the novel.

Murdoch's depiction of the two homosexual characters reveals a belief that their love is as valid morally as that between heterosexual characters. The suggestion that love involves a norm or biological standard is not a part of her vocabulary of vision.

A further series of allusions that serve to universalize the central themes in the novel involves Murdoch's use of

Shakespeare, and in particular his plays A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest. Indeed, the whole idea of the prank arranged by Julius, whereby a rendezvous is made by Rupert and Morgan in a location convenient to Julius so that he and Simon can eavesdrop upon the scene, is borrowed from the "play within a play" scene in A Midsummer Night's Dream

(Act V, Scene i). The reader is thereby made particularly aware that the relationships between the characters in various combinations are indeed plays, summoned into life by a mechanical force and just as easily made to vanish.

Julius comments upon the scene involving Rupert and Morgan in a sarcastic manner, stating that "both were bursting with curiosity and interest and excitement at having so unexpectedly inspired passionate love in the other one, and both resolved to carry the whole thing through with discretion, compassion, wisdom, the lot . . ." (p. 364). The nature of Rupert and Morgan's 'love' is of the greatest importance to the novel's perspective, and the critical judgment that theirs is a "decent" passion is an even more telling comment on contemporary social mores. Julius sees the scene as "a midsummer enchantment, with two asses" (p. 236). The parallel with A Midsummer Night's Dream is thus made quite explicit. In the play, supernatural forces intervene in the activities of the characters, turning their intentions upside down and directing their actions. The novel presents a varia-

tion on this idea with Julius playing the role of the evil manipulator. Initially in the novel we are led to believe that something outside the various characters is the cause of their downfalls. Increasingly, however, we see that character is a deeper and more important influence in human affairs than is any external influence. The individual's fate is determined from within, by his vision, or the lack thereof.

As in the play, dream-world and reality merge imperceptibly in the novel, so that Rupert and Morgan are not sure themselves, as the full ramifications of the prank become obvious, in which sphere they move, nor whether what they have experienced has been imagined, or whether it occurred in fact. The idea that what has happened has been a dream or illusion is often expressed from various standpoints by the characters themselves.

A further parallel with Shakespeare is in Murdoch's use of a particularly subtle form of dramatic irony; she creates a gap in the awareness between some of her characters, particularly Rupert, Morgan, and Hilda, and the reader. The reader is given notice of matters which are concealed from the characters, and as the reader progressively becomes more aware, the characters become more muddled. The letters introduced by Julius make the reader more cognizant of what is to happen while at the same time plunging Rupert and Morgan into confusion.

Julius can in one sense be seen as a comic device in that he creates the initial deception, which precipitates the comic process. Through Julius, Murdoch produces a gap between the reader's knowledge and that of the protagonists. The protagonists are deluded and deceived, and fall into entanglements which become more complex as the novel progresses. This web is untangled by an immediate and simple solution--Tallis's phone call--and, as if by chance, the social order is once again restored.

Where Murdoch blends comedy with tragedy is in the fact that while circumstances are fortuitous for Simon and Axel, Rupert's dilemma is resolved only by death; the potential disaster which originally appeared as comical, but which the reader surmised would resolve itself, is realized. The harmony of the social order at the beginning of the novel is only partially reached at the end. If love re-emerges at the end, its victory in the case of Simon and Axel is tempered by its defeat in Rupert's case. This notion of the co-existence of victory and defeat has its source in Murdoch's belief that while life itself may be tragic, human activity is comic.¹⁴⁴ Dipple sees this as "the paradox of her [Murdoch's] own joy in life in the world in the light

¹⁴⁴Dipple, p. 46.

of her knowledge of its horrors."¹⁴⁵

At the end of the novel, it is in the degree to which each character's knowledge approaches that of the reader that demonstrates how well they have realized their potential. Simon and Axel become more self-perceptive, more aware of themselves as having been fooled, and also as having gained in insight. Hilda and Morgan simply divorce themselves from their past, yet remain unchanged. Tallis continues to suffer. It is with Rupert, however, that the reader is confronted with death--his corpse floating in the pool is a stark symbol of a failed potential.

The swimming pool, around which a few of the scenes take place, plays a central role in the symbolism of the novel. The staring into the pool is an allusion to the Narcissus myth and is perhaps the culminating image of the human condition. The image of man trapped by his own distorted reflection is expressive of the despair and loneliness of man, who is confined within his mind by an endless progression of images that are merely his own distorted reflection. This is the despair of Rupert, who fails to pierce the surface of the water, of his own reflection, and instead drowns in his own anguish. Peter Wolfe comments perceptively on this mirror symbolism when he states that

¹⁴⁵Dipple, p. 79.

people only exhaust life (their own) when they decline to pass through the image of the self, into the world of material objects and of other minds. As the mirror image implies, discontent with one's surface reflection promises depths of self-knowledge otherwise unobtainable.¹⁴⁶

Whereas Rupert dies in the swimming pool, Simon emerges from it having asserted himself against Julius (pp. 332-36). The game initiated by Julius in which each apparent reality is revealed as an appearance, an illusion, is a device to uncover this fundamental absurdity of being. The fixed point from which we as readers feel we can safely watch the world of the novel is itself shown by means of the "play within a play" to be an appearance.

Although water is a destructive force in the novel, it is traditionally symbolic of fertility or rebirth. Morgan's recitation to Peter while in the garden of the passage from *The Tempest* (Ariel's song in Act I, Scene ii) points to the potential role of water in the cleansing of one's vision. In *The Tempest*, Alonzo is a man of sin, but capable of remorse and redemption. It is he who is referred to by Ariel when he sings, "Those are pearls that were his eyes;/ Nothing of him that doth fade/ But doth suffer a sea-change/ Into something rich and strange" (I.ii.398-401). This idea of a "sea-change" or baptism by water is an external sign of the alteration in

¹⁴⁶ Wolfe, p. 36.

one's orientation to reality, necessary for one's eyes to become like pearls. Far from indicating blindness to reality, this image emphasizes the value placed both on reality itself, and the faculty of perception. Unlike Alonzo, the "sea-change" suffered by Rupert in the swimming pool is not something positive. For Rupert to have realized the true path of love, "the mountain path with many twists and turns" (p. 122), instead of worrying about the preservation of his social image, the pool would have taken on a different function, as a place of baptism from appearance to reality.

Freedom and love are two concepts integral to the definition of vision and together they form a thread that holds together the different aspects of Murdoch's moral and aesthetic philosophy. These are the essence of life; the source of a spontaneous and creative life. Modern man has sold his birth-right to live in a collective illusion. Murdoch enjoins her reader to be satisfied with nothing less than the freedom to respond with the whole self to ultimate reality. We must attempt to turn from the emptiness of self-involvement to the fullness of light, this process of turning involving an ascent. The theme of love as a means to enlightenment and life as a period of preparation in which the soul ascends to higher things is fundamental to both character and artist. Both must travel on the road to transcendence and their achievement must be one which is beyond personality.

The world is indeed a closed door, and it is by the power of vision that we perceive the way through. The quest, however, is not without its periods of darkness. The experience of those characters who are able to make the transformation from the false to the real reveals the truth that love is both form and substance, intuition and action.

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