

Iris Murdoch's Early Novels

by Hilda D. Spear



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Scope of Topic

Iris Murdoch has so far written twenty-five novels as well as a number of philosophical books. This *Bookmark* examines three of the early novels and aims:

- (i) to isolate some of the principal themes in Murdoch's work and to suggest how she develops them as time progresses
- (ii) to indicate how she deals with moral, religious and philosophical problems and
- (iii) to communicate some of the pleasure that I personally have found in reading them.

BOOKS TO READ

Under the Net (1954); Penguin Books, 1960; kept in print by Penguin Books

The Bell (1958); Penguin Books, 1962; kept in print by Penguin Books

An Unofficial Rose (1962); Penguin Books, 1964; kept in print by Penguin Books

NOTES

Iris Murdoch is one of the most prolific of our contemporary novelists and she has also had an active career teaching and writing about philosophy. It is perhaps inevitable that her philosophy almost constantly spills over into her novels and her books on philosophy are peppered with illustrations taken from literature.

It is not necessary, however, to know anything about philosophy to be able to read and enjoy the novels. They all tell good stories and are full of humour; there are many hilariously funny incidents and yet there is always a serious undercurrent to the novels. They can be read at various levels of understanding and, the more fully they are understood, the greater the pleasure the reader will derive from them.

Under the Net

Under the Net is Murdoch's first published novel, though she had written and destroyed several earlier ones. We generally look at any first novel in the hope of recognising the origins of various aspects of the later work, so that we can see how the novelist develops. *Under the Net*, however, is not an entirely typical Murdochian novel; in fact, there is perhaps no such thing as an entirely typical one.

Like the majority of her novels, it is set mainly in London, though the protagonist and a number of the other characters spend a short period in France. Throughout her novels Murdoch uses London to help her establish the reality of her plots, to be the firm foot of the compass around which the action evolves. London's own solidity, the detailed descriptions of well-known streets and landmarks encourage us to believe that the places and the people in the novels are real.

The protagonist, Jake Donaghue, is an unsuccessful writer who makes his living by translating the novels of a more successful French counterpart into English. He is the first person narrator of the story and we learn of his earlier life and relationships through retrospective accounts. It is his viewpoint that prevails; all the other characters are seen through his eyes

and until close to the end there is little to help us see the action in a rounded way. Murdoch uses a first person narrator intermittently throughout the rest of her work but it is not her most favoured form of narration.

Neither is Jake typical of Murdoch's later protagonists, for he appears to be without any family, whereas one of the more fascinating aspects of the later novels is to be found in the extended families that are presented. In this novel only Sadie and Anna are related but their relationship gives no hint of the complicated family interconnections that are to follow.

The action begins with Jake returning home from a trip to France to learn that he has been thrown out of his lodgings. He has little money and nowhere to go. The novel follows him in his search for somewhere to live but at the same time, though he is not aware of it, he is on a journey of self-discovery.

When we first meet him, Jake appears to be an independent, free, totally self-absorbed character, the kind of hero that the French philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre was presenting in the 'thirties, 'forties and 'fifties. As the novel proceeds, however, Jake learns that he is not the centre of the world and that his friends and acquaintances have lives in which he is merely peripheral.

Apart from Jake, the most interesting character in the novel is Hugo Belfounder, who is introduced quite casually in the middle of Chapter 4. He is the forerunner of the many 'enchanter' figures in the novels, a kind of philosopher whose ideas and theories captivate Jake. Later 'enchanter' figures, particularly those in the most recent novels, appear to have magical powers and are far more dominating but their origins lie in the character of Hugo.

It is from Hugo that Jake learns to recognise reality; he discovers that he has misinterpreted the signs around him; he has always believed what he himself wanted to believe and has not attempted to understand other people. So it is that, in a few words from his hospital bed, Hugo rearranges the whole story, explaining what has really been happening; the fact that Hugo loves Sadie, not Anna, leaves the way open for Jake to pursue his courtship of Anna.

Jake realises at last that his view of life has been mistaken: 'I knew everything' he comments in Chapter 18, 'I got it all the wrong way round, that's all'. The action of the novel is suddenly deconstructed and the reader, who has had to rely on Jake's account, now has to reconstruct the story in the light of Hugo's explanation of events.

The first of Iris Murdoch's many dog characters appears in this book. The Alsatian, Mr Mars, clapped-out hero of many animal films, helps to redeem Jake, for despite his selfishness with regard to people, he falls sentimentally in love with the dog and buys him at a price far exceeding his actual worth in order to release him from his public life and let him live out his last few years in comfort.

There are many dramatic incidents in the novel and Mr Mars is at the centre of one of the funniest of them, when Jake and his friend Finn try to kidnap him, cage and all, from Sammy Starfield's flat. At the same time, it connects up with the more serious side of the book, for it emphasises the theme of escape and imprisonment, of liberty and captivity, which is central to this novel. The kidnapping itself is exciting and spectacular as well as funny but its metaphorical significance should not be missed, since Murdoch's interest in freedom and responsibility recurs throughout the novels.

In many ways Murdoch can be compared with the nineteenth century novelists, particularly perhaps, Dickens, in her use of dramatic excitement to help move her story along. Unlike many modern novelists she has retained both the traditional shape of the novel and a strong interest in story; furthermore, and this may at times be seen as a weakness, she follows Dickens in tying up all the loose ends at her novels' conclusions.

This is exactly how *Under the Net* ends. Jake, after many vicissitudes, has begun to understand his own faults; he has decided to find a job; he is looking for a place to live which does not involve him sponging on his friends; and finally, it looks as though he may be able to find Anna once again.

The Bell

Murdoch's fourth novel, *The Bell*, is generally considered to be the best of the early novels. Compared with the somewhat picaresque adventures of Jake in *Under the Net*, it has a much more structured plot, which takes as its focus the bell of the title.

Though the story is narrated in the third person, much of it comes to us through the consciousnesses of Dora Greenfield, Michael Meade and Toby Gashe. Their various points of view are reinforced by the omniscient narrator who is able to fill in the gaps. We can thus see that, despite her interest in tradition, Murdoch is ready to utilise more modern techniques and to combine them with long accepted forms of narration.

The device of setting a novel within the confines of a closed community has been used by many novelists. In particular, Joseph Conrad set a number of his novels on a ship at sea. More recently he was followed by William Golding whose trilogy, *Rites of Passage*, is set mainly on a ship and whose best-known novel, *Lord of the Flies*, is acted out on a desert island. These isolated settings enable the novelist to avoid the distractions of ordinary life for the characters and to concentrate their actions and reactions on a small number of people.

The Bell is set mainly in a lay religious community, Imber Court, attached to the convent at Imber Abbey in the village of Pendelcote in the West Country. For most of the characters its isolation is absolute but Dora belongs to London and is never entirely absorbed by the atmosphere of Imber; she is essentially part of the real world outside the community and is an intruder on the apparent peace and tranquillity of life there. Murdoch's 'outsiders' often serve as catalysts to change the world of the novel and this is exactly the part that Dora plays. When she finally leaves Imber court the community is no more.

This is an extremely theatrical novel; it is not so much that the vocabulary belongs to the theatre, though it often does, but that, first, the plot is played out in settings which seem to be based on the theatre and secondly, though it has to be expressed in words, spectacle contributes significantly to the action. This device serves a dual purpose of distancing us slightly from what is going on while at the same time, as in the theatre, we are intimately involved in the drama unfolding before us.

Running parallel with the account of contemporary life at Imber is the ancient legend attached to the love story of a fourteenth century nun from the Abbey. When Toby and Dora discover the old bell which figured in this story, lying at the bottom of the lake that separates the Abbey from Imber Court they set in motion a mischievous plot; even they do not realise the catastrophic events which will follow.

Iris Murdoch has never shrunk from dealing with the social, philosophical and religious issues of the day and in *The Bell* she combines them all. From the outset we are concerned with the marital troubles of Dora and Paul. The novel begins with a description of their married life, seen through Dora's eyes, at the moment when, after a separation of six months, she has decided to return to him. But among all the myriad reasons that Dora offers for having married Paul in the first place, love does not figure and the marriage has become one of subjugation and domination. It is a theme that Murdoch often returns to.

Again, Murdoch frequently presents homosexuals in her novels. Even when she published *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* in 1970, she was criticised for providing a happy ending for the

homosexual couple Axel and Simon. Over ten years earlier such an ending would have been even less acceptable. What she shows in *The Bell* is the way in which the gentle Michael Meade is hounded for his sexual propensity; any happy ending is frustrated, however, through the evil in Nick which betrays love not once, but twice before his suicide.

Another issue which arises several times in later novels is that of religious vocation. Here, Catherine Fawley, twin sister of the satanic Nick, is to become a nun but she is tortured by human love, ironically for the untouchable Michael Meade, who himself is hopelessly in love with her brother. When Dora decides to disturb the complacency of the community by exchanging the new bell for the ancient one, she is both unaware of the malicious intervention of Nick and of the way in which Catherine will slot herself into the position of the dead nun in the old legend; so what began as a mischievous jape turns sour.

In most of the early novels Murdoch introduces ingenious and complicated explications of methods of achieving things or extremely detailed descriptions of how events take place. Among others in *Under the Net* is Jake's escape from Sadie's locked flat and the kidnapping of Mr Mars. In *The Bell* there are a number of such imaginative accounts of events, the dredging up of the ancient bell from the lake and the collapse of the causeway under the Bishop's procession being the most spectacular.

The Bell is a more serious novel than the earlier one, however, and despite the comedy of events, the death of Nick, the madness of Catherine and the complete dissolution of the community at Imber Court are tragedies only slightly ameliorated by the happy ending for Dora.

An Unofficial Rose

The title of *An Unofficial Rose* is taken from Rupert Brooke's poem, 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester'. It is one of four of Murdoch's novels published in the early 'fifties which explore the responsibilities, problems, and compulsions of the marriage tie and from that point of view it takes up where *The Bell* left off. It is also the most romantic of all her novels, though it does not have a traditional happy ending.

The story is built around the life and loves of three generations of the Peronett family, the largest extended family to appear so far in the novels. Again, this is an idea that Murdoch plays with in later novels. For instance, every member of the large cast of *The Red and the Green*, published three years later, in 1965, belongs to one extensive and complicated Irish family.

In *An Unofficial Rose*, however, the family itself is a fairly straightforward one - there are no twins, no step-parents, no half-brothers or -sisters. The problems and complications arise from the liaisons, the would-be connections and the secret desires of the various generations. The only other significant characters in the novel are all romantically connected in some way with the Peronett family: Emma Sands, the ex-mistress of Hugh, and her companion Lindsay, the future mistress of Hugh's son Randall; the gentle homosexual Humphrey Finch and his wife Mildred, who is in love with Hugh; Mildred's brother Felix who is loved by Randall's daughter Miranda and who is himself in love with Randall's wife Ann; Nancy Bowshott who helps in the house and in the rose gardens and is in love with Randall; and Douglas Swann, the local vicar who is married to Clare but is half in love with Ann.

The interest of the plot lies in the way in which these various love entanglements are resolved. A cyclical theme is introduced in which we see the second-generation son, enabled by his father's generosity to live out in his life the frustrated dreams of his father and the third-generation daughter, in her turn, frustrating through her jealousy her mother's chance

of happiness with Felix who wishes to marry Ann after she has been deserted by her husband.

Miranda and Randall are both strong characters in whom the theme of domination is perpetuated; both treat the weaker Ann with selfish disregard for her feelings. Apart from *The Unicorn*, however, this group of romantic novels is more concerned with right and wrong than with anything as strong as good and evil. Randall's bullying and final desertion of Ann and Miranda's emotional blackmail of her are the wickedest things in the novel. The minor deceits and lies of the other characters are hardly to be taken seriously on a moral plane. There is little ethical discussion except in Chapter 14 when Douglas Swann attempts to comfort Ann.

Though, unlike *The Bell*, this novel is not set in an enclosed community, the characters do not have the freedom of movement accorded to Jake and his companions in *Under the Net*. Here the settings are fairly carefully circumscribed; the novel begins with the funeral of Hugh's wife, Fanny in the local churchyard; after that it is set in the Peronett's home and rose nursery, Greyhallock, Seton Blaise, the home of the Finches, and the various London flats of Emma Sands, of Hugh and of Felix; the book ends with Hugh, Mildred and Felix on a boat going to India.

The loose ends are tied up at the end of the novel, so that we know what the future appears to hold in store for the various characters we have been interested in. Moreover, though there is no dog in *An Unofficial Rose*, Fanny Peronett's cat, Hatfield, which had disappeared at the beginning of the novel, after Fanny's death, returns home at the end and takes his old place in front of the stove.

CONCLUSION

These three novels illustrate a variety of themes and devices which are used in later novels. They all make good and exciting reading and do not demand any knowledge of philosophy for the reader to enjoy them.

FURTHER READING

The following novels will help to fill out this introduction to Iris Murdoch's work up to the mid-'seventies and are a good preparation for reading the later work. They are all to be found in Penguin editions:

The Sandcastle, set in a boy's school

A Severed Head, a bizarre and amusing story

The Black Prince, a first person novel which is presented as the best novel of its writer-protagonist, Bradley Pearson

A Word Child, a novel based on a cyclical theme.

CRITICISM

A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom*, Chatto & Windus, 1965. An excellent book on the early work.

Hilda D. Spear, *Iris Murdoch*, Macmillan Modern Novelists, 1995. Currently, the only book that deals with all the novels.

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