

The "Immoral" Psychology of Murdoch's *A Severed Head*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the portrait of female characters in Iris Murdoch's famous novel, *A Severed Head*, to reveal the immoral behavior of most of its characters. This is a shocking critique, since Murdoch always talked about moral psychology and her great interest in ethics. As it seems, this novel could discredit many of her ideas and views. The narrator is a wine trader called Martin Lynch-Gibbon, married to the adulterous and hypocrite Antonia who has an affair with her psychiatrist, Palmer, and before that and after, with her brother-in-law. Martin is also having an affair with a Georgie, who ends up traveling with Palmer to America. Palmer, on the other hand, used to have an incestuous relationship with his half-sister; Dr. Honor Klein. All the twisted and shifting relationships reveal ethical corruption, culminating with everyone getting what he/she wanted, with no remorse or guilty conscience.

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الفلسفة اللااخلاقية في رواية ايريس مردوخ الرأس المقطوع

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تصوير الشخص النسانية في رواية ايريس مردوخ الشهيرة *الرأس المقطوع*، لكشف السلوك الغير اخلاقي لمعظم شخص تلك الرواية، مما يشكل صدمة للقارئ، بسبب اهتمام الروائية بالأخلاق والفلسفة الخلقية، مما يجعل القارئ يشك في مصداقية الكاتبة وآرائها. تدور أحداث الرواية والتي يرويها مارتن لينش غبون حول عدد من الشخصيات وجميعهم متورطون في علاقات غير أخلاقية، فالزوجة انطونيا تقيم علاقة مع طبيبها النفسي، بالمر، وكذلك مع شقيق زوجها بالمر بينما في نفس الوقت يقيم هو علاقة مع أخته غير الشقيقة. كذلك يخون مارتن زوجته مع جورج التي تسافر في النهاية مع بالمر إلى أمريكا. إن كل هذه العلاقات المنحرفة تكشف فساد خلقى كبير، خاصة عندما ينتهي أصحاب هذه العلاقات بنيلهم ما يريدون، وذلك دون إحساس بالذنب أو الندم.

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British writer, university lecturer, prolific and highly professional novelist, Iris Murdoch, has dealt with everyday ethical and moral issues, sometimes in the light of myths. Murdoch produced 26 novels in forty years, the last written while she was suffering from Alzheimer. Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919, and studied classics, ancient history and philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford. During World War II she was an active member of the Communist Party, but eventually became disappointed with its ideology and resigned. From 1938 to 1942 she worked at the Treasury as assistant principal, and then for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1944-46) in Austria and Belgium. After a year without employment in London, Murdoch took up a postgraduate studentship in philosophy under Ludwig Wittgenstein. In 1948 she was elected a fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, where she worked as a tutor until 1963. Following that time, Murdoch devoted herself entirely to writing. Between the years 1963 and 1967 she also lectured at the Royal College of Art.

Murdoch's first published work, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (1953), was a critical study. Murdoch made her debut as a novelist with *Under The Net* (1954), which had as its protagonist the Sartrean hero, Jack Donaghue. *A Severed Head* (1961) was generally perceived as exploiting Jungian theories of archetypes. The novel was turned into a play with the help of J.B. Priestley, then later (1971) into a movie, starring Richard Attenborough, Lee Remick and Claire Bloom.

Among Murdoch's other publications are plays, philosophical and critical studies, including *Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals* (1992). Murdoch was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1987. From the mid-1990s Murdoch suffered from Alzheimer disease. Her last novel was *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), a psychological thriller. She died in Oxford on February 8, 1999.

Murdoch has long been known as one of the most deeply insightful and morally passionate novelists of our time. This attention

has often eclipsed Murdoch's sophisticated and influential work as a philosopher, which has had a wide –ranging impact on thinkers in moral philosophy as well as religious and political theory. The idea that is usually associated with Murdoch and moral philosophy is her search for what is good.

Kathleen Wheeler believes that “Murdoch's novels suggest a fascination with the central moral principle that the good in human relations is essentially the ability to perceive others as being like ourselves, rather than as objects for exploitation, and that art can develop this imaginative faculty”(186).

I find it crucial here to elaborate a little on Murdoch's concept of moral psychology before moving on. One of the brilliant studies in this area is the study of A. E. Denham, “Envisioning the good: Iris Murdoch Moral Psychology” where the writer starts by asking: “her novels...veiled expressions of a philosophical moral theory? Do they betray her commitment to some normative systems, some set of ethical convictions that she has elsewhere articulated in specifically philosophical terms?” (603). The writer also quotes many of Murdoch's words where she emphasizes that she separates philosophy from art, but concludes that “ it does not follow, of course, that Murdoch succeeded in wholly segregating philosophical from literary persona” (603). The writer also analyzes some of Murdoch's ideas such as meta-ethics, values and their aspects, moral reality and moral knowledge. Denham summarizes three theses that the writer believes to be “pivotal” to Murdoch's moral psychology: the first is that “moral knowledge occurs within a first person perspective”. The second is “moral judgments are, or should be, particularistic”. The third is “In accurate moral vision, imaginative attention overcomes illusion and fantasy”.The writer concludes by discussing Murdoch's ideas on the novel and works of art since they “enable us to better achieve an “objective vision”: its very form reconstructs the hapless and often senseless world of human affairs into a reality that is both beautiful and intelligible-and does this without falsifying its complexity and terror” (627).

It is interesting to note that, Murdoch always refused to be called a philosophical novelist. In an interview with Jack Biles, answering the question “...do you see yourself as a philosophical novelist ...?” Murdoch said “No, I don’t” (300-301). And yet, in another interview with S.B. Sagare, she answered the same question by saying “Not a philosophical novelist, no, certainly not, just as a novelist” (700). But what is important to clarify about Murdoch's insistence to keep her writings and philosophy separate is, according to Denham, her idea that philosophy is “objective, detached, abstract; philosophical style should be guided by the aim to say exactly what one means ...”(603). Therefore, I think it is a matter of style, not of themes and ideas.

This paper is not about the philosophical ideas of Iris Murdoch. Rather, it is a feminist literary textual analysis of the female characters in Murdoch's Novel, *A Severed Head* (1961). The paper will show clearly that Murdoch's ideas about the good, ethics and moral issues are alienated from this novel, which somehow discredits her own views, or at least makes us wonder about the use of these ideas. Rabinovitz asserts that “one of Murdoch's greatest interests...is ethics” (271). The point that this paper will try to investigate is that if a writer is preoccupied with ethics, how can the same writer produce a novel full of all possible deviant relationships, such as incest and adultery, in which most characters are involved, without having feelings of remorse or guilt? Throughout the novel we see twisted and shifting relationships that reveal ethical corruption, culminating with everyone having what he/she has wanted, with no remorse or guilty conscience. There are the adulterous relationships, lesbianism, incest, and homosexuality. One wonders about the point of having all these twisted relationships which contradict the minimum level of ethics.

A Severed Head is a novel about Martin Lynch-Gibbon, the forty-one-year old, oversensitive, intellectual narrator, a wine tradesman, having taken over the family business. The neurotic, misguided, and generally naïve narrator tells his story of love, romance, lust, and adultery. At first, he is happy and in love with both his wife, Antonia, and his mistress, Georgie Hands. This stability ends when Antonia reveals her affair with intention to marry

him to Palmer Anderson, Martin's best friend, and her Martin tries to convince himself that he loves and must have both women, and he pursues this end by complacently accepting the situation. Meanwhile, Honor Klein, Palmer's half sister, appears on the scene, and Martin falls in love with her, losing his infatuation with both his wife and mistress. Thwarted by Klein, he attacks her physically though not sexually, only shortly thereafter to realize that he has homosexual inclinations for Palmer. After Antonia and Palmer decide not to marry, she returns home for a short-lived period of peace and reconciliation, until she announces that she will marry Alexander, Martin's brother and her lover of many years. In the end, Martin is left with Honor Klein, with some great though ambiguous hope of having a relationship.

Before diving into the textual analysis of the female characters in the novel, I find it necessary to discuss, briefly, some of the ideas of feminist psychology. Feminist moral psychology is usually conceived as dealing with what feminists in particular have contributed to the field of moral psychology, or the ways in which their approach to these issues is motivated by feminist concerns, especially in relation to understanding female oppression, and attempting to end it. The feminist contribution to moral psychology can be seen as relating to four areas: the first is that some feminists emphasize the role of emotion in action; in particular, they stress the motive of care in promoting action. This element is clear in the character of Rosemary. Rosemary, as we shall see later, is the caring sister of Martin, but has at the same time her own life about which nobody seems to know much. The second is the feminist attention to oppression seen in both victims of oppression, and oppressors themselves. The third is responsibility. This is clearly the area where Georgie seems to be the key character. She is often described as the sensible university lecturer who takes care of her own issues. A good example of this is when she goes through abortion on her own without any help of Martin; the father. The Fourth is how feminists see or fail to see moral issues. This can be related to the obscure character of Honor Klein. She is a strong character with absolutely no moral values

to prevent her from having an incestuous relationship with her half-brother. ¹

Taking the previous points into consideration, this paper will try to analyze the female characters in the novel, *A Severed Head*. The first female character to appear is Georgie saying: "You're sure she doesn't know," (5)² in the first line of the novel and the reference is to Antonia, Martin's wife. We are given some characteristics of Georgie's personality as perceived by Martin, the narrator. She is described as tough, honest and sensible; Martin says "typical of toughness which had...more to do with honesty than with ruthlessness...Only with a person so eminently sensible could I have deceived my wife" (5). She is a university lecturer, and her room is untidy, in fact "dusty hurly-burly more reminiscent of a junk shop than a civilized room" (8). We notice that throughout the novel. Georgie and her room are often described as messy. Georgie is pictured as wearing old skirts and "shapeless" jerseys. Her hair is usually strange and absurd, which indicates that she does not care about her feminine appearance, like Antonia. She is also described as being "no cook" (91). All of these qualities refer to the stereotyped image of working women. He admits that unlike Antonia, the wife, "I...failed to possess her" (8). When Martin compares Antonia, Rosemary, his sister, with Georgie, he says "...both Rosemary and Antonia were perpetually playing the role of being a woman, Georgie played no role....She was herself, which just happened to involve, and nature had decreed superbly, being a woman" (20). When Georgie got pregnant earlier, she got rid of the baby "in the matter I would have expected of her, calm, laconic, matter of fact, even cheering me along with her surly wit." (13). So far, Georgie seems to be the representative of the modern strong clever woman: the feminist type.

The second stereotyped image is that of, Antonia, the wife. She is portrayed as the opposite of Georgie. A feminine type, she is five years older than Martin, and he considers himself "fortunate to get her" (15). She is beautiful, but "has more than once been taken for my mother" (15) as Martin confesses. She never got "a sensible education, though she lived abroad for a great deal and speaks three languages fluently"

(16). Martin isn't sure why she married him " I was not sure at the time, and am still not sure, whether I was precisely what Antonia wanted, or whether she didn't take me simply because she felt it was time to take somebody"(16). Nevertheless, they were "formidably happy" (16). Martin starts describing Antonia's personality and appearance by saying "she is a woman long accustomed to admiration, long accustomed to think of herself as beautiful" (16). He carries on describing her golden long hair, her face, her "great tawny-coloured intelligent searching eyes and a mobile expressive mouth" (17). Martin also admits that both he and Antonia have no religion. She is also manipulative and acting, she uses tears as a weapon to achieve her goal. At one point in the novel, Martin says "Antonia's weeping stopped as if at the turn of a switch" (143).

The events start to develop when Antonia returns home telling Martin that she wants a divorce because she is "being very desperately and deeply in love" (23). What is ironic is that he calls her "angel" immediately before this confession. After along discussion in which Antonia asserts her love for Palmer while Martin refuses to believe her, he says in complete self-deception "What have I done to deserve this?" (25). He even refuses to let her go and says "you'd better resign yourself to having a husband and a lover" (26). His childish reaction pushes Antonia to say at the end of the discussion and part three of the novel "my child, my dear child" (27).

The next confrontation takes place between Martin. Palmer tries to convince Martin that his adulterous relationship with Antonia is logical!! He does not want Martin out of their lives, saying: "in a strange and rather wonderful way we can't do without you. We shall hold on to you, we shall look after you. You'll see" (31). Although Martin not reacting in a self-respecting manner, all he can do is to go and spend Christmas with his brother and sister. One of Antonia's main qualities is her love to control, especially Martin. She wants to have him in her life, and is madly jealous when she knows about his affair.

The next female character to appear on the scene is Rosemary, Martin's sister. She has never liked Antonia, and she herself has not had a successful marriage. He describes her saying: "she gives the

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appearance of a prude, she is in reality far from prudish and is almost undoubtedly at her somewhat mysterious flat in Chelsea...involved in continual amorous adventures” (35). She is also referred to as being “petit”. She is nice to her brother, trying to soothe his wounds, and offers to help him settle down in a new flat. She even asks him to be nice to their bother, Alexander, because he is very sad over their separation; Martin agrees “to console him for my wife having left me, I said ‘All right, flower” (38). She is described by Alexander as “gifted” in doing nothing (41).

After that, the reader is introduced to Dr. Honor Klein, Palmer’s sister who is picked up by Martin himself from the train station in a foggy and horrible weather. Antonia “shamelessly” exerts her powers to convince him to do so because Palmer has a cold. All that Martin can say is: “you can’t have everything, Antonia”. Her reply is simply, “I can try, my darling, I can try!”(52). She wants to have it all and she is egotistical and full of hypocrisy asking Martin to accept her adultery and cheating and even be good to her lover “ [a]nd please, if you can, be nice to Anderson. He’s so terribly worried about what you feel about him and so terribly anxious to please you. You could hurt him dreadfully by the smallest thing” (49). Back to Dr. Klein, whose face “not a very pleasant” is portrayed as “heavy, perceptibly Jewish, and dour, with just a hint of insolence” (55). She even has a moustache “the black hairs on her upper lip” (111). She mocks Martin when he helps her with her luggage “This is an unexpected courtesy Mr. Lynch-Gibbon” (55). The next day, Dr. Klein criticizes Martin and analyzes the situation of her brother, Martin and Antonia. She believes that both her brother and Antonia want his help because they can not make a decision for themselves, and that his soft and civilized behavior is confusing them.

She is another representative of the feminist type. She teaches at Cambridge and is described as a tough, unpleasant and a bit frightening. When she asks Georgie about Martin, Georgie confesses everything, and when asked by Martin why she did that, she replies “Because it was impossible to lie to her” (83). When the odd episode

of the fight between Martin and Honor takes place, she fights back violently "she fought like a maniac...she didn't cry out once" (111).

When Martin returns to work after Christmas, he does not forget his two lesbian secretaries: Miss Hernshaw and Miss Seelhaft, who are described as excellent secretaries. He adds "They could write accurate and even witty business letters in French and German and by now knew the business very well indeed" and "that they were a happy and well-suited lesbian couple" (61).

A great deal of the characters' secrets and immoral behavior is revealed throughout the novel. When the relationship of Martin and Georgie is revealed by Honor Klein, Antonia shows her hypocrite face in its best "Martin, I can't tell you how it hurts" (77). She sheds tears and pretends to be surprised although she was cheating him as well. When the much-feared meeting between Antonia and Georgie takes place, everyone is nervous. Antonia, the representative of the feminine camp, is at her best using the best defense strategy; her beauty. "Antonia who had taken more than usual pains with her appearance...an elegant, anxious, tired...and infinitely dear" (86).

On the other hand, the feminist, "Georgie in her shabby brown skirt, blue pullover, and black stockings looked like a child. She had, with a defiant deliberation, made no change in her appearance. She wore no make-up. Her hair was plaited and twisted carelessly, a little absurdly even" (86). The meeting ends with Antonia being hysterical and weeping while Georgie is taken away by Martin.

The immoral behavior of some of the characters in the novel reaches its peak when Martin, accidentally catches Honor and Palmer in bed together, naked. Thus the novel is a rainbow of all kinds of immoral actions. There are the adulterous relationships, lesbianism, and incest. Rabinovitz says, "There are, mathematically, nine heterosexual relationships possible between the three men and three women in the novel; eight of these liaisons occur" and she elaborates that "the lack of the ninth is offset by a hint of homosexuality in the relationship of Palmer and Martin" (301-302).

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After this relationship is exposed by Martin, everything changes in the novel. Having been manipulated by Palmer, Martin seems to have control for a while. Palmer begs him not to tell Antonia and he doesn't. Martin and Antonia get back to each other due to the change of Palmer; she even says to Martin that she thinks "he is going mad" (141).

Surprises follow one after the other: Georgie and Alexander are going to get married, which bothers Antonia greatly. When Georgie and Alexander visit Antonia and Martin, Georgie is much changed; she was thinner, wearing a black dress and her hair "cascaded on top and carefully pinned...She seemed with so much neatness, beautifully older" (160). Palmer and Honor are leaving to another country.

Soon after that, Georgie attempts suicide, and is saved by Martin and Honor. This incident brings her closer to Palmer who tries to help her and ends up taking her with him to America for good. Antonia gets back to Alexander; Martin's brother and we are to know that they used to be lovers. She even says to Martin "you knew I had to have both of you" (187). She continues in a rude and ruthless manner to convince him to be in this love triangle, by saying "After all, this situation has existed for a long time. It isn't as if I'd only just thought of it" (187). The moral issue here is that Antonia thinks that it is normal to have all the men she likes around her, even if they are brothers. She says to Martin, "I must keep you in my loving net" (190). Gindin analyzes this particular situation which reflects that Antonia is an "emotionally self-centered person who uses words like "rationality", "tolerance", and "understanding" as only half-conscious guises for a desire to possess simultaneously all the men she knows"(190).

But this time, Martin feels that he does not have to take it any more. He confesses his love for Honor who doesn't travel with Palmer after all. She visits Martin and it seems that they will be together, and when Martin asks her "could we be happy?" she vaguely answers, "This has nothing to do with happiness, nothing whatever" (205). The novel ends with both of them telling the other that they should take their chances.

The whole novel can be summarized in Palmer's word to Martin: "all is permitted" and "all is possible" (167). Unfortunately the author, whose interest in moral psychology is great has immoral characters. portvayed the triumph of and themes in triumphant situations. Antonia is with her life - long lover, Palmer with the beautiful and intelligent Georgie, while Honor hopes to be happy with Martin who loves her dearly.

To conclude, the novel clearly deals with brilliantly-portrayed characters and scenes, but, unfortunately, it fails to give the reader ethical values to respect. If everything in the world is simply possible and permitted, what kind of world can we expect to live in?

Notes

1. The information on feminist moral psychology is taken from the article "Feminist Moral Psychology", first published on Friday, Jan30, 2009.
[http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-moralpsy/Stanford.Encyclopedia of philosophy](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-moralpsy/Stanford.Encyclopedia%20of%20philosophy).
2. All quotes are taken from Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head*. London: Penguin Books, 1961.

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