

The Influence of Sartrean Existentialism on Iris Murdoch's Early Novels

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Abbreviations

After an initial reference the following texts will be abbreviated as follows:

EM: Existentialists and Mystics

FTE: The Flight from the Enchanter

MGM: Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals

RR: Sartre: Romantic Rationalist

UTN: Under the Net

Full citations of the above can be found in the first reference to each text or in the bibliography.

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Introduction

Iris Murdoch, an Anglo-Irish novelist and philosopher engaged with Sartrean existentialism throughout her career. This thesis aims to explore the presence of existentialist discourse in Murdoch's first four novels and evaluate to what extent this discourse had influence over her fiction. This exploration will take its course over three chapters: chapter one will consider Murdoch's debut novel *Under the Net* (1954) as a work greatly influenced by Sartrean existentialism but primarily in the form of a critique; chapter two looks at ideas of inhibited freedom in Murdoch's second published novel *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956) and determines this to be another work influenced by existentialism but in a more confused manner than *Under the Net*; the third and final chapter of this thesis considers Murdoch's philosophical turn in the publication of *The Sandcastle* (1957) and her engagement with Plato and Simone Weil in *The Bell* (1958). In this fourth novel 'notions of attention and 'unselfing' take center stage.'¹ The conclusion reached in this thesis will be to determine the degree to which Murdoch's first four novels are influenced by Sartrean existentialism. Before embarking on this study, there are two topics which warrant acknowledgement.

The first idea to consider is that of a philosophical novelist and whether Murdoch can be situated in this arena. Sofia de Melo Araújo acknowledges that 'literature seems to congregate two roles: that of aesthetic delight and that of vehicle for information, tradition and moral values.'² These opposing ideas suggest that literature can *only* be for pleasure, or to act as a vehicle for an agenda. The problem arises because Murdoch specifically stated her intention not to be categorized as a philosophical novelist. Murdoch insisted that 'I have definite philosophical views, but I don't want to promote them in my novels...I don't want philosophy, as such, to intrude into the novel world at all and I think it doesn't.'³ Yet despite her assertion, critics have

¹ Mark Luprecht, 'Introduction' in *Iris Murdoch Connected: Critical Essays on Her Fiction and Philosophy* ed. by Mark Luprecht (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), p.xiii

² Sofia de Melo Araújo, 'Introduction' in *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher Meets Novelist* ed. by Sofia de Mela Araújo and Fátima Vieira (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p.1

³ Gillian Dooley, (ed.) *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p.58

made strong connections between her fiction and philosophy. Mark Luprecht notes these 'inextricable links between philosophy and literature...'⁴ Scholars also note the influence of Murdoch's two disciplines upon one another and use them to explicate both her novels and philosophical essays. Guy Backus was the first scholar to write a major analysis of Murdoch as a philosophical novelist, his exploration was restricted to Murdoch's seventh novel, *The Unicorn* (1963). Since then many works have been published drawing connections between the philosophy and literature in Murdoch's oeuvre. Miles Leeson later published a thorough exploration of a selection of Murdoch's novels to investigate the 'notion that the history of philosophy is more prevalent within Murdoch's fiction than is usually given credit...'⁵ Scholarship is suggesting that, subconsciously or perhaps even consciously, Murdoch was using philosophy in her novels. Graham Martin takes the extreme view that 'Murdoch comes to literature as a philosopher; her own novels reflect her philosophical interests...'⁶ Martin suggests that Murdoch wrote her novels as a philosopher and an analysis of her novels may indicate this to be true. Niklas Forsberg, contrastingly, sets out to challenge the assumption that 'the question concerning the relation between philosophy and literature in Murdoch's authorship is to be answered by means of showing that Murdoch does or does not express philosophy in her novels.'⁷ Here, the debate surrounding these ideas begins to become clear. Martha Nussbaum, for the sake of this thesis, has the final word as she concedes that 'literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.'⁸ The purpose of this thesis, though, is not to define Murdoch concretely as a philosophical novelist or otherwise. An awareness, however, of this ongoing debate is clearly of use.

The second topic that warrants discussion is that of Murdoch's relationship with Sartrean existentialism. Richard Moran notes that 'Murdoch encountered Sartre's

⁴ Luprecht, p.xi

⁵ Miles Leeson, *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (London: Continuum, 2010), p.1

⁶ Graham Martin, 'Iris Murdoch and the Symbolist Novel', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 5.3 (1965), 296-300 (p.297)

⁷ Niklas Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.2

⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.3

Existentialism at the height of its cultural fashion and influence, and...she played a crucial role in bringing these ideas out of the realm of posture and fashion and into the realm of serious thought.⁹ Here, Moran is making reference to Murdoch's first published work: *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953). Murdoch introduced a British audience to Sartre's existential philosophy. However, her book took the form of a scathing critique, particularly in the final three chapters. Initially Murdoch was attracted to the movement; Conradi writes that the war was over and 'Sartre's philosophy was an inspiration to many who felt 'they must, and *could*, make out of all that misery and chaos a better world...'¹⁰ Murdoch would later determine that the movement was simply too solipsistic, individualistic and indifferent to the 'other.' Murdoch would argue that 'existentialism is not, and cannot by tinkering be made, the philosophy we need.'¹¹ This demonstrates Murdoch's inability to reconcile the movement with her perception of 'the good' and morality. Murdoch would ultimately come to 'a deeper engagement with the more contemplative ideals of Plato and Simone Weil.'¹² It must be noted, though, that Murdoch's relationship with existentialism was not a linear one, but a complex one. She would engage with existentialism throughout her career and revisited these ideas, however, she was deeply critical of Sartre. This thesis will attempt to track these ideas in relation to Murdoch's first four novels.

⁹ Richard Moran, 'Iris Murdoch and Existentialism' in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* ed. by Justin Brookes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.182

¹⁰ Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.269

¹¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.46

¹² Moran, p.183

Chapter 1: *Under the Net* of Existentialism

Iris Murdoch's complex relationship with existentialism is outlined within both her philosophical and literary work. These disciplines are so closely intertwined in relation to existentialism, a movement that is as often branded as literary as it is philosophical. Frances White acknowledges that Murdoch, too, felt this as 'so closely do literature and philosophy intertwine in her [Murdoch's] *oeuvre*.'¹³ Many scholars¹⁴ note Murdoch's debt to French existentialism in her debut novel, *Under the Net*. While Miles Leeson aptly indicates that Murdoch was reluctant to identify herself as a philosophical novelist and insists that this is 'not her chosen form of literature,'¹⁵ there remains much to discuss with the spirit of existentialism that clearly haunts her debut novel. Although Murdoch staunchly professed in interviews, later in her career, that she was 'anti-existentialist'¹⁶, she engaged widely in conversations about the movement, albeit mainly in the form of critique¹⁷, and, paradoxically, *Under the Net* highlights many existentialist features and concerns.

The majority of *Under the Net* is set in London. However, Jake journeys to Paris as do other central characters in the novel: post-war France haunts the narrative. The novel opens 'with the smell of France still fresh...'¹⁸; Jake is a translator of French novels for Jean Pierre and Murdoch permeates her narrative with French vernacular from the 'pile of *Nouvelles Littéraires*'¹⁹ to the '*bien renseigné*'²⁰ and Jake's statement that '*ce n'est pas mon genre*.'²¹ France, particularly Paris, is a permanent background feature of the narrative. Thomas R. Flynn suggests that 'existentialism is commonly

¹³ Frances White, *Becoming Iris Murdoch* (Kingston: Kingston University Press, 2014), p.94

¹⁴ This includes, but is not limited to: Gary Browning, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.15-20; Leeson, p.19-50; White, p.99

¹⁵ Leeson, p.19

¹⁶ Dooley, p.46

¹⁷ This critique is primarily manifested in Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999)

¹⁸ Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.7

¹⁹ *UTN*, p.21

²⁰ *UTN*, p.113

²¹ *UTN*, p.195

associated with Left-Bank Parisian cafes...one imagines off beat, avant-garde intellectuals...the mood is one of enthusiasm...and freedom – always freedom.²² Murdoch conjures these images of Paris from the first page of her novel. Similarly, it is possible that Anna, Jake's love interest, is emblematic of existentialism itself. When Jake and Anna first reunite, he exclaims 'however have I existed without you!'²³ This represents Murdoch's initial interest in existentialism as a viable metanarrative for life. However, Anna responds that all she wants is 'to be left alone to do some loving on my own account.'²⁴ Here, Murdoch displays the individualistic, solipsistic quality of existentialism that she deemed to be its ultimate failure. This is further symbolised in the ultimate demise of their relationship. At least for Jake, Anna belongs in Paris. As he visits Paris later in the narrative, he begins a fruitless quest to locate her until he sees her: 'there was no doubt that it was Anna.'²⁵ The elusive Anna fades into France until Jake accepts that 'Anna would not come.'²⁶ Anna is most often described in connection with France and her failure in the London theatre suggests that Murdoch is commenting that the existentialist movement is restricted to post-war France, that it simply fails as a 'way of life'²⁷ and cannot be extrapolated to London. Jake finally ponders 'was Paris as full of me for her as it was full of her for me?'²⁸ Anna is a symbol for France, and by extension, existentialism, in this narrative. Simply, Jake's infatuation for Anna could be read as a parallel for Murdoch's initial attraction to existentialism before she branded it too solipsistic. Kiernan Ryan asserts that 'the novel's deepest debts are European rather than English. Murdoch makes no secret of how much *Under the Net* owes to the fiction of the French surrealists...'²⁹ While this acknowledgement is not one specifically to Sartre or existentialist thought, clearly these ideas are present in the narrative and a more general, wider debt is owed to Europe.

²² Thomas R. Flynn, *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.ix

²³ *UTN*, p.44

²⁴ *UTN*, p.45

²⁵ *UTN*, p.213

²⁶ *UTN*, p.220

²⁷ Flynn, p.1

²⁸ *UTN*, p.216

²⁹ Kiernan Ryan, 'Introduction' to *Under the Net* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.xvi

The narrative, as a whole, serves as the existential journey of Jake Donaghue and is, in some respects, his story of 'becoming.' Jake's hamartia, though, is his solipsism. His ego is clear, and his existence is centred firmly around himself. Ryan acknowledges this in his reference to Jake's 'egotism [which] has stranded him.'³⁰ Jake professes that 'I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe, and cannot conceive that he has one containing me...'³¹ Jake simply cannot conceive of the idea that Finn has a universe that is similar to his own. For him, every person he meets serves a purpose to him, he is unable to consider other people and how he may have mutually beneficial relationships. Perhaps something as seemingly trivial as Murdoch's choice to use first person narration fuels this solipsistic notion. Stephen P. Thornton explores the philosophical dilemma of solipsism and the problem of other minds. He summarises that solipsism:

'is the view that "I am the only mind which exists," or "my mental states are the only mental states."...Solipsism is therefore more properly regarded as the doctrine that, in principle, "existence" means for me *my* existence and that of *my* mental states...For the solipsist, it is not merely the case that he believe that his thoughts, experiences, and emotions are, as a matter of contingent fact, the only thoughts, experiences and emotions. Rather, the solipsist can attach no meaning to the supposition that there could be thoughts, experiences, and emotions other than his own.'³²

Jake's character embodies these ideas and Murdoch's interest in philosophy is apparent throughout her writing, seeping into her literary endeavours. Murdoch's primary criticism of early³³ Sartrean existentialism was that it was too solipsistic and did not account for 'the other.' Murdoch argues that 'Sartre fails to emphasise the power of our inherited collective view...Sartre's is not a rational but an imaginative

³⁰ Ryan, p.xii

³¹ *UTN*, p.9

³² Stephen P. Thornton, 'Solipsism and the Problem of Other Minds', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/solipsis/>> [accessed 8 February 2019]

³³ A distinction is made here between Sartre's early and later work. Although Murdoch was primarily engaging with his earlier thought, it must be acknowledged that he attempted to reconcile these criticisms in his 1945 lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

solipsism.³⁴ This, on a broader spectrum, was a common critique of Sartre's early thought. Flynn confirms that 'existentialists had generally been criticised for their excessive individualism and apparent lack of social conscience.'³⁵ This was problematic in post-war France when a sense of community was important, therefore Sartre's ideas were criticised for being too individualistic and dismissive of 'the other.' Murdoch negotiates this critique of existentialism through the egotistical character of Jake.

This notion of solipsism is further fuelled as Nussbaum alludes to a lack in Murdoch's character development. She suggests that 'one might now suspect that Murdoch's Platonism, like Plato's, sets her in an ambivalent relationship to the sight of the human, that her intense love of the good militates against a loving embrace of the living particular in its everyday nonsymbolic realness.'³⁶ It must be noted that Nussbaum writes this specifically in response to Murdoch's Platonism in *The Black Prince*. Nevertheless, Nussbaum argues that Murdoch's character development is lacking in the simplicities and complexities that are recognised as human. This idea is reaffirmed in a later piece by Nussbaum, she maintains that 'too often, indeed, the absence of a more textured social world impoverishes her characters, who seems to play out their erotic dance in a void.'³⁷ Nussbaum considers Murdoch's characters to be weak, or that perhaps they stand to serve as ciphers, simply to symbolise something in her militant strive to find 'good.' This, though, is a reductive view of Murdoch's work, particularly in relation to *Under the Net*. Alternatively, Elizabeth Dipple considers Hugo's character to be 'a real character full of odd, worldly successes.'³⁸ This is a notable contrast to Nussbaum's argument. However, the truth of Murdoch's characterisation could be situated somewhere in between both scholars' ideas. In this novel, it can be argued that Murdoch's characters are not intended to be

³⁴ *RR*, pp.128-129

³⁵ Flynn, p.13

³⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual' in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* ed. by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), p.47

³⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, 'When She Was Good', *The New Republic* (2001)
<<https://newrepublic.com/article/122264/iris-murdoch-novelist-and-philosopher>>
[accessed 22 March 2019]

³⁸ Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), p.55

fully fleshed out or 'human' because they serve merely as figments of Jake's solipsistic universe. In this sense, Nussbaum's argument, although reductive, serves to further enlighten Murdoch's engagement with solipsism in the character of Jake as a lengthy and complex critique of existentialism.

This critique of existentialism continues through Murdoch's character Dave Gellman. Ryan notes that Gellman is a 'freelance utilitarian philosopher.'³⁹ Murdoch, vitally, utilises this branch of ethics to juxtapose Jake's solipsistic existential ego. John Stuart Mill, a major proponent of utilitarianism contends that "the Greatest Happiness Principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.'⁴⁰ The greatest happiness principle is often simply explained as that which achieves the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Utilitarian ethics concedes that an action is morally right if the outcome is positive for as many subjects as possible. This is notably distinct from Murdoch's take on existentialism. So, this juxtaposition is evoked to further criticise Sartrean existentialism. Murdoch believed that existentialism failed as a philosophy in that it was too individualistic and could not account for 'the other'. She highlights this further through her utilitarian character as this branch of ethics famously accounts for the other in the consideration of whether behaviour is right.

However, Dave is not portrayed as the ideal character either. He offers 'hospitality'⁴¹ to both Jake and Finn, 'brought [Jake] a meal at midday and in the evening'⁴² and cared for their stolen dog as Jake would hear him 'going out with Mars.'⁴³ Seemingly, Murdoch's portrayal of Dave is that of a 'good' man. However, returning to Nussbaum's consideration of Murdochian characters, he is another example of a character that does not appear fully 'human.' Gellman's character is not three-dimensional. This can be read in two ways: firstly that, as suggested previously, these characters are not intended to be seen as fully complex because they are merely a part of Jake's existence or, secondly, this could show that Murdoch equally does not consider utilitarianism to be the most appropriate approach to 'good' or ethics either.

³⁹ Ryan, p.x

⁴⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Great Britain: Amazon), p.9

⁴¹ *UTN*, p.275

⁴² *UTN*, p.223

⁴³ *UTN*, p.225

For that reason, despite creating the character to juxtapose Jake's existential outlook, she equally does not allow too much attention to be paid to the concept of utilitarianism. Early in the novel, Jake explains that 'according to Dave...human beings have to live by clear practical rules, he says, and not by the vague illumination of lofty notions which may seem to condone all kinds of extravagance.'⁴⁴ Vitaly, this is not an accurate representation of utilitarianism. As a consequentialist approach to ethics, utilitarianism determines the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of an action based on its consequences or outcome. Although the Greatest Happiness Principle is a rule to follow, it is not necessarily the clear and practical approach that Dave appears to be describing. The phrase 'according to Dave'⁴⁵ also suggests a condescending tone. Murdoch is not promoting this as an appropriate method for approaching and determining good. Ultimately, Joseph Malikail surmises that, for Murdoch 'the Utilitarian definition of moral goodness is inadequate...because of lack of *substance* in that conception of the *Good*.'⁴⁶ This suggests, that while Dave's character serves a clear purpose, his lack of authority over the narrative is a result of Murdoch's view on utilitarianism. As with existentialism, it does not provide the answer for Murdoch.

Another significant character to contrast with Jake is that of Hugo Belfounder. Murdoch shows him to be an unconscious character of 'the good.'⁴⁷ Raymond J. Porter acknowledges that 'Jake had met Belfounder...and become fascinated with his ideas...'⁴⁸ Jake is influenced and impressed by Hugo and sees in him characteristics that he would like to emulate. Hugo's unobtrusive character is both lacking in ego and the solipsistic qualities that Jake embodies. Despite being 'extremely rich and prosperous'⁴⁹, Hugo always 'lived simply'.⁵⁰ Hugo has an uncanny ability to concentrate on the small things in life, represented in his fascination with designing intricate set pieces, and gives up his successful past to focus on other things. Again, Murdoch compares Jake to other characters to highlight the downfalls of his existential

⁴⁴ *UTN*, p.24

⁴⁵ *UTN*, p.24

⁴⁶ Joseph Malikail, 'Iris Murdoch on the Good, God and Religion', *Minerva*, 4 (2000) <<http://www.minerva.mic.ul.ie/vol4/index.html>> [accessed 21 March 2019]

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Dipple categorized Murdoch's characters in this way, see: Dipple, p.53

⁴⁸ Raymond J. Porter, "Leitmotiv' in Iris Murdoch's 'Under the Net'", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 15.3 (1969), 379-385 (p.380)

⁴⁹ *UTN*, p.60

⁵⁰ *UTN*, p.60

existence. Yet, despite his portrayal as unconsciously good, Hugo is equally depicted as weak. Jake notes that 'Hugo has often been called an idealist [but]...he lacked both the practical interests and the self-conscious moral seriousness...' ⁵¹ and he also argues that Hugo found 'everything very puzzling.' ⁵² This portrayal is through the eyes of Jake and so, it can be assumed, may not be an entirely accurate perception. Nonetheless, despite the comparison to Jake, again, serving to highlight his downfalls, he is also not portrayed as wholly good. This can be compared to the character of Lefty Todd. This politically motivated character may be a representation of Sartre in his alternative, liberal philosophies. Scholars ⁵³ have readily noted that *Under the Net* parallels Sartre's *Nausea* and so it would be apt for Murdoch to represent him in her novel. With the inclusion of this character, Murdoch demonstrates three points of a triangle: Jake's solipsistic, existential existence works alongside Dave's utilitarianism and Lefty Todd's political engagement. She creates a complex trichotomy to compare and critique several different ideas. An alternative reading of these characters is a very literal depiction of Murdoch's understanding of 'the good.' Murdoch demonstrates that she does not consider it 'human' to be wholly good or bad, rather individuals are a complex mixture of both.

Despite this thorough critique of existentialism throughout the novel, it could be argued that Jake's redeeming quality is his existential angst in the face of responsibility. Thomas E. Wartenberg explains that for the existentialist 'anxiety is not just one emotion among others: it is the one that best reveals to us our nature as human beings...anxiety has metaphysical significance: it allows humans to correctly understand the nature of the being that they are...' ⁵⁴ Jake is all too aware of this emotion as he frets over the 'notion that [he] was still a free agent, and that the crime could still be avoided, was too intensely painful to entertain.' ⁵⁵ In attendance at Sartre's 1945 lecture in Brussels, Murdoch noted that 'there is no 'human nature'. Therefore each individual bears a great responsibility...Hence anguish. That is, solitude in the face of a universal decision.' ⁵⁶ Murdoch notes the emphasis on freedom, responsibility

⁵¹ *UTN*, p.64

⁵² *UTN*, p.66

⁵³ Leeson, p.23; Browning, pp.15-17; Dipple, p.54

⁵⁴ Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), p.71

⁵⁵ *UTN*, p.74

⁵⁶ Murdoch, 'Sartre Journal' (1945), from Kingston University Archives, IML 682

and the resulting anguish for the existentialist and this is illustrated in the character of Jake. Murdoch depicts Jake as a character, despite his egotism, who is painfully aware of the role of choice and responsibility if, as he asserts, he is a free agent. Moreover, Wartenberg asserts that 'people are responsible for what they are; they, in effect choose to be what they are.'⁵⁷ Jake is shown to avoid Sartre's concept of *bad faith* as he attempts to negotiate the fact that, as a free agent, he is ultimately responsible for any action he undertakes. Later in the narrative Jake exclaims that he is 'in anguish.'⁵⁸ Although Murdoch is critiquing Sartrean existentialism throughout her text, she allows Jake's character to develop through depicting him with these qualities.

Despite the prevalence of existential influences in this narrative, it must be acknowledged that there are other philosophical underpinnings present. The most notable instance of this is in Murdoch's engagement with Wittgenstein and language. The title '*Under the Net*' is a subtle allusion to Wittgensteinian ideas in a strive to get beneath the net, or confusion, of language. D.Z Phillips describes 'Wittgenstein's main concern in his later philosophy as a concern with clearing up confusions between different language games and relieving mental cramps.'⁵⁹ Phillips acknowledges this fundamental concern in the work of Wittgenstein. It is entirely possible that, aware of his work on language games, Murdoch attempted to negotiate some of this confusion in her novel. Other scholars note alternative traces in the narrative. Conradi argues that 'those who see Wittgenstein in Hugo are not wholly misled...'⁶⁰ It is unclear whether Murdoch's engagement with Wittgenstein in this novel is primarily an interest in his language games or whether she simply admired him enough to emulate his personality, or that of his star pupil Yorick, in the character of Hugo. Regardless, this engagement, albeit paling in comparison to her preoccupation with existentialism, demonstrates that there are other philosophical underpinnings present.

Although it must be acknowledged that a variety of concepts influenced Murdoch in her writing of *Under the Net* including the work of the French surrealists, Wittgenstein's philosophy and Murdoch's search for 'the good', fundamentally *Under*

⁵⁷ Wartenberg, p.141

⁵⁸ *UTN*, p.198 and p.243

⁵⁹ D.Z. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p.48

⁶⁰ Conradi, *A Life*, p.381

the Net is a novel which exhibits themes of freedom, choice and responsibility throughout. Murdoch puts clear emphasis on these ideas which Flynn dubs the major themes of existentialism.⁶¹ The narrative is beleaguered with these ideas: Jake 'began to have the feeling of responsibility again'⁶²; he is thinking about 'freedom'⁶³ and muses 'what was [he] to do?'⁶⁴ Murdoch's depiction of Jake is of a man who, accepting his responsibility as a free agent, constantly ponders over the choices and actions that he undertakes. Leeson ultimately concedes that '*Under the Net* is in the deepest sense a paradoxical work: the point is made that reality is incommunicable, just *there*, and at the same time a whole, highly conscious and sophisticated novel is devoted to saying this.'⁶⁵ This clearly summarises the irony in Murdoch's narrative – there is no doubt, despite her fascination with existentialism, that she is systematically critiquing Sartrean ideas throughout the novel. Yet, as Leeson notes, she dedicates an entire novel to negotiating these ideas. Ultimately, the presence of these existentialist themes serves to fuel the idea that Murdoch's debut novel is undoubtedly influenced by Sartrean existentialism, to the very core of the narrative.

⁶¹ Flynn, p.8

⁶² *UTN*, p.15

⁶³ *UTN*, p.24

⁶⁴ *UTN*, p.78

⁶⁵ Leeson, p.44

Chapter 2: Inhibited Freedom in *The Flight from the Enchanter*

Murdoch's second published novel, following *Under the Net* was *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Although published second, it was written earlier in 1951/52. Conradi notes that Murdoch was disappointed with her first draft as it 'seemed to her emotional, shapeless, repetitive.'⁶⁶ After a second draft Murdoch was better pleased, but despite this, the novel is not generally considered to be one of her best. *The Flight from the Enchanter* presents as a more confused work than *Under the Net* as Murdoch attempts to negotiate post-war society. There remains much to be said, though, about her philosophical development throughout the narrative. Peter Wolfe argues that in this novel 'the theme...is human freedom and the obstacles we must overcome in order to be free...*The Flight From the Enchanter* studies the social dangers which inhibit our freedom.'⁶⁷ In her journal, dated October 27th 1949, Murdoch ponders 'What sort of novel shall I write?...Reflecting how I am sexually thrilled by 'the good'. Write about the ambiguity of the good. A tale of someone making a choice!...Half in Paris, half in London.'⁶⁸ This entry demonstrates Murdoch's intentions for her early novels. Her enthrallment with 'the good' and interest in location is clearly depicted in *Under the Net*. The idea of choice, too, is demonstrated in her debut novel but carries over to *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Murdoch achieves this in a different way in her second novel. While *Under the Net* is fuelled by Jake's understanding of choice, responsibility and anguish, *The Flight from the Enchanter* considers what happens when freedom and choice are inhibited by social dangers as argued by Wolfe. In this sense, despite a slight shift in her philosophy, the theme itself remains one that lends itself to existentialism.

From the beginning of the novel there is a strong sceptical undertone about God and religion. Annette, reading Dante's *Inferno*, asks 'why should the poor Minotaur be suffering in hell?...It was God's fault.'⁶⁹ Hunter has a sense of 'being

⁶⁶ Conradi, *A Life*, p.388

⁶⁷ Peter Wolfe, *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and her Novels* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), p.68

⁶⁸ Murdoch, 'Journal' (Jan. 1949 – Jan. 1953), from Kingston University Archives, KUAS202/1/7

⁶⁹ Iris Murdoch, *The Flight from the Enchanter* (London: Penguin, 1962)

hemmed in by evil'⁷⁰ and Stefan swears 'by Holy Mother of God'⁷¹ that he will kill Hunter. Notably, the Christian character of Nina sees the crucifix as merely 'a man hanging most painfully from his hands'⁷² just moments before committing suicide. This atheistic undertone could simply represent Murdoch attempting to decipher how to reconcile religion in a post-war society. Alternatively, this demonstrates something significant in Murdoch's philosophical development. Sartre's atheistic existentialism was founded on the belief that 'existence precedes essence.'⁷³ The argument follows that, for human beings, the fact of existence stands alone. In this vision, there is no God, and so there is no higher being or power that has pre-determined human essence. If there is no God to determine our essence, human beings simply exist and are left to determine their essence themselves. There are several threads of thought to follow here. Firstly, Annette's discussion of hell coupled with Wolfe's acknowledgement of the theme of societal factors that inhibit our freedom bears parallels to Sartre's 'much-quoted and frequently misunderstood final line [in *No Exit*] 'Hell is other people.'⁷⁴ There is a suggestion that Murdoch is offering a societal warning about the extent to which people are influenced or, in this instance, inhibited by others.

Secondly, Nina's suicide and Annette's attempt at a lethal overdose indicate a nihilistic approach to existentialism. This is best illustrated through Camus' 'absurd hero'⁷⁵ Sisyphus. David Cerbone suggests that once one realises that life is absurd 'it would follow that life is not worth living and so that suicide is legitimate.'⁷⁶ However, he clarifies that Camus did not think suicide solved the problem of absurdity, rather 'if life is absurd because of my inevitable demise, isn't the absurdity of life only heightened by my bringing that demise about as quickly as possible? Isn't that to

⁷⁰ *FTE*, p.229

⁷¹ *FTE*, p.233

⁷² *FTE*, p.266

⁷³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (York: Methuen, 2007), p.30

⁷⁴ Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails* (London: Vintage, 2017), p.213

⁷⁵ Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus' in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Plume, 1975), p.376

⁷⁶ David Cerbone, *Existentialism: All That Matters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), p.92

mistake the problem for the solution?'⁷⁷ Murdoch exposes this nihilistic existential dilemma through the notion of suicide in her narrative. The inclusion of this concept of absurdity is a signifier that she was organising her thoughts on existentialism, displayed in a confused narrative. Bakewell concedes that there were philosophical differences between Sartre and Camus as 'neither Sartre nor Beauvoir accepted his vision of absurdity.'⁷⁸ Nonetheless, Murdoch's portrayal of the absurd and the problem of suicide demonstrates existential influences on her narrative.

Lastly, the enchanter figure of Mischa Fox, prohibits the other primary characters from determining their essence, exercising their agency and acknowledging their freedom. Mary Warnock argues that 'a human being has no essence...he is therefore not wholly determined, but is free to fill the internal gap in his nature.'⁷⁹ Murdoch depicts Mischa as a character who, through his all-encompassing behaviour, encourages others to allow him to determine, at least partially, their essence. The atheistic vision detailed by Murdoch in this novel evokes several existentialist concepts. However, the figure of Mischa stands to represent much more in this narrative.

Mischa is at the centre of the narrative, and all the other primary characters are transfixed by him. Conradi argues that he is a 'figure of bad power who enslaves many of those who surround him.'⁸⁰ This argument can be stretched further to suggest that Mischa represents an anti-God figure. The characters also appear to worship him and cater to his every desire. As a negative character, or anti-God, Murdoch depicts the dangers of worshipping false idols, again, showing concern for the place of religion in war-torn London. Zohreh Tawakuli Sullivan discusses the 'demonic energy that emanates from a central figure who embodies the will to power.'⁸¹ This describes Mischa but, more appropriately, the character of Calvin Blick who represents Mischa's dark side. John Rainsborough announces that 'Blick is the dark half of Mischa Fox's

⁷⁷ Cerbone, p.92

⁷⁸ Bakewell, p.151

⁷⁹ Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.94

⁸⁰ Peter J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p.66

⁸¹ Zohreh Tawakuli Sullivan, 'The Demonic: The Flight from the Enchanter', *The Midwest Quarterly*, 16.3 (1975), 71-86 (p.73)

mind...He does the things which Mischa doesn't even think of.'⁸² Calvin represents the demonic figure of Mischa at its most severe. Despite this, Sullivan adds that 'Calvin contradicts Rainsborough by claiming that Mischa 'killed' him long ago, implying, therefore, that all his dark deeds are in fact controlled by Mischa.'⁸³ Although Calvin represents the dark side of Mischa, Mischa remains the primary demonic figure. This parallels Murdoch's relationship with Sartre. Conradi relays that Murdoch's 'quarrel with Sartre goes back to her first encounter with him... It was...as if Sartre were 'repeating a spell: Be like me, be like me...' But she was not quite spellbound. In October 1947: 'There is something demonic about Sartre which is part of his fascination.'⁸⁴ Conradi details Murdoch depicting Sartre as an enchanter figure but also demonic. This parallels her character of Mischa and demonstrates that Murdoch was attempting to orchestrate and navigate her relationship with Sartre and existentialism. The character of Mischa symbolises this navigation.

Sullivan also concedes that 'Murdoch's demonic figures begin as rebels desiring to be 'free' from contingency, then evolve into solipsistic isolated figures who pursue that unreal totality of form denied them in the 'real' world of others.'⁸⁵ Much like in *Under the Net*, Murdoch demonstrates a fascination with solipsistic characters, of which Mischa is one. Nina recognises that she has adopted a reputation as 'one of Mischa Fox's creatures'⁸⁶ and yet despite this suggestion of ownership, Mischa fails to fully recognise any other character in the novel. Rosa accepts that Mischa was 'oblivious of her existence'⁸⁷ and he has an uncanny tendency to simply be 'not looking.'⁸⁸ Mischa's solipsism is different to that of Jake's in *Under the Net*. Mischa's attitude is darker, more sinister and has a damaging impact on those around him. Jake's solipsistic ego appears, in contrast, to be a result of naivete, ignorance and self-indulgence. Mischa, ironically, is described 'like a priest'⁸⁹ in the aftermath of his party. Murdoch, with her demonic figure, highlights the existential concern that 'the pull

⁸² *FTE*, p.33

⁸³ Sullivan, p.81

⁸⁴ Conradi, *A Life*, p.269

⁸⁵ Sullivan, p.72

⁸⁶ *FTE*, p.143

⁸⁷ *FTE*, p.236

⁸⁸ *FTE*, p.273

⁸⁹ *FTE*, p.196

in modern society is away from individualism and towards conformity. It is in this respect that Kierkegaard refers to the 'plebs', Nietzsche unflatteringly speaks of the 'herd'...and Sartre the 'one.'⁹⁰ Murdoch allows this conformity to absorb her characters.⁹¹ In their, albeit partially unwilling, worship of Mischa they both naively deny their freedom but also act as a part of Sartre's 'one' in their conforming to the way society expects them to behave and remaining ignorant to their individuality. Murdoch establishes her fascination with solipsism as she contends that existentialism's '*appeal*' as a philosophy is at present through its most non-Marxist aspects -its dramatic, solipsistic, romantic and anti-social exaltation of the individual.⁹² Ironically, Murdoch considers the appealing aspects of existentialism to also be the factors that she criticises so readily in her work. *The Flight from the Enchanter* seems to be an early negotiation of these ideas before *Under the Net* was written as a clear, strong critique of the movement.

The theme of denying freedom and conforming to societal expectations can also be seen in the motif of the paper knife that haunts Peter Saward. In almost every scene with Peter, Murdoch refers to his paper knife. Early in the novel 'the soft hiss of the paper-knife made an accompaniment to his thoughts'⁹³ and he later 'reached out for his paper-knife'⁹⁴ and then 'put away the paper-knife.'⁹⁵ Murdoch continually revisits this motif and it would be remiss to ignore it. There are several possible meanings for this: it may simply be a symbol of Peter's profession, however Murdoch may also be making a subtle allusion to Sartre's paper-knife analogy. Sartre uses this analogy to demonstrate an object for which essence precedes existence. The paper-knife is created with intention according to a specific use or purpose and so this is the essence of the paper-knife: it is designed to open letters. Sartre then reverses this

⁹⁰ Flynn, p.24

⁹¹ This is particularly significant considering Murdoch's subservient relationship with Elias Canetti (to whom this novel is dedicated) and the publication of his book *Crowds and Powers* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1962). See Conradi, *A Life* for more on this relationship.

⁹² Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1999), p.153

⁹³ *FTE*, p.26

⁹⁴ *FTE*, p.205

⁹⁵ *FTE*, p.210

formula to show how existence precedes essence for human beings. Cerbone explains that Sartre motivates this idea:

‘via an appeal to atheism: when it comes to human existence, there is no being that plays a role analogous to that of the designer in the case of the paper-knife. Since there is no designer...to have conceived of human existence beforehand, there is no prior essence that takes any kind of precedence over human existence.’⁹⁶

If this is the case, Murdoch clearly has a preoccupation with existentialism as a ‘way of life’⁹⁷ while writing the novel. In many ways, Peter’s fascination with the paper-knife parallels Murdoch’s relationship with existentialism. Existentialism, at this time in her career, was constantly in the background as she attempted to reconcile her attraction to the philosophical movement while organising her criticisms of Sartrean existentialism. By the time *Under the Net* is published, there is no doubt that Murdoch’s thoughts are ordered, and she has a more definite positioning in relation to the movement. However, Peter’s character is also ‘the only person capable of the Murdochian concept of selfless love in the novel.’⁹⁸ This is reminiscent of Dipple’s characters of unconscious good. So, while Peter’s paper-knife displays Murdoch’s negotiation of existentialist ideas, his characterisation also indicates Murdoch’s search for ‘the good’. This novel is a blatant and confused early working of many of Murdoch’s primary fascinations both philosophical and literary.

Despite this lack of clarity, Murdoch did make clear, in her rejection of existentialism, that she considered it misogynistic as ‘this world is built on a vision which excludes women.’⁹⁹ Murdoch expressed, in 1962, that ‘the notion that women are inferior is deep, very deep, even in our fairly sensible society.’¹⁰⁰ Murdoch was highly critical of misogynistic behaviour. However, Leeson argues that ‘one paradox of early Murdoch is that although she claims to subscribe to feminism she does not

⁹⁶ Cerbone, p.64

⁹⁷ Flynn, p.1

⁹⁸ Sullivan, p.79

⁹⁹ Leeson, p.29

¹⁰⁰ Dooley, p.5

exhibit it within her fiction.¹⁰¹ Although she pays lip service to it in *The Flight from the Enchanter* with the inclusion of Miss Wingfield and her associate lady reformers, she does not follow through...¹⁰² This is one lens through which to view Murdoch's early fiction. However, it is also possible that Murdoch was critiquing existentialism, as a misogynistic, male-centred movement, and displaying a need for feminism both in her omitting of 'a female narrator, perspective or even a female protagonist'¹⁰³ but also the juxtaposition of these submissive characters, lacking in autonomy, against Miss Wingfield and the lady reformers. In doing this, Murdoch makes apparent the need for feminism. This is achieved through the subtleties in the narrative, for example an anonymous figure in the *Artemis* board meeting exclaims that Hunter 'is under the impression that women have been emancipated!'¹⁰⁴ Murdoch gives more than lip service to women's societal position, but she achieves this in a subversive manner. Miss Wingfield, a wild and independent supporter of women's rights, forces Rosa to take over her role after her death. Peter announces to Rosa that 'Miss Wingfield left you all the shares of the *Artemis*...so long as the journal continues in publication with you as its editor.'¹⁰⁵ So, by the end of the novel, Murdoch has pushed Rosa into the position of a defender of women's liberty. Throughout the novel, Murdoch's depiction of women is questionable, as Leeson argues, but upon closer investigation, this is primarily manifested through the male characters. John is the main exponent of these ideas. When alone with Annette he 'thought to himself, and for a moment the image of Miss Casement was superimposed upon that of Annette.'¹⁰⁶ This is the second time John experiences this feeling – earlier he has a similar idea with Rosa and Miss Casement. Murdoch portrays John as a misogynist and women appear to be indistinguishable for him. This treatment of women is also expounded through the Lusiewicz brothers and Mischa. In this way, Murdoch, subversively, attempts to criticise misogyny both in general but also specifically in relation to Sartre's existentialism.

¹⁰¹ For more on this topic see, Sabina Lovibond, *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011)

¹⁰² Leeson, p.29

¹⁰³ Leeson, p.29

¹⁰⁴ *FTE*, p.173

¹⁰⁵ *FTE*, p.285

¹⁰⁶ *FTE*, p.127

Although there are features of existentialism present in the narrative, as with *Under the Net* there are other significant influences upon the novel. Murdoch briefly returns to her engagement with Wittgenstein as Calvin exclaims ‘see how high the seas of language run here, as Wittgenstein would say!’¹⁰⁷ However, she does not entertain this theme more thoroughly. Primarily, the major theme that demands consideration is Murdoch’s concern over displacement, refugees and immigrants in the novel. Almost all of the characters in the novel fall into one of these categories. Nina even laments that ‘she had no official existence.’¹⁰⁸ Murdoch illustrates post-war London in her depiction of these ideas and debuts her worries about how to negotiate both this post-war society but also the human beings that have found themselves displaced or without official existence. While this may initially present itself as a theme entirely separate from any existential influences perhaps these ideas feed into the metanarrative of existentialism as a possible solution in twentieth-century society. Ultimately, Murdoch is considering the essence of being, how it is to live and behave in both these societal circumstances but also in a more general sense. So, it is entirely possible, that the existentialist themes that have been discussed, demonstrate Murdoch’s quarrel with the movement and a negotiation of how best to reconcile society. At best, Murdoch is unsure about existentialism as a potential solution or metanarrative for being or, at worst, she is criticising the movement in a fledgling state before she offers a systematic and thorough critique with the publication of *Under the Net*.

¹⁰⁷ *FTE*, p.164

¹⁰⁸ *FTE*, p.264

Chapter 3: The Move to Platonism in *The Sandcastle* and *The Bell*

The Sandcastle was Murdoch's third novel and critics¹⁰⁹ tend to readily dismiss this work as it received a 'less than enthusiastic critical reception.'¹¹⁰ A. S. Byatt views the novel as 'a not entirely successful attempt to write more realistically about 'ordinary' people and problems – it had elements of women's magazine romanticism, and touches of the fey.'¹¹¹ Unfortunately, Murdoch's first novel in which female characters, particularly Nan, are at the forefront of the narrative, was considered a failure. This strengthens the argument for her misogynistic portrayal of characters in *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Jack I. Biles notes that Murdoch has 'written perhaps half-a-dozen novels with first-person narrators and in every instance that first-person narrator is a male.'¹¹² Murdoch replies: 'I think perhaps I identify with men more than with women, because the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman....If one writes "as a woman," something about the female predicament may be supposed to emerge.'¹¹³ Here, Murdoch makes clear that, despite being 'passionately in favour of women's lib'¹¹⁴, she does not intend this to be an agenda behind her fiction. Perhaps this is why Leeson argues that 'through her rejection of existentialism Murdoch defies the notion that males must be at the centre but this is not followed through in any meaningful way in her fiction.'¹¹⁵ Murdoch's admission that she identifies more with men, explains her inability to depict fully developed female characters. Perhaps, in hindsight, Murdoch was more successful in advocating feminism in a subversive manner through the notable omission of female characters.

Anthony Burgess argues that Murdoch was attempting to make a statement, he writes that 'this story is contrived to make a point: ordinary people cannot deal with

¹⁰⁹ Leeson, p.29; Conradi, *A Life*, p.416

¹¹⁰ Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (ed.) *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995* (London: Vintage, 2016), p.164

¹¹¹ A. S. Byatt, 'Introduction' to *The Bell* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.ix

¹¹² Dooley, p.61

¹¹³ Dooley, p.61

¹¹⁴ Dooley, p.61

¹¹⁵ Leeson, p.30

freedom.¹¹⁶ Burgess suggests that Murdoch's narrative did succeed, to some degree, in her discussion of freedom. The central theme is certainly that of freedom. Although not an exclusively existential theme it is reasonable to suggest that her focus on freedom in this novel is a development from her previous two works, both undoubtedly influenced by Sartrean existentialism. This theme rests 'at the very core of *The Sandcastle*.'¹¹⁷ Leeson, however, disagrees with Burgess' claim. He states that the theme of freedom is 'ultimately rendered obsolete in the return to the status quo at the end of the novel.'¹¹⁸ This could be to mistake Murdoch's intentions. It has been made apparent that Murdoch's quarrel with Sartrean existentialism was founded on several factors: the solipsistic nature of the movement, its inability to function societally and its negation of women. In writing *The Sandcastle*, Murdoch demonstrates that, in ordinary life, existentialism simply has no functional place and, as Burgess argues, that people cannot deal with this extreme level of freedom. Leeson deems the novel a failure because, amongst other things, nothing has changed by the end of the narrative. Perhaps this is Murdoch signifying her final thoughts on existentialism. While she is fascinated by Sartre's philosophy and the emphasis on freedom, the movement fails and so she plays this out in her third novel. The narrative is not a failure, it is a realistic depiction of existentialism's failure in society. This idea, however, warrants a larger study than can be considered in this thesis. Nonetheless, what is clear is that '*The Sandcastle* differs from its predecessors'¹¹⁹ and shows a change from Murdoch's interests in her first two novels.

Having implied the end of her engagement with existentialism through *The Sandcastle*, Murdoch was to publish *The Bell* a year later. In this fourth publication, developing from *The Sandcastle*, Murdoch displays a major shift in her philosophical position and considers ideas of love, art, morality and her search for 'the good'. Primarily, the influence on this novel seems to be that of Platonist philosophy and *The Bell* can be considered as Murdoch's first major expression of her desire to ground her fiction upon Platonism. Before engaging with these ideas, it must be acknowledged that Murdoch had not, despite appearances, entirely left existentialism behind and

¹¹⁶ Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Student's Guide to Contemporary Fiction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p.57

¹¹⁷ Leeson, p.29

¹¹⁸ Leeson, p.29

¹¹⁹ Conradi, *A Life*, p.415

influences can be seen in the character of Nick. Michael Levenson describes Nick as 'morose, caustic, alcoholic, alone...He is, in a word, Murdoch's vision of Existential Man, fully devoted to his own impossible agon.'¹²⁰ Unlike the solipsistic figures encountered in her previous novels, Murdoch likens the figure of Nick, Sartre's man, as more akin to 'a neurotic who seeks to cure himself by unfolding a myth about himself.'¹²¹ Nick's character, unlike Jake and Mischa, is relegated to an isolated life, separated from the rest of Imber by the river.¹²² The narrative does not revolve around him but isolates him. True to her fascination with existentialism, Murdoch simply cannot leave the movement alone, but in *The Bell* she relegates the existentialist figure to separation. However, Conradi also notes the geography of Imber and brands it a 'Platonic map of degrees of unselfing.'¹²³ It is this notion of 'unselfing' alongside Simone Weil's concept of attention that are so telling for Murdoch's philosophical development in this novel.

Leeson discusses the bell as a Platonist symbol and draws connections with Plato's allegory of the cave.¹²⁴ When Dora first sees the bell, she describes it as 'black inside and alarmingly like an inhabited cave.'¹²⁵ Clearly, a connection to Plato's cave allegory is not unfounded. What is more significant is Dora's reaction to the bell. Leeson argues that 'it is only when the bell is retrieved from the bottom of the lake...that Dora realises something beyond herself of equal or greater value.'¹²⁶ Contrary to Nussbaum's belief, as explored in chapter one of this thesis, Murdoch is depicting real, three-dimensional characters in this novel and their development is substantial. Murdoch vitally draws attention to the idea of 'unselfing', a Platonic

¹²⁰ Michael Levenson, 'Iris Murdoch: The Philosophic Fifties and *The Bell*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 47.3 (2001), 558-579 (p.561)

¹²¹ *EM*, p.268

¹²² Both Leeson and Conradi discuss the use of the river as a literary joke used by Murdoch to allude to Greek myth and Dante's *Inferno*. See, Leeson p.91 and Conradi, *Saint and Artist*, p.147

¹²³ Conradi, *Saint and Artist*, p.147

¹²⁴ For the sake of this thesis a full exploration of this idea is unnecessary but for Leeson's full investigation see pp.88-91.

¹²⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.276

¹²⁶ Leeson, p.93

concept that Murdoch coupled with Simone Weil's idea of attention.¹²⁷ Leeson concludes that Dora's 'sense of self has been partially replaced with a new understanding of otherness.'¹²⁸ It is just this which Murdoch wishes to draw her reader's attention to. Browning reasons that 'for Murdoch moral life suffers if individuals are obsessed with examining their own identities. They need to look outside of themselves, to see other people and to take account of them.'¹²⁹ In Dora's recognition of something beyond herself after the bell is raised, Murdoch depicts the inverse of solipsism that she has so readily portrayed previously. She shows characters recognising, albeit slowly and with fault along the way, each other and attempting to 'unself' or crack the ego to attain good.

Ultimately, James K. A. Smith concedes that "Platonism" for Murdoch is the recognition of a reality beyond my making and preference, an objectivity that calls to me, to which I owe a just attention.¹³⁰ Murdoch is notably shifting from the focus she has previously offered in her novels, here she can be seen to align herself with the philosophies that she truly believed in, rather than those she criticised. Murdoch describes Simone Weil's concept of attention, as alluded to by Smith, in relation to bringing about moral change. Murdoch explains that Weil says 'moral change comes from an *attention* to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things.¹³¹ Having indulged the flourishing of egoism in *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Murdoch, in *The Bell*, encourages a decrease in egoism, a true attention to those around us and, ultimately, 'unselfing'. Corina Stan, too, acknowledges Murdoch's interest in 'unselfing', attention and otherness as she notes 'a shared ideal of living-with-others in Barthes' course and in Murdoch's philosophical

¹²⁷ It could be argued that Murdoch did not fully understand Plato until she had grasped Weil's philosophy. Her engagement with Weilian 'unselfing' helped her to appreciate Plato and throughout *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Murdoch consistently uses Weil to enlighten Platonist concepts. See also, Dooley, p.99

¹²⁸ Leeson, p.93

¹²⁹ Browning, p.57

¹³⁰ James K. A. Smith, 'The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch', *America: The Jesuit Review* (2019) <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2019/04/10/moral-vision-irismurdoch?fbclid=IwAR1PVOomwfnIXA8gulbqQNR5fKfP_yiXYqErX89K7F0U_oZSOZt7TRod7I> [accessed 13th April 2019]

¹³¹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 1992), p.52

essays and fiction.¹³² Although Stan is drawing connections between the work of Murdoch and Roland Barthes, this enforces the importance of others and otherness in Murdoch's work. *The Bell* is the first major novel in which these ideas play out clearly, as opposed to the subversive suggestions Murdoch made in her critique of existentialism as too individualistic.

Leeson suggests that 'the voice of love which resounds from the bell is one which seeks to reconcile these insecurities as ultimately belongs not to the bell itself, which is only a catalyst, but to the abbess who is unseen and also misunderstood...'¹³³ The abbess, possibly a figure intended to represent Murdoch's own moral and philosophical views, serves to illustrate Murdoch's philosophical development. There are several points in the narrative in which the wisdom of the abbess is exhibited to the reader. In a quasi-Kantian imperative the abbess states that 'Our duty...is not necessarily to seek the highest regardless of the realities of our spiritual life as it in fact is, but to seek that place, that task, those people, which will make our spiritual life most constantly grow and flourish.'¹³⁴ Murdoch's character is perhaps unlike those of Dipple's unconscious good, the abbess is more of an example of *conscious* good. This character embodies Murdoch's belief that the task of beings is to flourish in pursuit of 'the good' or a diminished ego. Here, Murdoch suggests that the journey is just as significant as the destination in the moral life. This idea is enforced as the abbess advises that 'we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.'¹³⁵ Murdoch enlists the character of the abbess as a vehicle through which to spread her philosophical message. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Murdoch refers to the 'immediacy and visibility of beauty and its uplifting role in our lives'¹³⁶ that Plato discusses. In this summarisation of Plato's philosophical position, Murdoch also presents her own outlook. She intends to represent this uplifting role of beauty and the need for acknowledging others and otherness. In fact, in *The Flight from the Enchanter*

¹³² Corina Stan, 'A Sociality of Distances: Roland Barthes and Iris Murdoch on How to Live with Others', *MLN*, 129.5 (2014), 1170-1198 (p.1196)

¹³³ Leeson, p.95

¹³⁴ *The Bell*, p.81

¹³⁵ *The Bell*, pp.242-243

¹³⁶ MGM, p.15

Murdoch highlighted the desperate need for this 'unselfing' and attention through her displaced characters and in *The Bell* she begins an attempt to fulfil this need.

So, *The Bell* is Murdoch's first Platonist novel. She, once again, but more markedly, demonstrates her quest to discover 'the good' but also begins to outline how this can be achieved, particularly through the Platonic symbol of the bell and the character of the abbess. Murdoch insists, echoing Plato, that 'value is everywhere, the whole of life is movement in a moral scale, all knowledge is a moral quest, and the mind seeks reality and desires the Good, which is transcendent source of spiritual power, to which we are all related through the idea of truth.'¹³⁷ Her philosophical intentions have become clear. Perhaps *The Sandcastle* signalled the end of her literary love-affair with existentialism as a major theme but Murdoch could not help but include it, albeit in a highly unflattering manner, through the character of Nick. Primarily though, *The Sandcastle* marked the end of this preoccupation in her fiction and in *The Bell* Murdoch aligns herself with the philosophy that she subscribes to throughout her career. Plato, after all, was one of her 'personal gods.'¹³⁸

¹³⁷ MGM, p.56

¹³⁸ Dooley, p.129

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate the extent to which Iris Murdoch's early novels are influenced by Sartrean existentialism. This study has made clear that *Under the Net* is a work highly influenced by existentialism. Murdoch plays with ideas of freedom, choice, responsibility and anguish in her debut novel, paralleling Sartre's *Nausea*. However, despite her thorough engagement with these ideas and the clear influence of Sartrean existentialism on her fiction writing, Murdoch's exploration of these ideas is in the form of a strong, systematic critique of the movement. Murdoch also demonstrates interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. In a conversation with Bryan Magee, Murdoch discusses structuralism and suggests that 'one could say that Wittgenstein was a 'structuralist.'...Many aspects of the theory are not new; it has heterogeneous literary and philosophical ancestors such as the phenomenologists, the surrealists, and Sartre.¹³⁹ Here, Murdoch combines her many interests and particularly the ideas that influenced her debut novel. Even her discussion of Wittgenstein finds its way back to Sartre. Wittgenstein, though, was a notable influence and one that she continued with in later life as she identified as a 'Wittgensteinian neo-Platonist.'¹⁴⁰

Her second novel, *The Flight from the Enchanter* presents as a far more confused work than *Under the Net*. Given that this novel was written before her debut novel, it makes sense that this appears to be an early negotiation of her critique of existentialism, before *Under the Net* was written as a strong, passionate critique of French existentialism. Primarily this work considers inhibited freedom and the dangers of society. Byatt notes the major themes in this work as 'both political and personal, the war between the sexes, the contrast between youth and age, the problem of the refugee and the state.'¹⁴¹ Murdoch demonstrates concern for displaced figures in this narrative, fitting in a post-war period. Her concern leads her to attempt to find a solution through moral philosophy and attaining 'good' but, despite an initial appeal to

¹³⁹ *EM*, pp.22-23

¹⁴⁰ Leeson, p.6

¹⁴¹ A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.40

existentialism, Murdoch was to determine that the movement failed as too solipsistic, misogynistic and indifferent to societal and community values. These are all ideas that Murdoch considers in *The Flight from the Enchanter* before writing a clearer, organised critique in *Under the Net*. So, Murdoch's first two novels are significantly influenced by Sartrean existentialism, albeit primarily in the form of a critique. As has been acknowledged, though, there are other philosophical underpinnings to these narratives.

The publication of *The Sandcastle* marked a turn in Murdoch's interests. Although often dismissed by critics, a larger study is warranted to consider Murdoch's philosophical intentions and to determine if this novel signified the termination of her interest in existentialism for this period. Nonetheless, the novel demonstrates a turn in Murdoch's thinking. *The Bell* develops from this change and presents as Murdoch's first expression of her Platonist ideals. There is a notable shift from her previous interest in existentialism. However, Murdoch still showed an interest in portraying solipsistic figures. This time, though, she relegated the 'existential man'¹⁴² to a life of separation and upheld Platonist ideology instead. This pattern could suggest that Murdoch would no longer engage with existentialist ideas in her fiction. This was not to be the case.

Murdoch, in fact, returned to existentialism in her later novels. Byatt explores Murdoch's first eight novels and determines that they can all 'be seen as studies of the 'degrees of freedom' available to individuals.'¹⁴³ While not an exclusively existential theme, Murdoch's interest in freedom perhaps indicates what initially attracted her to the movement. Cyrena Norman Pondrom undertakes a study of *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) and the role that existentialism played in this narrative. Most notably, Murdoch returns to existentialism in her enclosed narrative *The Time of the Angels* (1966) but this time Murdoch engages with Heidegger's German existentialism. So, Murdoch's first two novels are primarily and significantly influenced by Sartrean existentialism. The publication of her third novel demonstrates a major shift in Murdoch's philosophy and she moves away from existentialism to consider Platonism and showcase her interests in Simone Weil. However, despite this notable change, Murdoch continues

¹⁴² Levenson, p.561

¹⁴³ Byatt, *Degrees*, p.6

to return to existentialism in some of her later novels, albeit not to the same extent as her first two publications. Murdoch engages with existentialism throughout her career, showcasing her undeniable attraction to 'freedom – always freedom.'¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Flynn, p.ix

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