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Conclusion

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10. CONCLUSION

It has been repeated time and again with a critical tone that Murdoch creates patterns of types and patterns of behaviour to fit the elaborate plots of her novels. It cannot be denied that some patterning of this kind is traceable as thanks to psychologists and sociologists enough generalisations of human behaviour have been drawn to make such patterns emerge. They have acquired the shape of mechanical models which, set in motion, make the machinery of behaviour grind relentlessly on. Yet, when confronted with an individual in his unique situation both psychologists and sociologists are often baffled.

Murdoch is aware of the machinery, but first and foremost she is sensitive to the human difference and it is not the difference of the individual self but apprehending others as different. The anti-existentialist credo of her philosophy is reflected in her novels in human relationships in the directing of attention from the ego to other people and things in the surrounding world. She therefore creates human relationships with a serious intent and thus saves them from being swept under the carpet as mere tools for writing a thrilling story of who loved and married or hated and divorced who.

Murdoch breaks the machinery by unpredicatability. The unexpected twists and turns which the relationships in her novels take and the way the complicated emotional entanglements are disentangled shift the patterns. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, when the trials and tribulations of unrequited loves, hates, rides into myth and the occult are over, the casualties buried and everything is now only wistfully remembered with serene nostalgia, it all seems to click back into pattern. For there is no finality to Murdoch's endings, they dissolve into a vagueness suggestive of the ever recurring cycle of life, of human relationships being so similar and yet so different, of everything repeating itself but never quite in the same way.

Murdoch is not fond of drastic decisions and clean cuts with the past and the burning of bridges. Her mildly happy endings, if that is what we are offered, are never celebrated with fanfares or crowned with glory. What we get are unassuming it's-all-for-the-best solutions of the complicated conflicts and the way Murdoch allows her books to go on after the story seems to have been told intensifies the feeling that there is no ending and no goal finally reached, that life goes on and anything may happen any time.

There is clear development in Murdoch's portrayal of human relationships. In her first novel there is little actual interaction and the relationships go on more or less in the hero's head. The other characters in the story are marginal and, most of the time, the hero does not know where they are or what they are doing and he is

not even interested. The following early novels until about the mid 60s have much more interplay although the casts are comparatively small even if we include the absent characters that provide the link with the outside world by letters. Whereas in the early novels Murdoch's ideas and concepts are more clearly visible, as they are reflected in the interplay of characters, in the later novels with their vast casts and often parallel stories being told all the issues become interconnected in a much more complex manner.

The relationships in the recent novels have become more intense with the more space and time they have gained. They have thus also been given the definite advantage of being allowed to grow on the reader and appear more real and insistent in his mind and consequently all the more intriguing. For Murdoch throws little light on the workings of the relationships she creates, leaving them as ambiguous and multilayered, inscrutable and unpredictable as their actors remain indefinable to others as well as to themselves. This does not mean, however, that Murdoch rests content with this rather bleak picture as a conclusion. In her prolific work she keeps probing the manifold human relationships to drive home the message that man is not an isolated will but that he is always striving to meet others.

As the century is drawing to its close it is becoming apparent that the English novel has not become confined in a new -ism unless the term postmodernism can be expanded to contain the multilayered plurality of today's fiction in Britain. The form of Iris Murdoch's novels as well as her portrayal of characters and their relationships reflect the plurality. In fact an important part of Murdoch's thought points in that direction, towards an acceptance of difference.

In conclusion I want to stress that whatever Murdoch has been criticised for, she is certainly not guilty of a lack of attention to 'the great surprising variety of the world'¹ which she does not reduce to her concepts as I may have made it appear. Attention to the immense variety rather than similarity of human relationships is the essence of this aspect of Murdoch's novel writing.