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TITLE: FREEDOM, FICTION, AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION: IRIS MURDOCH'S LITERARY RESPONSE TO EXISTENTIALISM

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores Iris Murdoch's philosophical engagement with existentialism, especially the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, through her novels. Existentialist thought emphasizes autonomy, choice, and the construction of meaning in an absurd world. Murdoch, however, critiques this moral framework by offering a morally realist alternative that foregrounds attention, love, and the reality of others. Through close readings of The Sea, The Sea and The Nice and the Good, this article argues that Murdoch reshapes the novel as a medium of moral exploration, rejecting Sartre's view of the self as sovereign in favor of a vision grounded in relational ethics and the transcendent Good.

INTRODUCTION. The intellectual legacy of existentialism, particularly in the 20th century, had profound implications for both philosophy and literature. Jean-Paul Sartre, one of existentialism's foremost figures, developed a philosophy that emphasized individual freedom, the absence of predetermined essence, and the necessity of self-creation. Existentialist literature thus became a vehicle for dramatizing the burden and liberation of this freedom. Yet Iris Murdoch, a philosopher and novelist, mounted a subtle but profound critique of this tradition.

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Murdoch's philosophical and fictional works consistently challenge the existentialist celebration of autonomous freedom. Instead, she advances a vision of moral life grounded in attention, humility, and the moral reality of others. Her concern was not just with abstract ideas but with the way these ideas affect human behavior, perception, and ethical development. Through her novels, Murdoch constructs a literary rebuttal to Sartre's ethical vision, offering in its place a moral realism rooted in Platonic and Christian thought.

Sartre's Concept of Freedom and the Autonomous Self

Jean-Paul Sartre's foundational work, Being and Nothingness, articulates the existentialist view that existence precedes essence. According to Sartre, humans are thrown into existence without predetermined purpose and must create their own meaning through choices. This freedom is absolute, but it comes with the anguish of responsibility. For Sartre, authenticity involves embracing this freedom and refusing to hide behind social roles or external values.

This view finds literary expression in works such as Nausea and No Exit, where characters confront the absurdity of life and the burden of freedom. Sartre's characters often find themselves trapped in existential dilemmas, where the search for meaning leads to confrontation with nothingness. The heroism of Sartre's figures lies in their refusal to submit to external authorities, be they religious, moral, or societal.

Murdoch, however, found this emphasis on freedom and self-creation morally inadequate. In her essay "The Idea of Perfection," she critiques the existentialist model for reducing moral life to a series of choices made by an isolated will. She argues that human beings are not free-floating agents but are deeply influenced by their past, their psychological make-up, and their ability to perceive others clearly. Moral improvement, in her view, comes not from radical acts of will but from sustained attention to the reality outside oneself.

Murdoch's Moral Philosophy: Attention, Love, and the Good

Murdoch's moral philosophy draws significantly on Plato and Simone Weil. From Plato, she inherits the idea of the Good as a transcendent moral reality that lies beyond human comprehension but which exerts a gravitational pull on the soul. From Weil, she adopts the concept of attention as a moral and spiritual discipline.

In The Sovereignty of Good, Murdoch contends that the moral life involves the struggle to overcome selfishness and illusion. The self is not a blank slate, as Sartre suggests, but a complex and often deluded structure that must be slowly transformed through love and vision. She famously writes, "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."

This notion of love and attention becomes central in her fiction. Her characters are often caught in webs of illusion, driven by egoism, fantasy, and the desire for control. Moral progress, when it occurs, results from their painful confrontation with reality and the slow

reordering of their vision. This process stands in stark contrast to the Sartrean act of self-assertion.

The Sea, The Sea: Illusion and Moral Blindness

In The Sea, The Sea, Murdoch explores the themes of illusion, control, and the moral awakening of the protagonist Charles Arrowby. A retired theatre director, Charles retreats to a seaside cottage seeking peace and self-understanding. However, he becomes obsessed with his former lover, Hartley, whom he tries to possess and rescue from her present life.

Charles sees himself as a romantic hero and moral savior, but his narrative reveals a deep self-delusion. His freedom is not authentic but narcissistic. He fails to perceive Hartley as a real person with her own desires and agency. Through Charles, Murdoch critiques the existentialist ideal of the self as autonomous and self-defining. Instead, she demonstrates how egoism can masquerade as moral purpose and how genuine morality requires attention to the other as other.

The novel's narrative structure further supports Murdoch's moral vision. Charles's unreliable narration forces the reader to see beyond his perspective and to question his moral judgments. This narrative complexity enacts Murdoch's claim that the novel can teach moral discernment by training the reader in attention and empathy.

The Nice and the Good: Community and Forgiveness

The Nice and the Good presents a broader canvas of characters, all grappling with issues of guilt, love, and redemption. Unlike Sartre's isolated heroes, Murdoch's characters live in a web of relationships, where moral decisions affect others in profound and often unseen ways.

The novel juxtaposes philosophical and emotional quests, suggesting that goodness is not found in grand gestures but in ordinary acts of kindness, patience, and self-restraint. Characters such as Ducane, the government official investigating a colleague's suicide, undergo moral development not by asserting their will but by relinquishing control and learning to love. Ducane's spiritual journey involves recognizing the limits of his knowledge and the necessity of forgiveness—both for himself and others.

Murdoch's emphasis on community, humility, and the long view of moral development contrasts sharply with the existentialist focus on isolated decision-making. Her fiction affirms that goodness is deeply embedded in the fabric of daily life, and that the novel is uniquely suited to portray this moral texture.

Aesthetic Form and Ethical Content

Murdoch's challenge to existentialism is not only philosophical but also aesthetic. While Sartre viewed literature primarily as a vehicle for ideas, Murdoch saw the novel as a form capable of ethical engagement through style, structure, and character. She criticized modernist and existentialist literature for being overly self-conscious and abstract, often privileging cleverness over moral seriousness.

In contrast, Murdoch called for a return to the great 19th-century tradition of the realistic novel. She admired authors like Tolstoy and George Eliot for their ability to portray complex moral lives within richly textured social worlds. Her own novels seek to revive this tradition, not through nostalgia, but by showing how realism can serve moral imagination in a secular age.

The novel, for Murdoch, becomes a site of moral training, where readers are invited to exercise the virtues of attention, compassion, and humility. By resisting the existentialist emphasis on will and subjectivity, Murdoch affirms the power of literature to shape the moral vision of both characters and readers.

Conclusion

Iris Murdoch's fiction offers a sustained and profound critique of existentialist ethics, particularly as developed by Jean-Paul Sartre. While Sartre emphasizes freedom, choice, and authenticity, Murdoch highlights attention, love, and the reality of others. Her novels dramatize the moral struggle not as a series of heroic decisions but as a gradual transformation of vision and character.

Through her literary practice, Murdoch redefines both ethics and fiction. She restores the moral seriousness of the novel, positioning it as a medium uniquely capable of illuminating the complexities of human life. In a world where existentialist themes continue to resonate, Murdoch's work remains a vital counterpoint—a reminder that true freedom lies not in self-assertion, but in self-forgetting love.

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